

Childlessness and the Male Child: Assessing the Challenges Facing Christian Married Couples at Mbeya City

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Abstract

This article uses the discrimination theoretical perspective and qualitative research approach to examine the challenges facing childless couples and couples without male children at Block T in Mbeya City Tanzania and their perceptions about those challenges. Unstructured Interviews were conducted to twelve research participants (six childless and six without male children) selected randomly among Christians of some denominations present at Mbeya City to ascertain their perceptions and experiences on childlessness and the lack of male children. Results indicated that issues of childlessness and preference for the male child at Block T in Mbeya City are shrouded in stigmatization and discrimination of childless couples and those without male children in various areas: decision-making, religious freedom, betrayal by spouses and conflicts between couples. The study suggests that churches should play key roles to educate marrying couples about the purpose of God for marriage to mitigate discriminatory challenges facing couples and children in Christian marital relationships.

Keywords: Childlessness, Male Child, Christian Married Couples, God's Purpose for Marriage and Discriminatory Challenges.

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Introduction

Nowadays, there are several contradictions within African societies regarding the issue of marriage. The contradiction is on two perceptions; that is, the African and Christian understandings of marriage. On the one hand, according to the African understanding, marriage is the agreement between two families, the family of the bride and that of the groom, to let their children unite together for the purpose of having legitimate children for generating or expanding their clans (Eburn, 2014 & Wanjohi, 1999). Therefore, the main purpose of African traditional marriage is

fecundity and procreation; marriage is expected to have a child or several children as its product.

According to Christian understanding, marriage is the loving, voluntary agreement and covenant between a woman and a man to live as husband and wife (Lovše, 2009 & Letseli, 2007). Here, love is the centre of marriage, not fecundity and procreation. Basing on the raising contradiction between traditional and Christian marriages, the issues of childlessness and preference for a male child make, both Christian and traditional marriages, be at dilemma. Childlessness and the preference for the male child disturb both Christian and traditional marriages leading them to many challenges. This article examines the discriminatory challenges facing childless married Christian couples and those without male children at Block in Mbeya city and the way in which they perceive those challenges.

Theoretical Perspectives

This study was guided by the theory of Discrimination as stipulated by the American National Research Council. The American National Research Council (2004), categorizes four types of discrimination in the racial discrimination context. First, intentional or explicit discrimination. Second, subtle, unconscious and automatic discrimination. Third, statistical discrimination and profiling. Fourth, organizational processes. This article used the first type of discrimination intentional or explicit discrimination which involves four main categories: verbal antagonism, avoidance, segregation, physical attack and extermination. Verbal antagonism is associated with causing hostility to another person seen as being different by the use of words. It involves the imposition of hostile comments to people considered as different regarding their difference. Avoidance involves one's selection not to associate with people who are different. The different people are considered as being out-group people worthy of isolation.

Avoiding associating or aversion leads to segregation. Segregation involves exclusion from necessary services of social life in general. The National Research Council asserts that the most common examples include denial of equal education, housing, employment and health care on the basis of race. Segregation leads to physical attacks if coincidental association occurs between those segregating and those who are segregated. Physical attack is caused by hate which perpetrators of segregation have upon the victims of segregation. Physical attacks due to hatred lead to extermination, the killings caused by the difference existing between perpetrators of segregation and victims. Thus, this theoretical perspective is mostly a relational perspective indicating the way in which perpetrators of discrimination relate with those considered different from them.

Though the National Research Council focuses the discussion of this perspective on the American context of racial discrimination and hardly touches other areas of human life, this perspective is useful in other areas of human life including those of marriage and family relationships. In this article, this perspective of discrimination

was useful because it enabled us to discuss issues of childlessness and the lack of male children among married couples as a difference that caused their discrimination from members of society and the struggle for power and privilege between couples themselves. In that case, this perspective was a lens to explore the various manifestations of discrimination experienced by victims and the way in which victims perceived of the faced discriminatory acts.

Empirical Literature Review

Several studies have been conducted regarding issues of childlessness and the preference for a male child in Africa and other parts of the world. Regarding the issue of childlessness, the following studies have currently been documented. Kitur (2018) studied the reasons for infertility, the perception of infertility and factors leading to such perception among community members of the Kipsigis community in Fort-Ternan, Kericho county in Kenya. Some factors for their perception were social-cultural, religious, and economic factors. Study results revealed that children were inevitable for the Kipsigis community members as were considered to play important roles including formation of the family, expansion of the family lineage and they are the future legacy.

Another study was that of Tabong & Odongo (2013) carried out among infertile couples in Northern Ghana. By the use of the Upper West Region as a case study and the use of qualitative approach. The study sought to explore experiences of infertile couples about the situation of infertility. Results showed that infertile couples were stigmatized and marginalized in various affairs: leadership roles, inclusion in the ancestral realm, etc., forcing them to engage in multiple sexual affairs in order to prove their fertility. Baloyi (2016) investigated the way in which issues of gender inequality and women humiliations due to infertility in particular continue to manifest in various African societies and the South African context in particular. The major discovery rests on the way in which African men perceive themselves and their position in the community. Baloyi states that, men, because they have been brought up to be rulers and providers of their families in a patriarchal system are always tempted to believe that they should be exempt from the misfortunes of the family, including a lack of children.

Obiyo (2016) investigated the impact of childlessness among married couples in the Lowa community in Imo State Nigeria. According to Obiyo's study, childlessness has caused many problems, ranging from psychological, physical and/or emotional to social problems such as broken homes, depression, marital conflicts, psychological problem which comes as a result of inability to bear children, both sexes may feel inadequate to their roles, having mental illness. A study by Olamijuwon, Odimegwu & Chemhaka (2021) sought to investigate the relationship between involuntary childlessness and marital infidelity and how it may be moderated by women's educational attainment. Women from five Sub-Saharan countries were involved including Cameroon, Gabon Lesotho, Liberia and Sierra Leone. Varied results were obtained suggesting a high rate of infidelity in involuntary childlessness. In the

Tanzanian context, several studies have also been conducted such as those of Mtae (2015) and of Larsen (1996) conducted at Kishapu and Mvomero districts, Manyama (2017) conducted at Kijitonyama in Dar es Salaam and Mhando (2011) conducted among the Kurya of Mara region.

Studies concerning the preference for the male child include that of Olanrewaju, Kona & Dickson (2015) which used a randomized sampling of 100 Yoruba women to examine the rationale and implication of male child preference in the Yoruba community in Nigeria (Olaogun, Ayoola, Ogunfowokan & Ewere, 2013). Results indicated that while the perceptions on the preference for males were high, yet women played a pivotal role as stabilizers of the community (Ndu & Uzochukwu, 2012). Baloyi & Manala (2018) studied the way in which the celebration of the birth of a male child contributed to the undermining of the perpetuation of patriarchy in the South African context. Researchers argued that the birth of male children, which is celebrated more than the birth of female children, contributes to undermining one gender in favour of the other. In Tanzania, a study was conducted by Mwageni, Ankomah & Powell (2017). Researchers used a cross-sectional design and six focus group discussions to collect data from 600 men aged 16 - 50 in rural and urban areas of Mbeya region to determine reasons for their sex preferences. Results indicated that son preference is significant in Mbeya region, Tanzania and largely attributable to the traditional value accorded male children for their role in inheritance and as a vehicle to extend family and clan names (Mwageni, Ankomah & Powell, 2017).

Despite the energy vested to study the aspects of childlessness and the preference for a male child in various parts of African and other parts of the world indicated above, there is hardly a documented study ventured to explore the perception on such issues in Tanzania among Christian married couples in order to reflect theologically about those issues. None of such studies used the discrimination theoretical perspective to ascertain the interaction between perpetrators of discriminatory acts and victims, which suggests the need to study such issues and use the discrimination perspective as a point of view. Placing our study in the context of the above literature, we argue in this article that the discriminatory acts facing Christian married couples without male children at Block T in Mbeya city are unfair and do not correspond to the purpose of God for Christian marriages.

Methodological Perspective

In order to execute the above argument, a qualitative study was done using interpretivism as its underlying philosophy. This philosophy emphasizes attachment between the researcher and research participants, subjectivity, in-depth investigation and research information being collected in the form of descriptions (Corbetta, 2003). Since this study aimed at collecting perceptions and experiences of challenges facing research participants on issues of childlessness and preference for the male child, this philosophical ground was deemed appropriate. A qualitative approach was used whereby researchers examined the way in which participants described their world and experiences challenges due to childlessness and preferences for the male child in

their community (Jackson, Drummond & Camara, 2007). Twelve participants (six males and six females) with age ranges from 23 to 50 were selected randomly to participate in the study and unstructured open-ended interview questions were used in the data collection process. The study was done between March and April 2021. All participants lived at Block TsStreet in Mbeya City and belonged to some Christian denominations found at the city. Verbal data were captured through recording using a smartphone and non-verbal data by handwriting for non-verbal data. Data processing involved transcribing, qualitative analyzing, presenting the obtained themes and discussing the results to make sense of what participants communicated. For ethical purposes, the names of research participants have been anonymized in this research report. The presentation and discussion of research findings are done in the following paragraphs.

Marriage and Children in African Context

The African perception of marriage is mostly concerned with fecundity and procreation. As Baloyi and Manala (2019) put it, in many African societies, children are the buds of society and failing to bear children is worse than committing genocide. Quoting Oladimeji, Baloyi and Manala (2019) further emphasize that a person who, therefore has no descendants in effect quenches the fire of life and becomes forever dead since his line of physical continuation is blocked if he does not get married and bear children. This childless state makes couples, mostly women, suffer all kinds of discrimination from relatives of the husband and society in general. Kitur (2018) for example, reports the experience of discrimination faced by one of the childless women in the Kipsigis community in Kenya:

I am married but do not have children yet. I have experienced numerous miscarriages and what I have suffered in the hands of my in-laws is beyond description. I have been abused in all manners; people throw insults at you and they don't respect you. I have been rendered many derogatory names, but the worst part of it is that my husband seems not to care. He is unwilling to consider medical treatment for me. I am ten years in this marriage. What can I do? Should I just give up the dream of ever giving birth to a child?

The quotations above indicate that, in an African point of view, the person has life and dignity only if he or she has the ability to enhance life. Children are grown and provided responsibility in family according to their genders. On the one hand, girls are provided tasks by their mothers preparing them to be good wives in their future lives. Boys are prepared by their fathers to do any work and behave like fathers helping them to grow and prepare them for their future lives as fathers of homes. In the conversation about children and marriage with participant A (personal communication, 20th April 2021), it was inquired about the importance of children in the African setting. She said that children are very important in the family because they will help their parents during old age, when the parents are not able to fend for themselves. Participant B said that:

The failure of parental care to children may lead to the failure of children to be good people in their future lives; while poorly reared girls will not be good wives, poorly reared boys will fail to stand as husbands in their future lives (Personal communication: April 22, 2021).

The above conversation shows that parents are important people in the preparation of children's future lives. The conversation portrays the role of parents in orienting their children towards various social gender roles. Therefore, the well-preparation of children results in the best gender-sensitive African community members.

African Marriage and Childlessness

As stated in the above paragraphs, fruits expected from African marriages are children and most likely boys. Their roles in the community rely on the hands of their parents who orient them according to their genders. However, once the marriages have no children, conflicts raise. In the conversation with participant C (Personal communication, 27th April 2021), the question was asked to him: what if your child Thomas is married to a woman with no ability to had a child? Will you advice him to tolerate it? The following was his reply: "to me, if my child is married to a woman who does not bear a child, I will find another wife for him; or I will advise him to divorce that woman and be married to another girl." Participant D (Personal communication, 16 April 2021) was asked, "What if your son has married a woman who does not get pregnant?" She said; "children are a blessing from God; once they fail to have children, I will advise my son to find children out of the marriage and not divorce his wife."

This participant was asked another question, "What if your daughter, a married one, does not have the ability to be pregnant; what advice will you provide to her?" She replied, "I will tell her to tolerate her husband, to love and provide him much care so that he cares less about children and becomes afraid to lose his wife." According to the conversations above, marriage in Africa has been affected by traditions where children are the centre of marriage; married couples who fail to have children face a lot of challenges from their husbands' relatives. Even Christian marriages lacking the ability to bear children also face similar challenges from relatives. Therefore, the church should provide enough marriage education to societies; and societies should understand that children are blessings and gifts from God.

Discriminatory Challenges Facing Couples Due to Childlessness

The following are some challenges facing couples due to childlessness according to research participants. First, lack of support and care when older. As everyone can know, people need support and care from other people, especially from their children to help them with various needs such as searching for food. Participant E (personal communication, 17 April 2021) explains that "The importance of children in family level is quite open because children are needed for helping their parents in their future lives, especially when their parents become older. Therefore, it is very important to have children who will help in various activities for the future time of their parents."

According to participant E, if one does not have children in an African context, the surrounding societies will hardly embrace that person because their perception is quite different. The surrounding society thinks marriage is complete only if children are present. Societies should be educated to understand alternative situations of childlessness. Education is needed to understand that childlessness is not sinful before God, and that marriage cannot be nullified by lack of children.

Childlessness-related discrimination leads to the collapse of many couples in the community. Participant F (Personal communication, 05 May 2021) said that most people soon after being married require having children. If they live for a long time without having children, they start showing different elements of disagreement with the situation, such as unreasonable punishing of their wives and not caring for their homes. All these lead to the possible collapses of marriages. Embarrassment due to discrimination is another challenge facing childless couples, especially to family members and people surrounding their society. Couples feel embarrassed when people, out of ignorance, ask them about their lack of children. Thus, lack of children makes couples embarrassed due to community perception of their childlessness.

Marriage and the Male Child in the African Context

In an African context, male children seem to be more important in the family than female children. Though some societies are matrilineal, they still provide priority to male children. Waruta and Kinoti (2000) reiterate this fact, that in Africa “not only is the birth of a child important among the African people, but the gender of the child is also important. Male children are valued, especially in many patrilineal African societies.” During the study, a conversation was made with participant G (Personal communication, 22nd April 2021) who said that a male child needs decent care because he will be the agent of the generation of offspring for the clan; he will be the one carrying the name of the clan. But the female child will go to generate offspring for the other clan”.

The participant further continued to explain that to him male children were the ones supposed to have better lives in preparation for the future fatherly lives such as giving more chances for acquiring education than female children. Participant H, in our conversation (Personal communication, 02nd May 2021), said, “...all children are from God; it is not good to consider girls as valueless because nowadays are the ones who remember their families after marriage rather than boys; when parents are too old to fend for themselves, they always go to their daughters.” Participant H continued to explain the experience from her family; that she was the one who cared for her parents although had brothers who hardly cared for the parents. They were mostly busy with their wives and families. Basing on the above experience from participants, the preference for male children hardly corresponds to the reality of lives in current societies, both Christian and non-Christian. The above conversation highlights the need for enough education in societies about the position of male and female children. Married couples should grow their children without favouritism; all children are equal

and should be provided equal opportunities without any traces of gender-related discrimination.

Marriage and the Male Child in Churches at Mbeya City

Baloyi and Manala (2018:2) report that “One mother-in-law in Igbo, Nigeria, came into conflict with her daughter-in-law because the mother was forcing her son to take a second wife in her desperation to receive a male grandchild. Besides the fact that sonless marriages are built on shaky foundations, the wife is usually the one blamed for the lack of sons in the family, not the husband and his family.” This statement indicates that the collapses of many marriages, including Christian marriages, happen when most husbands need their wives to bear for them more male children than females. If they lack male children, they discriminate against them on the basis of their deference and start finding other wives outside the official marriages, which leads them to backslide from adherence to their churches. Despite being committed to faith, most Christians seem to overlook the fact that all children are equal without considering their gender. This overlook increases conflicts in most families irrespective of their religious affiliation, according to participant I (Personal communication, 30th March 2021). Participant J said during the conversation:

The lack of a male child influences some Christians to backslide from their faith. The back sliding of Christians appears when they try to find male children but fail to obtain them; they tell God their predicament everyday without any achievement. This situation influences them to shift to other sides; they start using traditional medicines from witch doctors in order to fulfil their demands. This situation causes them to feel that God does not listen to their plights. Hence, the situation also leads them to backslide from Christianity and attending to religious issues (Personal communication: April 27, 2021).

The explanations of participants I and J above indicate that Christians’ views have been affected by the African traditional outlook. The male child is seen as being the source of conflict among couples in churches, especially those lacking male children in their marriages.

Gender-Based Discrimination Issues Surrounding the Preference for Male Children

There are different gender issues surrounding male and female children in our community as follows. First, uneven access to education, which signals gender-based discrimination (Awinia, 2019). Female children in the community still have less access to education than male children. Participant K (Personal communication, 21 April 2021), in our conversation, attested saying:

Most African cultures and traditions provide more chances to male children to obtain education than female children and sometimes people say that providing education to female children is wastage of time and money. To my opinion, it’s not true at all. All children are

equal. Otherwise, this situation of segregating children on the basis of sex increases the number of dependent people, especially females to depend on males in the community. So, it is better to change our minds and provide equal chances for education to both male and female children.

The above statement suggests that it is better to stop the behaviour of segregating female children in the community in order to promote development without caring about the gender of children.

Another gender related-discrimination aspect is the absence of freedom in marriage engagement in African traditional marriages. The absence of freedom to engage in marriage in traditional marriages, especially to male and female children, is another aspect among gender-related discrimination issues surrounding male and female children. Participant J (Personal communication, 02nd May 2021) said that:

African traditional and culture does not provide male and female children freedom of selecting boyfriends and girlfriends they want. They are forced to be married to someone without their consent, especially girls. This forced marriage leads married people to live without happiness, which consequently leads to breaking their marriages.

According to participant J, it is better to provide freedom to children to select their boyfriends and girlfriends they prefer. It is better to render them freedom in order to promote unity and cooperation to their families.

Participant D (Personal communication, 17 April 2021), asserted that in the African communities most people force children, mostly girls, to be married to people they do not like just because of bride-price. Parents hardly consider love between the marrying couples. Because of the poverty of parents, they force their children in order to obtain some money as brideprice to assist them in their daily lives. Participant D sees forced marriage due to brideprice as another sensitive gender issue facing children in African communities because children's consent is important to allow them to balance their marital lives. Due to brideprice, girls are engaged in marriages without their consent, only to provide material things to their parents.

This gender-related discriminatory practice faces vehement challenges due to social changes in highly digitized interactions among youths. Manyama (2017) reports some findings that show that youths were no longer willing to marry partners they did not love. Quoting from one of his female research participants at Kijitonyama Dar es Salaam Tanzania, Manyama (2017:73) reports that "Family influence in the selection of life partner is out of date. In this modern world tribalism, regionalism and religious influence cannot determine mate selection anymore. What matters is love!"

Decision-making is another gender-related discrimination issue surrounding male and female children in most African communities. Participant H (Personal communication, 05 May 2021) said that:

The African culture hardly provides chances to children to participate in decision-making, especially female children. It is better to provide chances to children of both genders to present their views and ideas in the community because doing that provides children the ability to have more confidence to express their views.

Therefore, participant H sees the value of children's views regardless of their genders. For him, it is better to involve all children in decision-making in order to understand ideas of everyone regardless of gender and age.

Lack of religious freedom, when being married, is another gender-related discrimination issue surrounding female children in African societies. Participant C (Personal communication, 24 April 2021) was asked about his views on the way religious freedom is exercised among girls and boys being married. He said:

...in many African societies, there is little chance for female children being married to select places of worship. In most cases, male spouses want their wives to follow them where they worship.

Participant C emphasized that the freedom of worship to a female child marrying is different from that of the male being married because the female is obliged to join her husband's denomination or religion. Hence, the lack of freedom of worship of the marrying female child is one among gender-related discrimination issues surrounding female children that require close attention of African communities in modern time. The provision of punishments in households is shrouded in gender biases. In some families, since the value of the male child is highly accorded, female children are tortured emotional, psychological, and even physical treatments by their parents or guardians. Participant C is of the opinion that "it is better to provide punishment equally and not providing heavy punishments to one sex and less punishment to another." According to participant C, children of both genders are children that require equal treatment as human beings without discrimination.

Domestic works are also surrounded by gender biases between male and female children in African community. Relating her experiences, participant K (Personal communication, 24 May 2021) said:

Female children face a lot of obligations to work at home, with long working hours making them burdened and tired all the time. Female students work long times at home instead of studying; a thing that makes them have poor performance in academic issues as compared to male children who use more time on academic

matters making them have better performance. It is better for parents to reduce some work to children, especially female children, in order to make sure that they have more time for participating in academic issues in order for them to have better performance.

Overworking, especially for female children in the homes, is a gender-based discrimination issue surrounding female children that reduces their chances to participate in academic issues as their counterpart male children. This situation requires the attention of society to provide equal working situations for both male and female children in homes for them to grow with equal gender attitudes.

Raping is also another among the gender-based discrimination issues surrounding female children in our community. Most female children are raped and impregnated in various situations, including schools and colleges. This behaviour and situation make most female children lose confidence and have greater fear whenever they walk here and there in their environment than male children. Due to fear of rape, female children hesitate to join with boys to discuss subjects in schools and colleges, which leads them to have less performance. Since the interaction between boys and girls is important, the raping behaviour should be stopped in order to make sure all people live safe lives with the required confidence. Raping is one of the gender-discriminatory issues surrounding most female children needing greater attention in promoting the life of equality of children of both genders.

Discriminatory Challenges Facing Christian Couples Due to the Lack of a Male Child

After discussing gender-based discrimination issues surrounding children, this section looks at challenges facing couples due to the lack of a male child. The lack of male children is one of the challenges facing married couples. There are many challenges facing married couples due to the lack of a male child in their household in the area of research. Some of them are the following: First, the lack of male children is a source of polygamous marriages. Participant L (personal communication, 24 April 2021) explained that most husbands, at Block T area need male children to help them in different activities, including being heirs of their wealth in case of their death. In order to obtain a male child, they engage in polygamous marriages. Baloyi and Manala (2018) report a similar situation in a South African context:

If the first wife has no children, or [has] only daughters, it is likely that her husband will find another wife'. This shows that the lack of male children in the family is considered a serious problem. The fact that polygamy, which has its own set of problems, is seen as a solution to families without male children is an indication that the lack of male children is indeed a challenge for African families.

Participant L sees there is a danger of engaging in polygamous marriages in such for male children: it can lead to the spread of diseases such as HIV/AIDS. Hence,

according to participant L, the search for a male child is one of the sources of unnecessary problems in most marriages against God's plans for marriage. Participant L (Personal communication, 24 April 2021) emphasized saying:

Most men need to have male children who could assist them in various activities, especially caring for them when are old. So, the lack of a male child leads them to find other wives in order to bear them male children.

According to participant L, the fear of old age and the need for care when old forces them to engage in polygamous marriages to have male children. This conception is hardly correct because not all male children take care of their parents when are old. Most female children may appear more efficient in caring for their parents than male children.

Misunderstanding between couples is another challenge facing them due to the lack of male children. The misunderstanding between a husband and his wife, and the other family members, especially those of the husband, becomes vivid when they need to have a male child and the woman does not bear that child; they reduce love and cooperation to the husband and his wife. Consequently, they start to isolate the woman and her husband. Participant E (Personal communication, 16 April 2021) opined that when the male child isn't obtained in a household, family members start to convince their child to be married to another wife in order to have a male child who will help expand their family and inherit wealth when their child dies. The seduction from relatives leads to quarrels between couples that may also lead to divorces and remarrying. Lack of male children leads to misunderstandings between people, especially married couples in African communities.

The lack of a male child causes betrayal between married couples. Betrayal means having secret affairs outside the official wedlock; it is cheating another couple by putting one's own self-interests first instead of considering the common interests. The lack of male children is a source of betrayal between couples because the husband needs a male child but lacks it. The husband starts to cheat his wife by engaging in affairs with other women in order to bear a male child for him. Since the husband's engagement is contrary to their initial agreement to love each other and live together in whatever situation, the husband considers his self-interest more than the prior common interest leading them into conflicts and misunderstandings. Betrayal due to the lack of male children is a challenge facing couples, not only in the area of research but also in all African societies requiring attention, if the will of God for the Christian marriage is to be met.

Theological Reflections on Childlessness and the Preference for a Male child

The theological overview of the two concepts of childlessness and male child cannot be clearly discussed without understanding God's purposes for marriage. God's purpose for marriage is to unite the original state of humanity. When reading the

second creation story, God created the “Earth creature” and differentiated it into male and female creatures. Marriage unites the male and female creatures into the original earth creature. Following this understanding, the purpose of marriage is not children; rather, it is the union of a man and a woman into one body. Children whether male or female remain as gifts from God. God is the one who provides children; God is the one who provides male or female children according to God’s wills and for God’s purpose. We agree with Baloyi and Manala (2018) as we know that every person is created in the image of God, but we also need to understand that everybody - regardless of his or her gender is created for a purpose. Quarrels and misunderstanding in marriages due to gifts provided by our creator is implausible and against God’s purposes.

Human childlessness needs a person to have tolerance because having children is not in one’s own hands. Tolerance is very important in human life because without tolerance one cannot live a life of childlessness surrounded by various societal stereotypes and stigmatization. In the book of *Samuel*, 1:7–20, one can see how Hanna tolerated her husband Elkana. They continued to find children without losing their faith in their God. Hanna cried everyday to God for giving them children and eventually God rendered them the baby called Samuel because she was asked to the Lord. In difficulties facing human lives, tolerance is very important for one to succeed.

Faith is the cornerstone when facing childlessness and other similar human predicaments. Faith is the source of achievement to any activity. In the book of *Samuel*, 1:7–20, one can see how Hanna showed faith in God due to childless life, God heard the cry of Hanna and her faith in God. God promised to provide them a child and after a short period, Hanna became pregnant and bore a baby Samuel. Penina and her derogatory words represent the societal view towards childlessness and the lack of a male child. Similarly, Hanna became unhappy as the African women would feel unhappy when confronted by society’s view on childlessness and the lack of a male child. For one to succeed in various predicaments in life, especially those of childlessness and the lack of a male child, faith in God, the provider of all gifts, is very important.

True love is very important, especially to any situation such as the plight of human childlessness and the lack of male children. Both husband and wife need to have true love and cooperate together on how to solve their quandaries of childlessness or the lack of a child of a certain gender instead of initiating discriminatory acts in their families. Initiating divorces and cheating in marriages due to childlessness or the lack of a male child hardly correspond to humanity and to God’s wills for Christian marriage. The need to focus on solving dilemmas is better than diverging them. Love and compassion may be better approaches than following discriminating societal norms and personal whims that compromise God’s wills for marriage.

Conclusion

This article has argued that the purpose of Christian marriage in Africa is not only having children or children of a particular gender, especially males, but also the consolidation of loving and satisfying complementary between couples. Several issues have been discussed, including the discriminatory actions facing Christian childless married couples and those without male children at Block T in Mbeya and their perceptions of participants on such challenges. The article also provided a theological reflection on the two issues of childlessness and the lack of a male child by focusing on the purpose of God for marriage in God's creation of the unified human being. The article sheds light that apart from children, Christian marriage is there for love purposes and erotic satisfaction between couples. Complementing each other in the two mentioned aspects is what makes them one body. Societies should need to be illuminated that any kind of discrimination based on bearing children or their gender is contrary to the will of God for Christian marriage.

Basing on the discussion in this article, we are of the opinion that the importance of Christian marriage in the African context goes beyond what people conceive it in terms of their existing cultural and societal norms. It is important for people to understand that in Christian marriage love plays a pivotal role between the two who agree to live together as wife and husband and complement each other. Bearing children of whatever sexual orientation should be understood as a gift to people whom God has united. Strictly speaking, it is a gift from God and born for God's purpose, not a human endeavour that can lead to blaming and discriminating the wife or husband as being the cause of the deficiency. The quandary of childlessness or the lack of male children in marriages should not affect the loving relationships between wives and husbands in Christian marriages because are beyond their human conceptions. It is important to understand the possible causes of childlessness and the lack of male children in marriages instead of initiating conflicts and discriminatory acts because such knowledge will reduce unnecessary conflicts and possible collapses of marital relationships. Churches should provide adequate education to couples before contracting marriage, and after contracting marriages, regarding God's purposes for Christian marriage and their possible gifts of procreation. Education will most likely eradicate discriminatory behaviors' among Christian married couples.

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