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Religion and non-marital fertility: A qualitative study of the perspectives and experiences of South African Muslim women

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Abstract

In light of the rising number of children born outside of formal marriage, there is increasing concern about the well-being of these mothers and children, especially since they mostly come from disadvantaged populations. This study aims to determine the role religion plays in the experience of non-marital fertility. This study draws on data from ten in-depth interviews with women in Durban, South Africa. The study found that women did not anticipate the negative impact of non-marital fertility prior to experiencing their first birth. The main reason contributing to the experience of non-marital fertility was the lack of sex education. Many women believed that Islam allowed only married women to use contraceptives because unmarried women are expected to practice celibacy and their religion advocates for a two-parent household. As a result, unmarried women with children found themselves often ostracised from their community. The study recommends a comprehensive sexual education regime to address the challenges associated with non-marital fertility. (*Afr J Reprod Health* 2022; 26[7]: 49-58).

Keywords: Non-marital fertility, Islam, sex education, religion, attitudes

Résumé

Compte tenu du nombre croissant d'enfants nés hors mariage formel, on s'inquiète de plus en plus du bien-être de ces mères et de ces enfants, d'autant plus qu'ils proviennent pour la plupart de populations défavorisées. Cette étude vise à déterminer le rôle que joue la religion dans l'expérience de la fécondité hors mariage. Cette étude s'appuie sur les données de dix entretiens approfondis avec des femmes à Durban, en Afrique du Sud. L'étude a révélé que les femmes n'avaient pas anticipé l'impact négatif de la fécondité hors mariage avant de vivre leur première naissance. La principale raison contribuant à l'expérience de la fécondité hors mariage était le manque d'éducation sexuelle. De nombreuses femmes croyaient que l'islam n'autorisait que les femmes mariées à utiliser des contraceptifs parce que les femmes célibataires sont censées pratiquer le célibat et que leur religion préconise un ménage biparental. En conséquence, les femmes célibataires avec enfants se sont souvent retrouvées exclues de leur communauté. L'étude recommande un régime d'éducation sexuelle complet pour relever les défis associés à la fécondité hors mariage. (*Afr J Reprod Health* 2022; 26[7]: 49-58).

Mots-clés: Fécondité hors mariage, Islam, éducation sexuelle, religion, attitudes

Introduction

In developing societies, especially in countries that are in the early stages of the fertility transition, like most of Sub-Saharan Africa, religion-specific differentials in fertility have been commonly observed¹. Fertility is central to population change and forms a vital component of development and growth². Religion has a powerful influence on fertility, and vice versa, as there are underlying notions of what constitutes *normal and accepted behaviour* regarding the onset of sexual activity, marriage, and family formation^{3,4}. Previously, high levels of fertility were associated with non-use and

lack of modern contraceptives due to religious principles and attitudes^{3,5-7}. Religion also has an influence on the desired number of children, family priorities, and gendered roles that are practiced within families⁸.

Globally, it is observed that Muslims exhibit higher fertility as compared to Hindus or Christians². The traditional Muslim family is considered to be strongly patrilineal and male dominated as prescribed by the Quran⁹. Patriarchal systems can increase the demand for children because they sometimes limit a woman's liberty and opportunities for economic growth¹⁰. Additionally, norms and practices limit a woman's

mobility which constrains her interaction with other individuals, especially non-family members, which in turn may restrict exposure to contraceptive initiatives¹¹. Muslims in South Africa are sociologically diverse, divided along the lines of race, class, gender, ethnicity, language and beliefs. In addition, in South Africa, there are multiple Islamic voices, traditions and identities across the provinces¹². For instance, Vahed¹² suggest that this is highlighted by the diversity of the South African population. The Muslim community is not homogenous; instead, it comprises a diverse group of people with distinct racial and socio-economic differences. In South Africa Muslims are concentrated mostly in KwaZulu-Natal and the Western Cape¹². Although religion strongly influences reproductive practice, its effects are not consistent or similar across all communities. For instance, Johnson-Hanks¹³ suggests that in West African countries which is predominantly Muslim, fertility is lower among Muslim women than other women. On the contrary, in countries where Muslims are in the minority, they have higher fertility rates in comparison to other religious groups.

The study of religion and fertility is important, not only to understand fertility differentials, but also to reveal broader public health concerns. For a long time communication regarding sexual and reproductive matters, including contraception, has been a sensitive topic. A study conducted by Al-Zahrani¹⁴ in the predominantly Muslim country of Saudi-Arabia found that female participants reported experiencing more difficulties in talking about sexual matters. They also delayed seeking sexual health care as a result of the influence of social norms pertaining to women's sexuality. In addition, health care professionals usually avoided initiating discussions on sexual matters to respect cultural norms and to avoid offending the patient. A recent review by Alomair and colleagues¹⁵ found that many Muslim women have poor sexual and reproductive health knowledge, and negative attitudes towards family planning, which influence their access to, and use of services. Alomair and colleagues suggest that there are many barriers to

contraceptive use among Muslim women including the lack of basic reproductive knowledge, insufficient knowledge about contraception, misconceptions, and negative attitudes. More recent research by Alomair and colleagues¹⁶ suggest that a lack of knowledge on sexual and reproductive health among Saudi women contributed significantly to negative experiences.

There are a number of factors which continually affect the relationship between religion and fertility. In the Arab States and Iran, DeJong¹⁷ found that there are a few national government programmes addressing young people's sexual and reproductive health and their access to information. A major factor restricting contraceptive use is the taboo surrounding discussion about sexual health matters. A study by Mohammadi¹⁸ suggests that stereotypes, the fear of being judged, discriminated against, and feeling ashamed for seeking reproductive health services are usually the main challenges facing unmarried women. This is because premarital sexual activity, homosexual relationships, and the use of contraception is not supported by Christians and Muslims^{3,19}. In addition, elevated levels of HIV has been largely promoted by cultural patterns of premarital sex, multiple sexual partners, and unprotected sexual activity²⁰. As the influence of religion has slowly diminished, there has been a heightened risk of sexually transmitted infections (STI) and HIV infection^{21,22}. Religious principles central to Islam advocates for adherence to moral behaviour through its values, which provides a measure of protection against HIV and STIs⁹. The practice of social control observed in Muslim communities, where premarital fertility is not tolerated seems to have an effect on the dynamics of epidemics, infections and diseases of a sexual nature across religions^{23,24}.

Over the past several decades, fertility has been declining steadily. According to Statistics South Africa²⁵, between the period 2009 and 2019, fertility has declined from an average of 2.62 to 2.32 children per woman. Recent evidence on the relationship between religion and fertility (specifically the Muslim religion) in the South African context is scanty. Therefore, understanding

the influence of religion on reproductive behaviour will provide important insights into the fertility decline that is witnessed globally. For this study, in-depth interviews were used to shed insights into the perspectives and experiences of young Muslim women on non-marital fertility.

Methods

This study draws on qualitative data from ten in-depth interviews (IDI) with Muslim women in order to better understand their perspectives and experiences. For this study, in-depth IDIs were the most appropriate approach for investigating the lived experiences of Muslim mothers. The study was restricted to Muslim women who had at least one child outside of marriage. In order to reach the participants the researcher liaised with a non-government organization, Sisters in Africa (SIA). The organization travels throughout Durban to educate women on sexual health issues. The first author collected data in suburbs within Durban. This study site was selected because it has demographic diversity, was more accessible to the researcher, and is also less researched in comparison to other major South African cities such as Johannesburg and Cape Town²⁶.

The age of the women ranged from 20 to 34 years. The sample consisted of single, married and divorced women. Most women in the sample had their first birth when they were 20 years or older. Eight out of the ten women in the sample had their first birth while completing their tertiary education. At the time of the interviews, seven of the women in the sample were single. The remaining three women in the sample were divorced, widowed and married. The number of children ranged from one to three. Most (6) of the participants had one child. Mostly, those who gave birth to more than one child in the study were married (this includes widowed and divorced). Only one woman was not married and had two children. Of the women who were married, the second child was usually conceived after marriage.

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (protocol reference number: HSS/1424/015M).

Prior to the interviews, the researcher made it clear to the women that their participation in the research is voluntary and that no identifying information would be disseminated. Names of the participants or any personal information was not obtained to ensure confidentiality. Participants were also informed that withdrawal from the research is also an option. The women sat with the interviewer for approximately 45 and 60 minutes in a venue that ensured maximum privacy and allowed participants to respond to the open-ended questions that were asked by the interviewer. The data collected was transcribed verbatim and analysed thematically.

Results

Religion and non-marital fertility is a sensitive topic because of pre-existing norms and stereotypes yet capturing the unheard voices of women are imperative to advance gender equality. Drawing on the narratives of the young women who participated in this study the first section documents prevalence of non-marital fertility. A number of factors influence non-marital fertility including lack of contraceptive use, inadequate sex education and personal desire to become a mother. While all of the women experienced non-marital fertility, it is not without its challenges. The last part of the results documents the challenges facing women who experience non-marital fertility. In order to accurately capture the voices of the women, verbatim quotes from the interviews are presented in each section.

Prevalence of non-marital fertility among Muslim women

The women in the study explained that there is a low prevalence of non-marital fertility among Muslims since marriage occurs at an early age. When a couple is ready to experiment sexually, they are already married. Often the humiliation of non-marital fertility is overlooked when the couple gets married before the child is born. This is done to *legalize* the relationship and for the child to grow in an environment without any discrimination and stigmatization. Muslim women who are unmarried and pregnant are expected to marry the father of the

child as the Muslim religion advocates for a two-parent household.

Most people who have knowledge of Islam know that marriage is accepted and practiced from an early age, hence both males and females can explore their sexual desires freely between each other, thus minimising and almost eliminating non-marital fertility (IDI #1 22; years).

The women in the sample all agreed that sex before marriage is prohibited by Islam. For a couple to engage in sexual intercourse they have to be married. Marriage is seen as a pure union between two individuals. Some women in the study expressed that marrying the father of the child was the only way to limit negative perceptions from their social group. In addition, they elaborated that the couple is given a chance to *legitimize* their relationship by getting married and to give the child a stable home environment.

As an unmarried female, you ought to get married if you find out that you are pregnant. (IDI #5; 28 years).

Non-marital fertility can be decreased by individuals getting married at a young age (IDI #9; 26 years).

The women in the study also explained that marriage at a younger age is strongly encouraged for reducing non-marital fertility. They mentioned that young women should not experiment sexually with multiple partners. As a result, a younger age at first marriage may also limit the number of sexual partners of an individual. The women explained that if marriage occurred at a younger age, out-of-wedlock births will not be as prevalent as they are now. The women also mentioned that even though Islam emphasizes early marriage, recently that does not occur due to greater female autonomy.

Factors causing non-marital fertility

The role of contraceptives

The women in the study expressed mixed responses to contraceptives. Some women believe that Islam

is pro-family, and therefore contraceptives are not allowed. However, some women point out that contraceptive use is acceptable for child spacing. If the couple is married, and depending on their economic situation, then contraceptives are used. Young people are expected to abstain from all forms of sexual activities. The quotes below from the women suggest that abstinence is advocated especially when an individual is not married.

Sex education in Islam is solely based on abstinence for individuals that are not married (IDI #1; 22 years).

Islam is strongly pro-family and regards children as a gift from God. Muslim sexual ethics forbids sex outside of marriage, so its teachings about birth control should be understood within the context of husband and wife (IDI #3; 29 years).

In Islam, some women argue that contraceptive use is not forbidden but there are conditions that a couple should adhere to. Generally, abortion is prohibited and heavily frowned upon but the narrative differs in some contexts. For instance, in the Middle East and West Africa, reform efforts, including progressive interpretations of Islam, have resulted in laws allowing for early abortion, dependent on the circumstance²⁷. In addition, Shapiro²⁸ observes that most Muslim-majority countries do not allow abortion under any circumstances unless for the purpose of saving the life of the pregnant woman. However, there are a few countries which allow abortion 'on request'. Generally, this is because it is much more acceptable for married women to utilise contraceptives while unmarried women are expected to abstain. Religious views on birth control vary and many religious institutions oppose the use of contraceptives. This is challenging for women who feel that they do not have satisfactory control over their reproduction²⁹.

Lack of adequate sex education

The women in the sample were all aware that sex without using any contraceptive method led to pregnancy, but they did not understand the

repercussions of out-of-wedlock births. Most of the women believe that non-marital fertility is caused by the lack of effective sex education. Sex education is a lifelong process of acquiring information and forming attitudes, beliefs, and values; however, as a result of the lack of adequate sex education, women were not fully aware of the repercussions that would follow a non-marital fertility.

The main cause of non-marital fertility is experimentation because you do not know the consequences of it (IDI #3; 29 years).

Religion also does not explain much. It does not inform people about sexual health. The mosque or religious gatherings do not give in-depth knowledge about such issues (IDI #4; 24 years).

Sex education in this sense depends on the individual's marital status. For those who are married, sex is acceptable, but for those who are not married, it is forbidden. Sexual activity is limited to married couples because a child needs to grow up in an environment that will ensure that they will be financially and emotionally supported. Religious principles encourage contraceptive use but it must be used in a manner that is advocated for within the religion.

Moral and religious ethics need to be considered. Abortion is forbidden (haram) except if necessity requires that it be done. However, this act must be performed before the soul is infused into the foetus – meaning before the foetus has reached the age of four months, in which it is permissible (IDI #4; 24 years).

Financial limitations

Non-marital fertility is prevalent not only due to a lack of sex education but also a lack of finances necessary to formalise the union of marriage. Marriage in Islam does not only mean signing the marriage contract but there are important events leading up to the actual wedding, which are costly.

Prior to the wedding event, in Islam, the groom has to pay dowry. There are certain things that are

basic to all Muslim marriages. Marriages must be declared publicly. They should never be undertaken in secret. This publicity is usually achieved by having a large feast, or walimah - a party, specifically for announcing publicly that the couple is married and entitled to each other (IDI #1; 22 years).

Non-marital fertility arises in the context when the couple does not have the financial resources to pay the dowry, host the wedding and to maintain the expenses of marriage. Weddings are therefore seen as expensive and out of reach for some. For them, the events leading to the marriage is not affordable.

Desire to be a mother

The women expressed that they had no interest in getting married but expressed the desire to become a mother, which led to their decision to have a child out-of-wedlock, even though in Islam it is expected that a child lives in a household with a mother and a father.

Personally, the reason for the out-of-wedlock birth was that women are driven by the urge of wanting to have children. Not every woman is meant to be married but it is in us to take care and nurture children (IDI #5; 28 years).

The women in the study believe that not every woman has the desire to get married. The urge for a woman to have a child is strong, but the urge to have a husband is not. The women have a strong desire for a child and some are willing to forego marriage to have a child. A child is seen to give meaning to their life.

The external harmful force

The women in the study also believed that the factor leading to non-marital fertility is the interference of external forces, which drives them to sin. The women in the study believed that the structure of society provides a guide to living righteously. In that structure, there is always an opposing force that tempts people to commit sin, rather than living righteously. This is clear in the comment by one woman.

In every community, there are rules of marriage. That is why to establish illegal relationships is against the law. This is the reason that the person doing this type of deed feels guilty due to this, which stems from a sinful soul and has bad results (IDI #7; 21 years).

She adds:

In addition, when a person repeats this deed or, due to other factors the guilt of the person becomes less or if the fornicator does not have the feeling of guilt, then there is a thief present in his inner self also, and he becomes ill mannered, breaks the law, and deviates (IDI #7; 21 years).

The women explained that the cause of non-marital fertility is having an external force that can propel an individual to commit devious deeds. As a result, they explained that the individual could only be at peace once a cleansing ritual is performed.

Challenges of non-marital fertility

Single parenthood

The women in the study all agreed that there are many challenges connected with being a single mother. The women also expressed that the father's participation in the life of the child born out-of-wedlock is limited. In the interviews, the women mentioned repeatedly that the child born out-of-wedlock is the responsibility of the mother, while the father may not have any ties with the child. In many instances, the father is usually not known to the child.

The child born out of Zina (adultery or fornication) is not traced back to the adulterer or fornicator, but he should be traced back to his mother (IDI #4; 24 years).

Children from illegitimate unions are not legitimate (IDI #3; 29 years).

A child conceived in marriage is mainly the responsibility of the family but when a child is born out-of-wedlock, the child is not likely to get the same level of support as compared to a child born

in a two parent household or in a 'legal relationship'.

Negative attitudes towards non-marital fertility

All women in the study held negative attitudes towards non-marital fertility. The main reason for these attitudes is related to strong religious beliefs. The religious doctrines of Islam suggest that individuals must always follow a righteous path. Islam teaches that unlawful relationships are sinful and they should be prohibited. The women also believed that an individual who sins is a non-believer. One woman argued:

The belief and knowledge of sin, is present in any person having intercourse outside the union of Nikkah (marriage) (IDI #1; 22 years).

She adds:

Islam preaches against having children out-of-wedlock, but also makes provisions for it in the sense that should people find themselves in that situation there are procedures to help redeem themselves and to help both the male and female and the child (IDI #1; 22 years).

The women reveal that the Quran states that sex out of marriage is a sin and even though the women in this study had children outside of marriage they disapprove of non-marital fertility as they feel that it goes against their religion.

Sometimes women are cast out and made out to be a bad influence on younger women (IDI #2; 20 years).

Ostracism and stigmatization

It was also emphasized that, in some cases, non-marital fertility may result in ostracism and even rejection from social groups. This results in the mother lacking a place to go for emotional and financial support. In situations where an individual is ostracised, she has to sever ties with the family. Additionally, all the women in the study have admitted to feeling a certain degree of shame and

disgrace associated with having a child while they are not married. The disgrace stems from the religious doctrines prohibiting individuals from being sexually active while they are not married. The women quoted below explain that an individual is labelled as an adulterer for being in an illegitimate relationship.

It depends on the people you are surrounded with, but in extreme cases, I would say it means being labelled as being promiscuous (IDI #5; 28 years).

A child born because of an illegitimate relationship should not suffer from discrimination because of his parents' sin (IDI #8; 23 years).

Even though abortion was legalised in South Africa, there are still moral and religious barriers in some sectors of our society that deter women from practicing this right. Equally, shame and disgrace does not deter women from proceeding with the pregnancy. The greatest need for access to legal abortion services exists among disadvantaged women, both socially and economically³⁰.

Discussion

Fertility, a phenomenon associated with childbearing, is strongly regulated by the dominant principles of different religions³¹. This study found that prior to their first birth, the women were aware of the risks leading to pregnancy, but they were not fully aware of the adverse implications of non-marital fertility such as negative community attitudes, stigmatization and ostracism. All the women in the study had their first birth outside of marriage. Traditionally, births to unmarried women were not accepted³². It is more preferable to be part of a two-parent household, consisting of both a father and a mother³³. In a single parent household, children depend on just one parent. This translates into economic hardships, which are especially pronounced among families headed by a never-married mother²⁴. These conditions are accompanied by weak financial conditions and a reliance on a single income to fulfil the child's needs as opposed to an income from both parents.

Even though the consequences of non-marital fertility differ, generally the socio-

economic conditions of a child born out-of-wedlock tend to be different from those of a child born from a marital union³⁴. In light of the rising numbers of children born outside of formal marriage, which is intrinsically associated with socio-economic stratification, the well-being of these mothers and children are of increasing concern³⁵ because they generally originate from disadvantaged populations³⁶ and will continue to live in a cycle of poverty and hardship. Furthermore, children born outside of marriage struggle with developmental achievements which disrupts their own socio-economic attainment and successes^{37,38}. As a result, non-marital fertility presents itself as a challenge because it is a pathway for the intergenerational transmission of socio-economic inequality.

The women in the study further explained that there was an additional strain prior to the arrangement of the actual wedding as there were several rituals that needed to be followed. The groom also has to pay dowry. The payment of bridewealth is a common practice across much of Sub-Saharan Africa³⁹. Due to financial constraints it can be a challenge to commit to the payment of bridewealth or dowry and thus the financial constraints can lead to diminished prospects for marriage⁴⁰. This further contributes to the prevalence of non-marital fertility across various cultures and religions. Despite the financial and social challenges associated with non-marital fertility, the study found that many women desire to experience motherhood. These sentiments are supported by literature that suggests that the experience of motherhood is desired among many women regardless of specific factors such as age, religion, health and socio-economic status^{41,42}.

The women in the study suggested that their religion advocated for a two-parent household therefore non-marital fertility is not common among Muslims. The same countries that exhibit high marriage rates and low cohabitation rates exhibit low rates of non-marital childbearing. These are concentrated in Asia and the Middle East⁴³. Marriage in these countries occurs at a younger age, as compared to societies with a higher prevalence of non-marital fertility where marriage occurs later in life. Marriage is a union that is respected as there

is collaboration between the wife and the husband⁴⁴. The study reveals that marriage can provide stability within families and avoid negative challenges of non-marital fertility as highlighted in the study by Crosnoe and Wildsmith²⁸. Recent fertility trends reveal that there is a later age of first marriage⁴⁵ which results in a longer period for an individual to have different sexual partners. Therefore, more consideration needs to be directed towards identifying existing barriers to contraceptive use and accessibility and this needs to be dealt with adequately to avoid any unplanned pregnancies.

The women in the study all agree that effective sex education is vital to address issues related to sexual health and should not be limited to the classroom but should also be accessible in the home, religious gatherings, cultural settings and in the media. Various institutions need to adequately take responsibility for relaying information. Madhavan, Harrison and Sennott⁴⁶ highlights the importance of the role of education in shaping young people's attitudes towards union formation and childbearing. Learners studying sex education should be taught the benefits of marriage as well as the impact it has on society in terms of bringing stability not only to the couple, but also to the children⁴⁷. Education is pivotal to ensuring that informative decisions are made, especially those with long-term effects. Additionally, religious institutions have an important role to play in raising awareness of contraception and other important sexual and reproductive health matters⁴⁸. Addressing the unmet need for family planning may enhance the status of women through education and employment as well as changes in social structures that influence female autonomy⁴⁹.

The novelty of the study lies in the detailed narratives of the lived experiences of Muslim women who had a child outside of marriage. The aim of the study was not to interview until saturation was reached but rather to gain information power on a sensitive topic. Based on the findings of the study it is clear that more research is needed on the impact of religion on non-marital fertility as there are numerous, inter-linked factors that might influence the decision-making of

women. We are currently in an era where norms and expectations are rapidly changing and factors such as socio-economic status, access to higher education and availability of health services are allowing women greater autonomy in their decision-making. Thus, a larger, in-depth study will shed unique insights into the role of religion and other prominent factors that influence fertility decisions among women.

Conclusion

The purpose of the study was to shed insights into the lived experiences of non-marital fertility among Muslim women in Durban. From a religious perspective, the interviews suggest that if individuals have a clear understanding of the consequences of their actions, they are more likely to make decisions that will not cause obstacles in attaining respect in society. An effective and efficient sexual education regime, which is provided to younger cohorts of women, can potentially address the challenges associated with non-marital fertility. Beyond the individual, it would be worth encouraging education regarding sexual and reproductive health matters at the community-level. While it would be ideal to incorporate religious leaders into these initiatives it may be difficult as it may go against general beliefs and principles. However, safer sex practices should be encouraged at the community level and within learning institutions. These measures should include culturally sensitive and innovative means of addressing issues of sexual and reproductive health among young people.

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