

A SOCIO-RELIGIOUS APPRAISAL OF “CRYPTIC PREGNANCY”
PHENOMENON IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

‘Cryptic pregnancy’, a term misleadingly used in Nigeria to describe false pregnancy by fraudulent individuals is becoming a phenomenon. Some women with infertility are manipulated by unscrupulous midwives who deceive them with a pseudo-pregnancy and extort them financially. At “full-term”, during the often stage-managed delivery, they are usually handed a baby that is criminally gotten from a “baby factory”. Sometimes, these women are complicit to this nefarious act in order to deceive their husbands and / or douse onto them the pressure from family or society. This paper interrogates this phenomenon in Nigeria, showing the shortcomings by government and religion. The qualitative study applies descriptive research design and draws insight from interviews, observation, and literature. Data is analyzed using the content analysis research technique. An inquiry into the causes and effects of this phenomenon in Nigeria, among others, uncovers the inability of the Nigerian government to keep accurate vital birth statistics. Hence, the existence of baby factories. Besides, the prevailing harsh economic reality in the nation also predisposes the girls / women who constitute a source of babies for these ‘factories’. They are neither in school nor meaningfully engaged in society. Religion, which is also largely (mis)used in Nigeria to disregard reason and valorize strange phenomena, paves the way for such ridiculous beliefs like a simulated pregnancy that defies science. Cryptic pregnancy in Nigeria has cultural, social and religious consequences. This paper, therefore, proposes that Nigerian civil society and government should mount a massive campaign against the deception called ‘cryptic pregnancy’.

Keywords: Cryptic Pregnancy, Religion, Baby Factory, Motherhood, Motherism.

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INTRODUCTION

Cryptic pregnancy, a rare condition where a pregnant woman may not be aware of her pregnancy for various reasons, until very late in the pregnancy or even during labour / delivery is being inappropriately and criminally employed in Nigeria. This term has been misapplied by some midwives, healthcare workers, and self-acclaimed fertility specialists. They use it to describe some kind of induced false 'pregnancy' that cannot be scientifically proven or confirmed. It is in this perverted sense, that cryptic pregnancy is discussed in this paper. Some women fall prey to these unscrupulous health workers that champion cryptic pregnancy in Nigeria in a bid to get pregnant and become mothers.

In Nigeria, motherhood is revered and considered noble. It is fulfilling and defines women. Motherhood validates marriage in Africa and both are intertwined (Ijezie, 2013; Manus, 2013; Chukwuma, 2012; Ngcobo, 2013; Oduyoye, 2002; Nwajiaku, 2011). Moreover, in Nigeria, especially in contemporary times, infertile women are often held in disdain and treated with contempt. These women often consider themselves as failures. Therefore, they leave no stone unturned in their desperation for motherhood experience.

In the past, certain cultural practices in Nigeria like communal lifestyle and polygyny reduced the pressure on women who could not have biological children. Women coped with the harsh realities of childlessness as community solidarity was stronger and children truly belonged to the community and not only to their biological parents. As civilization weakened these practices, these women became more exposed to psychological trauma, family contempt and apprehension for loss of descent.

Hence, in Nigeria, it is very rare to see a married woman who does not desire to have children (Ijezie, 2013). More so, the procreative power of women represents a major attraction to men. Chinweizu (1990) succinctly states: "yes indeed! A woman with fruitful womb is most precious to a man; contrariwise, a woman without a fruitful womb is of scant value to a procreative man" (p. 19). Continuing, Chinweizu claims that the female power rests on her privilege of controlling or owning the womb, kitchen and cradle. The womb is a biological privilege, while the control of the kitchen and rocking of the cradle are gender roles. In essence, there is truth in Chinweizu's submission. However, if for any reason, the 'womb' fails a woman, she also loses a second power, that of the cradle and the kitchen often becomes of less attraction without the 'womb' and the "cradle". Therefore, the ability to procreate empowers, while the inability to procreate disempowers women in Nigeria.

Infertility, therefore, remains a distasteful experience for women in Nigeria. Manus (2013) notes: "much social stigma is accorded to barren women in most Nigerian ethnic cultures. The gravity of childlessness is acute in African societies" (p. 205). Hence, women usually explore the available means – medical, religious, trado-medical, personal discipline – all in a bid to beat infertility. Indeed, "at the deep center of a woman's being, uncontrolled and unknown by any other human

being, lies motherhood” (Oduyoye, 2002, p. 143). Motherhood is vigorously sought after as women derive a sense of fulfillment and societal approval from it. Different religions practiced in Nigeria also consider procreation as a behest of God. The deep craving for motherhood in a society that deride married women who for any reason, do not have children, drive these vulnerable and gullible women to patronize dishonest individuals and quacks. They engage in questionable and biologically incongruous practices, often inadvertently, to bear children. Quacks capitalize on these child seekers’ yearning for conception to exploit them with false pregnancy which they tag “cryptic”. Hence, the focus of our paper, is the growing trend of cryptic pregnancy racket in Nigeria which calls for serious concern. This trend has socio-religious and ethical implications and challenges for humans.

This paper is an inquiry into “cryptic pregnancy” in Nigeria with particular focus on the socio-religious undercurrents and implications of the phenomenon. The research design of this paper is descriptive and data is obtained from interviews, observations, online sources and literature. Data is analyzed qualitatively, using the content analysis technique, while Catherine Acholonu’s model; *motherism*, is used as theoretical framework. This paper aims to demystify “cryptic pregnancy” as it is used in Nigeria, bare its worrisome social and religious implications and campaign for measures to halt its escalation.

Among other sources, experiential testimony for this research is gathered from four victims of these “fertility specialists”. One from the North-central geopolitical zone of Nigeria, two from the South-East and one from South-South geopolitical zone. This spread simply points to the fact that this phenomenon exists in almost every part of Nigeria, but apparently preponderates in the South-Eastern part. Their names are withheld for privacy reasons. This number is however infinitesimal, compared to a plethora of others who fall victims of the gimmick of cryptic pregnancy fraudsters in Nigeria.

The rest of this paper is organized in six sections. First, a review of Acholonu’s (1995) *motherism* as the theoretical framework for this paper. This is followed by a detailed explanation of the actual meaning of cryptic pregnancy and then, by a discussion on the distorted usage of the term and its practice in Nigeria. Afterwards, a socio-religious evaluation of cryptic pregnancy phenomenon in Nigeria is done, followed by recommendations to managing the cryptic pregnancy phenomenon in Nigeria. Finally, statements of fact from findings are used to draw conclusions.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper is based on Catherine Acholonu’s “motherism” as a supporting framework. Acholonu proposed “motherism” as an African indigenous model of feminism in her 1995 work titled: *Motherism: The Afrocentric alternative to feminism*. Here, Acholonu extols motherhood and places the importance of the African woman squarely on it. According to Acholonu (1995), “motherism denotes

motherhood, nature and nurture”(p. 110). In her definition of who a motherist is, Acholonu states, among others, that a motherist is a man or woman who loves the child that loves and respects all humans irrespective of their background, culture or religion. A motherist, therefore, cares for the survival of people and mother earth. Ezeigbo (2012) notes that “the main thrust of Acholonu’s work is to «empower African women as mothers»” (p. 22). It is very difficult to sever issues of motherhood from the African woman whose matriarchal and social nurturing qualities stand out. In Acholonu’s (1995) words: “the rural woman is our link with mother earth and with her rests our last hope for reunification with the indispensable mother essence” (p. 118). Harrow (1997) explains that “Acholonu finds in motherhood an elemental tie to the earth, to the spiritual center of African life and society, the organic space wherein goddesses and earth-mothers lend fertility and life to human existence” (para. 7). The idea of motherhood by Acholonu therefore is both literal and metaphorical (Etim, 2000). Acholonu’s motherism has been criticized by Ezeigbo (2012) based on its exclusion of urban (educated) women, especially those who embrace the feminist ideology.

However, Acholonu’s model of feminism resonates with the subject of this paper and expounds the idea of motherhood in a broader sense which this paper subscribes to. Motherhood in Africa, which gives a great deal of recognition to women, could be literal as well as figurative. Biological as well as non-biological mothers are equally valued for what they stand for. Acholonu’s model, therefore, presents a strong footing in this paper to argue in favour of the valorization of non-biological mothers in Nigerian society to protect vulnerable women from scams such as cryptic pregnancy.

CRYPTIC PREGNANCY: WHAT IT REALLY MEANS

Cryptic pregnancy describes a situation where a pregnant woman is oblivious of her pregnancy until very late in the pregnancy or even during labour and delivery. This could be as a result of intermittent bleeding caused by fluctuating hormones, and mistaken for menstrual flow. Cryptic pregnancy could also be as a result of lack of, or sheer negligence of pregnancy signs. Sometimes, weight gain occasioned by pregnancy especially during the first trimester is either insignificant or ‘explained away’ leading to ignorance about a woman’s pregnancy. Cryptic pregnancy therefore stands for a stealth pregnancy that may elude medical tests. For Watson (2019), cryptic pregnancy is “a pregnancy that conventional medical testing methods may fail to detect”(p. 1). Watson however states that this kind of pregnancy is not common. It is something like 1 out of 475 cases.

Watson (2019) notes that in cryptic pregnancy, there could be no inkling of pregnancy. Pregnancy signs may not be noticed, not known to first-timers or may be explained away as stomach flu, indigestion or a result of dietary or lifestyle

choices. Irregular menstruation as a result of other underlying health issues like polycystic ovarian syndrome (PCOS), also makes it difficult to detect some pregnancies. More so, low pregnancy hormones may be responsible for no or mild pregnancy symptoms. This could be misleading and make some women ignore pregnancy signs even if they are there. Some women could also engage in psychological denial of pregnancy symptoms when they are on birth control pills or if for any reason, they have phobia for pregnancy. These scenarios, among others, are presented as causes of cryptic pregnancy (Laderer, 2019).

The duration of cryptic pregnancy remains uncertain, since its onset is usually not certain. Watson (2019) however states: “anecdotal evidence suggests that a cryptic pregnancy can last longer than a typical pregnancy, perhaps related to very low hormone levels at the start” (para. 16). Furthermore, Watson avers that lack of prenatal care, poor diet, lifestyle choices, risky behaviours, intake of alcohol and other harmful substances can lead to an increase in preterm birth of cryptic pregnancies.

More so, explanations have been put forward concerning negative medical tests in a cryptic pregnancy. These range from hormone fluctuations that reduce the pregnancy hormones in the urine or blood, to haphazard / unprofessional ultrasound scan, to irregularities in the position of the growing embryo, especially during the first trimester. Pregnancy and labour are usually not planned in a cryptic pregnancy and they could cause some kind of distress (Watson, 2019; Mazel, 2019; Laderer, 2019).

In essence, even though cryptic pregnancy is a complex medical situation, it is a genuine pregnancy in which the pregnant woman is unaware of her pregnancy for various reasons.

THE CRYPTIC PREGNANCY PHENOMENON IN NIGERIA

With respect to cryptic pregnancy as it is used and understood in Nigeria, all interviewed victims seem to agree that unsuspecting baby seekers usually get to know about these cryptic pregnancy specialists through other women that are believed to be their agents, women that have patronized them or know someone that is patronizing them. When visited, the scammers tell “success” stories of other women who conceived through them. These scammers quickly add their clients to a WhatsApp group where other women share their testimonies and encourage one another (Laderer, 2019; IbomWeddings, 2020; Brisibe, 2019). This WhatsApp group is also a scam. It is designed to keep the women believing and spellbound. Once they succeed in convincing a prospective client, Peter (2019), as cited in IbomWeddings (2020) states that they inject her with a heavy dose of oestrogen

and sometimes, progesterone, which are pregnancy hormones. Brisibe (2019) and Yaakugh (2019) corroborate Peter's assertion. These hormones make the woman's stomach to begin to protrude with the presence of pregnancy signs. After being injected with pregnancy-associated hormones, the woman is given an appointment during which she will be told that she has conceived and must not consult gynecologists and obstetricians or even have a pregnancy test or ultrasound scan as their pregnancy test will be negative and the baby will not be visible when their pelvis is scanned. These fraudsters usually define the pregnancy as cryptic, which according to them, cannot be confirmed scientifically. They falsely claim that Human Chorionic Gonadotropin (HCG, the hormone screened for during routine pregnancy test) is low, making the baby develop slower than normal. They also claim that the fetus is positioned outside the uterus, hence cannot be confirmed scientifically. The woman is then given appointments for regular follow-up. During subsequent appointments, they continue to inject the woman with high doses of pregnancy hormones to keep her looking and feeling pregnant. The woman is usually warned that the delivery of the baby must be performed by them through a Caesarian section. As the months go by, her supposed pregnancy continues to advance. The woman's belly protrudes like a normal pregnancy, with most of the signs of pregnancy, including experiencing assumed fetal movement. The fee for 'cryptic pregnancy' remains unusually high. The victims interviewed reveal that these cryptic pregnancy tricksters demand a fee between NGN 1,500,000 to NGN 3,000,000, depending on the sex and number of babies. Sometimes, the charge may be less, depending on the economic capacity or bargaining power of their victim.

Consequently, most of these women, in their desperation to conceive, get brainwashed. They jettison reason and blindly believe an uncanny claim. The women who cooperate with the "fertility magicians" for nine months or more, subsequently have a caricature delivery supposed to be a Caesarean section. Those who get inquisitive and try to make further inquiries about cryptic pregnancy against the advice of their deceivers, usually become skeptical and suspicious of the process.

Moreover, a second set of women connive with the perpetrators of cryptic pregnancy scam to hoax their spouse and immediate family and perhaps the society with a pseudo pregnancy in the guise of cryptic pregnancy. In collaboration, a baby or babies is / are surreptitiously bought from a baby factory. This cover-up and illegal baby buying also cost a fortune. In this case, the woman is complicit to the crime. This also has the same socio-religious implications with that of the woman who is oblivious of the fraud.

Nevertheless, at 'full-term' of the cryptic pregnancy, according to Peter (2019), as cited in IbomWeddings (2020), the supposed pregnant woman is usually given general anaesthesia. As the anaesthesia wears off, she is handed a baby or babies as hers, supposedly birthed through a Caesarian section. O. Okafor (from

the interview taken April the 26 th, 2020) reveals that these cryptic pregnancy swindlers work hand-in-hand with the operators of baby factories. They manipulate a woman's body with hormones to simulate pregnancy, and give her a bought or abducted baby (Adeboye, 2019).

For the women that get suspicious or those that could not pay the balance of the extraordinarily high charges, their stories are usually different – filled with miseries, regrets, woes and financial losses. Their supposed pregnancy is usually scientifically disproved beyond doubt. On the contrary, they are usually left to their fate or to seek help from obstetricians in order to get rid of the cysts formed as a result of the overdose of oestrogen and progesterone administered to them.

MOTHERHOOD AND CRYPTIC PREGNANCY IN NIGERIA

The prime place of motherhood in the Nigerian society remains a known fact. Hence, the quest and desperation to conceive and give birth to children by all means, for personal, cultural, economic and / or religious motive persists. Women, as well as men, desire to bear children, religion prescribes and affirms procreation and the society expects it. In the case of difficulty in conception, women resort to helpful lifestyle modifications like proper diets, weight loss, stress reduction and so on. They also seek orthodox and / or traditional medical help as well as religious help. In their search for help, some unfortunate women fall prey to devious health workers / doctors / nurses who offer seeming succour or solution, termed “cryptic pregnancy”.

To all intents and purposes, the scam called cryptic pregnancy in Nigeria is opposed to the actual meaning of the term which stands for an oblivious pregnancy where a woman is not aware that she is pregnant. There is therefore nothing like making a woman pregnant in a cryptic way. Cryptic pregnancy, in the sense it is used in Nigeria, contradicts the actual meaning of the term. The lack of knowledge about one's pregnancy is what makes it cryptic. Some doctors in Nigeria have raised alarm against this repugnant practice, calling it a scam perpetrated by fraudsters (Azubuike, 2019; Yaakugh, 2019; Brisibe, 2019). It is also an act of malevolence as these doctors state that it exposes a woman to the risk of breast cancer, ovarian cancer or stroke (Adeboye, 2019; Azubuike, 2019).

Cryptic pregnancy in Nigeria is a harmful phenomenon: it is born out of desperation of women and is based on deceit, extortion and crime. Evidences abound of women struggling with infertility who have been extorted and deceived by these scammers. This phenomenon bares the complexity of Nigerians' unquenchable desperation for motherhood at all cost. Cryptic pregnancy in this sense plays with the emotions of Nigerian women who fall victim, thus causing social disfunctionalities. In the following section, we delve into a socio-religious analysis of cryptic pregnancy in Nigeria.

A SOCIO-RELIGIOUS APPRAISAL OF THE PHENOMENON

What strikes the most in this phenomenon is that what is called cryptic pregnancy in Nigeria is nothing but a scam targeted at women who are desperate for motherhood, with dire implications.

Psychosocial implication: In essence, the Nigerian patriarchal culture that sees a married woman as complete only as a mother compels women to go to any lengths to fulfill that societal / cultural expectation. "Barrenness carries profound negative psycho-social implications" (Manus, 2013, p. 205). These desperate women usually sacrifice reason and accept anything that looks like a solution. Cryptic pregnancy therefore when uncovered, constitutes double jeopardy for women who have fallen victim to them. Aside from the agony of childlessness, they also suffer the agony of living with such a serious hoax for a long time or for the rest of their lives. Also, it could be troubling for the child if he/she gets to know about the true circumstance of their birth. This negatively impacts the mental health and wellbeing of both the woman and the child, thereby affecting the society at large. More so, the effects on the mental and physical health of women and girls who are trafficked and used as «baby factories» in Nigeria are enormous (John, 2017; Akor, 2011).

Religio-cultural evaluation: Apparently, religious teachings and thoughts, just like culture, play a huge role in advancing the quest for motherhood and procreation. Christian, Islamic as well as traditional religions in Nigeria value procreation (B. Okoye, interview taken Dec. the 26th, 2019; I. Suberu, interview taken August the 12th, 2019; O. Nwankwo, interview taken May the 2nd, 2020). They speak favourably about it, pray for it and believe it is the will of the Supernatural for the married couple to be fruitful. In the case of a childless marriage, for instance, religion continues to offer hope and prescriptions for conception. From observation, religion teaches that repentance, fasting, almsgiving, righteousness, sacrifice, appeasing the spirits, as the case may be, could turn the tide for the infertile.

In the same vein, faith, which is a major ingredient of religion, has been misused to sometimes deny science. It is not rare to spot Christian pastors for instance, who pray for women in need of conception and declare literally that they just got pregnant as he was praying. Such a declaration of faith do not agree with science in any way. Manus (2013) describes such promises by faith healers as "fatally unrealizable" (p. 207). But, no matter how effective a prayer may be for believers of various religions, conception must follow its due process, and not by mere word of mouth (faith) by a religious leader. Such illogical ideation and mindset fuel the receptivity of cryptic pregnancy delusion. According to O. Okafor (interview taken December the 19th, 2019), some women who have been defrauded through "cryptic pregnancy" in Nigeria explain the inability of science to detect the pregnancy as sheer handwork of God. This reflects how erroneous the

teachings of some religious pedagogues are, that religion negates science rendering women gullible. In essence, no religion explicitly encourages cryptic pregnancy in Nigeria, but some religious actions and / or inactions indirectly do so. Any religion that throws away reason may not be said to be true to itself. Cryptic pregnancy in Nigeria, therefore, is a deception that offends religion, decency and humanity in its mode of operation, which involves human trafficking and illegal baby-snatching / buying.

Nonetheless, cryptic pregnancy can create avoidable disarray in an exogamic society like Nigeria where culturally, marriage to one's close tie is considered an abomination. Since the biological parents of these cryptic pregnancy babies, who are gotten from what Brennan and Jaworski (2016) call 'black baby market' are not known, unintended endogamy cannot be ruled out. This could also distort ancestral affiliations which Nigerians, and indeed Africans, hold sacrosanct.

Also, motherhood represents much more than biology, its religious importance remains high. For instance, Acholonu's **motherism** links motherhood to mother earth. This tie apparently confers transcendence and immanence on mothers. The earth, according to Harrow (1997), is "the spiritual center of African life and society, the organic space wherein goddesses and earth-mothers lend fertility and life to human existence" (para. 7). In the same line, Chukwuma (2012) notes that "the spiritual element in woman as mother is the source of her power in the subliminal realm. (...) She is not just woman but mother, earth mother whom the Igbo recognize as the goddess Ani / Ala. She gives fertility and nurture" (p. 97). Bachofen (2017) shares Chukwuma's view with respect to the spiritual dimension of women as mothers in Africa.

Social evaluation: The lack of efficiency of the Nigerian government in certain areas could be responsible for the cryptic pregnancy menace in the country. Factors such as the paucity of accurate vital statistics like birth records and the dearth of domestic espionage to uncover the activities of cryptic pregnancy scammers and operators of "baby factories", create an enabling environment for this crime to thrive. In the age where the rest of the world is concerned with issues such as the commodification, whether or not the buying and selling of adoption rights are acceptable (Brennan and Jaworski, 2016), babies are being taken from trafficked girls and illegally and clandestinely sold to women who were supposedly made pregnant in the cryptic way. This situation, in all its aspects, is unethical. Brennan and Jaworski (2016) claim, and correctly so, that some of the babies sold on the black market are "obtained via kidnapping or coercion" (p. 180). This despicable act does not promote social cohesion and progress. Again, incompetent, poorly trained or poorly motivated security agencies have continued to display a lack of capacity in handling this situation.

More so, the prevailing harsh economic reality in the nation also predisposes the girls / women to get involved in these «baby factories». They are neither in

school nor meaningfully engaged in society. This explains why they easily fall prey to scammers and human traffickers.

Gender perspective: Cryptic pregnancy is a gendered hazard that victimizes women in Nigeria. It is women that are held responsible and suffer indignity for childlessness in marriage in Nigeria (Manus, 2013; Mbonu, 2012) – from the pitiful victims of circumstances that fall for cryptic pregnancy scam to vulnerable girls that are trafficked, sometimes from Internally Displaced Person Camps and turned to “baby-making machines” (Obaji, 2020). Women in Nigeria continue to bear the brunt of societal pressure, gender injustice, inequitable traditions as well as inept government.

As a matter of fact, some women may not be able to become biological mothers for different reasons. Therefore, using biological motherhood as a yardstick to measure a woman's relevance or place in the Nigerian society is unfair. While Acholonu's “motherism” values motherhood as an African alternative to feminism, she points out the phenomenal qualities of African mothers – love, nurture, care for the survival of people and mother earth – as qualities of motherists. These qualities are actually what qualifies a woman as mother. Mbonu (2012) opines that, “the disproportionate emphasis placed on motherhood in the biological sense can prove limiting and oppressive to women who cannot be biological mothers” (p. 118). Society must cease to openly or covertly compel women to go out of their way to become mothers. Going by Acholonu's motherism, motherhood can also happen metaphorically. Moreover, in the past, when communalism and extended family solidarity was prevalent in most parts of Nigeria, people cared less about biological children. They regarded children among their kith and kin as theirs (Chukwuma, 2012). Motherhood is beyond biological parenting. Acholonu (1995) captures this in her theory. Women's love for, care and nurture of children empowers them as mothers. Women in contemporary Nigeria can borrow a leaf from Acholonu's motherism which resonates with the eroded extended family solidarity and cultural values of the past and protect their dignity even as non-biological mothers. Mbonu (2012) insists that motherhood represents a rich metaphor that is inclusive of biological, non-biological mothers and even men and it is quite liberating. For instance, citing the example of Apostle Paul in the Bible: 1 Thess 2: 7b–8, Mbonu recounts how he metaphorically referred to himself as a nursing mother. For Mbonu therefore, “motherhood can be a universal image that expresses service. Service can be expressed in a regeneration of life through nurturing” (p. 118). In essence, therefore, Nigerian women can be mothers without biological children. The extreme and hazardous practice of succumbing to irrational acts such as cryptic pregnancy to become a biological mother is uncalled for.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE MANAGEMENT OF THE PHENOMENON OF ‘CRYPTIC PREGNANCY’ IN NIGERIA

It is high time that doctors, the government, religious groups, women groups, used every available platform – radio jingles, television, religious rendez-vous, social media platforms, group meetings – to expose the noxious activities of these cryptic pregnancy scammers and encourage women to seek help from proper sources.

Also, women should be advised to seek genuine ways of becoming biological mothers. There are various available options – genuine fertility therapies, *in-vitro* fertilization and so on. The man could also be responsible for lack of or difficulty in conception in a marriage. Therefore, men should seek medical help too, and also give their wives moral support while they are trying to conceive. There are also licensed adoption agencies in Nigeria which are not just genuine, but far more affordable than cryptic pregnancy scammers’ charge. At all levels in the society therefore, women should be informed by their leaders and the government on their numerous genuine options for becoming mothers and the terrifying health risks of arranged cryptic pregnancy.

Nonetheless, shortcoming in certain areas of governance are partly responsible for the growth of this scam in Nigeria. Accurate vital statistics, which are imperative in every country, are hardly available in Nigeria. If vital statistics such as births and deaths, which constitute core components of the demographic equation of any nation, are properly recorded, there will not be room for “baby factories” as the babies born in the “factories” cannot be registered. In a country that has a functional system, the delivery of babies does not just happen anywhere, but in licensed places that as a matter of policy, would have to supply the government with the necessary information about the birth, for record-keeping purposes. More so, such registrations entitle the baby to certain benefits as a citizen. Such a strict method of birth registration is not enforced in Nigeria, and also, there are no benefits *per se* for such registration. This unregulated situation makes Nigeria the perfect background for the operations of baby factory operators. The government should, therefore, come up with stricter policies and implementation strategies, to improve on vital data collection and keeping.

Also, adequate punishment for a crime committed deters others from committing the same crime. Apparently, the perpetrators of cryptic pregnancy scam and their accomplices are not being arrested and prosecuted as they should. Though some baby factories have been uncovered, a lot more are still operational in different parts of the country, especially the south-eastern part. The Nigerian government, through its security agencies, must clamp down on these criminals if their evil activities should be stopped. Furthermore, government should work towards improving the nation’s economy and the lives of the people. When the nation’s economy will be fixed, the number of women susceptible to traffickers and ‘baby factory’ operators will be decimated.

Finally, culture is not meant to be destructive. Those aspects of culture that demeans married women without children need to be modified. Women should not be seen as a means to an end (Oduyoye, 2002, p. 142). They are full human beings and do not derive their relevance or dignity from their ability to procreate. As we have seen, Acholonu's motherism explains how motherhood transcends biology. Motherhood has social and religious significance, independent of biology. Motherhood may be a welcome becoming for Nigerian women, but the absence of it should not be used to limit and oppress them. No wonder that, according to Burman (1994), as cited in Chukwuma (2012), motherhood was pointed out globally as "a key source of women's oppression" (p. 91) during the second-wave feminism of the West. In Nigeria however, motherhood has never been considered oppressive. It is those who cannot achieve it that are vilified. This is considered oppressive because not all women can or will become biological mothers.

At the same time, leaders of the major religious traditions practiced in Nigeria need to educate themselves in a balance manner, that will allow them to be able to draw a line between faith and reason. This will go a long way to reduce credulity, based on the resulting confusion.

CONCLUSIONS

Women in Nigeria could go to any length to have children as that empowers and defines their dignity in a way. Hence, miscreants take advantage and trick them with what they refer to as cryptic pregnancy. Cryptic pregnancy as used by these fraudsters is opposed to the real meaning of the term which refers to a real pregnancy that is unknown to the carrier or for some reason, is not proven by medical testing especially during the first trimester. Culture and religion among other things, seem to be the driving force of the women that patronize the quacks who claim to make them pregnant «cryptically». This scam in Nigeria has social, religious and even medical implications in the society and for the women.

Cryptic pregnancy scam in Nigeria also shows the worrisome height of ignorance and credulity among Nigerians, irresponsibility of government and the thriving of quackery and criminality in the Nigerian society. Also, distorted or uninformed religious teachings and its consequent thought pattern fuel the cryptic pregnancy phenomenon in Nigeria.

Cryptic pregnancy in Nigeria has to be prevented, to save society and especially women from the health risks. All hands must, therefore, be on deck to fight this evil in the society – the women themselves, health workers, the government and the religious leaders. Importantly, the Nigerian society must cease to see women as only valuable as biological mothers or deride women who are unable to have biological children. Motherhood represents much more than biology and resonates love, care and nurture in the society, which are taken-for-granted

feminine qualities. Motherhood in both the literal and figurative sense should empower women. Dealing a death blow to cryptic pregnancy scam in Nigeria will no doubt save women and indeed the entire nation from tremendous injury. It would also dissuade illegal baby commodification and other crimes such as human trafficking that is associated with illicit buying and selling of babies.

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