# THE CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES ON CHILDLESSNESS IN CUSTOMARY MARRIAGES AMONG THE ACHOLI PEOPLE IN LAMWO DISTRICT, UGANDA

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**A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE DIRECTORATE OF RESEARCH AND GRADUATE TRAINING IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE AWARD OF THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS IN RELIGIOUS STUDIES OF KYAMBOGO UNIVERSITY.**

**NOVEMBER, 2024**

## DECLARATION

I, Aber Jackline, hereby declare that this dissertation is my original work and it has never been submitted to any University or higher institution for any award of master's degree.

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## APPROVAL

This is to certify that this dissertation was done under our supervision and now is ready for submission with our approval.

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## DEDICATION

To my family Mr Okongo Alfred, Josephine Lamunu, Odongkara Emmanuel, Ageno Scovia, Laker Mercy Faith and Eseosa Jireh Rwotlonyo and all my family members.

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## DEFINITIONS AND EXPLANATIONS OF OPERATIONAL TERMS

1. Childlessness is defined as failure to conceive and bear biological children while in marriage and yet having regular unprotected sexual intercourse. There are different types of childlessness and these include:

i). Voluntary childlessness that is choosing not to have children.

ii). Involuntary childlessness meaning being unable to have children due to medical or fertility issues, temporary childlessness, delaying parenthood but yet planning to have them.

iii). Permanent childlessness referred to as being unable and never having children.

Childlessness is best understood as failure of a woman to bear children and traced back to the female rather than the male spouse in marriage in Africa and it is not appreciated nor embraced. In this study, childlessness is inability to have biological children while in marriage for more than five years.

3. Customary marriage is ''nyom te kwaro /gang'' and marriage between a man and a woman performed traditionally at the girls or brides' parents' home. Customary marriage in Africa is highly embraced and traditionally carried out with pride. Customary marriage is traditional and based on the customs, traditions, laws of a specific community, involve informal ceremonies and rituals performed, and the requirements for customary marriage vary depending on the community. In this study, customary marriage is defined as "Nyom te kwaro" literally meaning a cultural or traditional marriage organized and performed by elders between a man and woman with the intention of them staying together and bearing children after payment of dowry. Hence, this kind of marriage is recognized and accepted by the community, governed by traditional customs, norms and practices and involves traditional rituals and ceremonies.

4. Marriage:

In this study, marriage can be defined as the union of a husband and wife with the key role of bearing children and becoming parents. African societies stress the importance of children in marriage and regard having children as the only way for perpetuating the family line into the future generations. Marriage in this study is purposed for a husband and wife to become parents and groom their children involving shared responsibilities and long-term commitment.

4. Cultural Perspectives.

Cultural perspectives can be described as an approach that describes people's social behavior, thoughts and attitude about a particular circumstance, situation and phenomenon in this study. Cultural perspectives have key aspects, which include, values, beliefs, customs, norms, language, history and social set up. This is considered as the way childlessness is perceived by African culture, norms and traditions. Cultural perspectives are family oriented and involve community that comes along with expectations especially with marriage.

5. Culture. According to this study culture can be defined as social behavior, attitude and ideas of the Acholi people. This includes Language, religion, history, music dance, social norms, symbols and artifacts. In Africa, culture is understood as shared values, beliefs, practices, traditions, and customs that define a group of people and it is so important that it gives one identity and cultural heritage. In this this study, the Acholi culture is being explored in particular concerning childlessness in customary marriage.

6. Childlessness in customary marriages. According to this study childlessness in customary marriage can be defined as failure to bear children after and in a traditional marriage. Childlessness in customary marriage is considered an abomination and unacceptable in the African tradition for every marriage is expected to have children and bring happiness to the

community. Therefore, childlessness in this study is further understood as the absence of children within a traditionally performed marriage.

7. Acholi. According to this study, Acholi are a Nilotic ethnic luo-speaking group of people from Northern Uganda living in Lamwo, Kitgum, Pader and Gulu district. The Acholi are a luo speaking group of people believed to have migrated three or four centuries ago from adjacent areas of what is now South Sudan into what is now the Acholi district of Uganda. The Acholi have small chiefdoms of one or more villages, each with several patrilineal clans. The Acholi people maintained a traditional government that was rooted firmly in their religious beliefs, norms, and customs, which demanded peace and stability in Acholi-land at all times and was maintained by the real anointed chiefs of the Acholi. The Acholi in this study are the main group of people living in Lamwo district in sub counties of Palabek Gem, Palabek Kal and Palabek Ogili.

## LIST OF ABBREVIATION

| | |
|---|---|
| AI | Artificial Insemination |
| Bible | Best instruction before leaving earth |
| CM | Customary Marriage |
| GIFT | Gamete Intra Fallopian Transfer |
| HB | Hebrew Bible |
| HIV AIDS | Human Immune Virus / Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome |
| IDIs | In-Depth Interviews |
| KIIs | Key Informant Interviews |
| KJV | King James Version |
| NGO | Non-Governmental Organizations |
| NKJV | New Kings James Version |
| SDT | Second Demographic Transition |
| STI'S | Sexually Transmitted Infections |
| USA | United States of America |

**ABSTRACT**

This dissertation explores the cultural perspectives on childlessness in customary marriages among the Acholi in Lamwo district. A phenomenological approach was used to assess the cultural perceptions about childlessness in customary marriages in Acholi, to explore the experiences of childlessness among women in customary marriages in Acholi, and to assess the coping mechanisms of childless women in customary marriages in Acholi, Lamwo district. A purposive sampling technique was used to obtain members suitable for the study in the community. In-depth interviews, key informant interviews and focus group discussions were used to explore the attitudes of participants towards childlessness in the community. The data was organized according to themes generated from the findings through the responses of participants. Key findings reveal how women bear blame for childlessness in families. The study also found out that the childless women suffered more than men because of community perceptions and this has affected their social life since they are considered accountable for their failure to bear children. It was also found out that many men felt at liberty to marry other women to bear for them children. Following the findings, this study therefore recommended the need to intensify sensitization about childlessness, building health facilities with health programs, making policies and rules that support and protect the childless women and promote peace in families especially those affected by childlessness. The study locates itself in religio-cultural studies, and African feminist theologies that examine issues of gender and women's experiences in African traditional marriage systems.

# CHAPTER ONE

# GENERAL INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY AND BACKGROUND

## 1.0 Introduction

This chapter comprises of the background of the study, problem statement, general objective, specific objectives, scope of the study, and significance of the study and justification of the study. The study focuses on childlessness in customary marriages investigating issues concerning the cultural perceptions about childlessness, experiences and coping mechanisms adopted by childless women with a general objective of examining cultural perceptions about childlessness among the Acholi people in customary marriages and the experiences childless women in Acholi, Lamwo district. A purposive sampling technique was used to obtain members suitable for the study in the community. In-depth interviews, key informant interviews and focus group discussions were used to explore the attitudes of participants towards childlessness in the community. The background of the study consists of world view about childlessness, African context about the place of children, religio - cultural view of childlessness, customary marriage and childlessness in Africa, celebration of customary marriage, Childlessness and customary marriage in Uganda, naming of children and practices performed, religious genre anchoring the study and motivations of doing the study, in Lamwo district specifically in Plabek Kal, Palabek Ogili and Palabek Gem focused on cultural perceptions about childlessness, experiences, and coping mechanisms of childlessness. The study highlights a view that women are blamed for reproductive retardation, uncertainties and problems as far as such problems are perceived to be associated with childlessness. The predominant African socio-cultural perspective is that

childlessness is to be traced back to the female rather than the male spouse in a marriage. Such a perspective is a cause of tremendous, often silent suffering, on the part of childless women. The study increases awareness on the implication of childlessness in families especially to women and how childless women navigate and cope with such experiences. The study anticipates that awareness on childlessness shall lead to transformation in society and a change of attitude towards people associated with childlessness in society and inform the government about inadequacy of health facilities and services offered at the health centers.

In this study, we review some of the available literature on childlessness specifically on socio-cultural perspectives, experiences, effects and coping strategies of childlessness. The study employs a qualitative research approach and through it, a phenomenological study design was used to explore experiences of childlessness among women. A purposive method was used to select the respondent's. The methods and instruments used include: observation method and guide, in-depth interviews and guide, key informant interviews and guides and focus group discussions. In its fourth chapter, the study makes a presentation of findings, discussion of findings, followed by the summary, general conclusions and recommendations in the chapter five. In the following section, we begin by presenting the general background of the study.

## 1.1 Background of the study

### 1.1.1 World view about childlessness

Childlessness is a global reproductive health issue that affects many individuals and couples. Childlessness is a state of not having children either by choice or circumstances ( a woman chooses not to have children which is voluntarily or experiences secondary infertility which is

involuntary) and focus on absence of children regardless of the reason while barrenness refers to inability to produce children often due to medical issues and a woman struggles with primary infertility and is focused on specifically the physical or biological inability to conceive or carry a pregnancy to term. In this study, childlessness is defined as failure to conceive and bear biological children while in marriage and yet having regular unprotected sexual intercourse whereas marriage defined as the union of a husband and wife with the key role of bearing children and becoming parents.

The criteria used to determine childlessness was based on the absence of children in an individual's life voluntarily or involuntarily. According to Jeong & Phillips, (2001) European countries- German-speaking countries seem to be at the forefront of this development as more than 20 % of the women living in Germany, Switzerland, and Austria who are reaching the end of their reproductive period will remain childless. But other European countries, such as the United Kingdom and Finland, also report high levels of childlessness. Eastern and Southern Europe did not have high levels of childlessness a decade ago, but are now seeing steady increases. In these countries, the shares of women who remain childless have been increasing rapidly (Kreyenfeld, 2017). In Italy, for example, childlessness skyrocketed to 20 % among the cohorts born around 1965 (Tanturri & Mencarini, 2008). Meanwhile, in Belgium, France, and the Scandinavian countries, childlessness has remained comparatively low. An exceptional case is Finland: in the Nordic context, Finland has always had relatively high levels of childlessness. Recent data for Finland show that childlessness in that country is still rising; thus, it appears that the gap between Finland and the rest of the Nordic states is expanding (Miettinen & Rotkirch, 2012).

In his broad overview of fertility trends in 28 European countries. The recent increase in childlessness in southern Europe and in the former state socialist central and eastern European countries, childlessness is converging at high levels in Europe (Sobotka et al., 2008, p.79-101). From a global perspective, significant developments can be observed in Asian countries, and particularly in Japan, too, where childlessness has been increasing among recent birth cohorts (Frejka, 2010; Raymo et al., 2015). However, we also see some signs of a reversal of this trend, as childlessness appears to be gradually declining among the younger cohorts in a number of countries, including the United Kingdom (Berrington & Pattaro, (2014). 2019). The United States also had high levels of childlessness for decades, but recent evidence indicates that the trend is reversing in this country as well. Tabong & Adongo, (2013) states that childlessness is generally about 12% Worldwide, more than 70 million couples suffer from infertility, the majority being residents of developing countries. Infertility has the greatest burden on people in under developed countries as a reproductive health problem (Fathalla, 1992). Largely, under developed countries encounter negative consequences of childlessness largely than the Western societies (Fathalla, 1992). In Africa, the implication of childlessness is approximately increasing with generally 40% yet in all marriages, partners are anticipated to produce children in African countries and a marriage without children is not marriage (Thomson, 1997). Over the past decades, permanent infertility has notably increased and have gained growing interest from researchers and policy makers. Europe and SA as developed regions have mainly expressed this interest (Ferejka et al., 2017). One reason for this is that "fertility rates have historically been high in sub-Saharan Africa, equal to almost seven births per woman on average in 1980" (The World Bank, 2018). Although fertility rates have been decreasing in the region, they still equal almost twice the replacement level at an average of five births per woman in 2017. Bongaarts &

Casterline, (2013) urge that ''high fertility rates have led to the assumption that childlessness is not significant in the region''. There are also a substantial number of women who never have children while in sub-Saharan Africa, women still have relatively many children on average (Inhorn & Patrizio, 2015). World Health Organization (2018) points out that childlessness has its own causes that are scientifically proven but not all this is considered. Poverty may be the strongest driver of childlessness in sub-Saharan Africa, which is problematic (Baudin, de la Croix, & Gobbi, 2020). Furthermore, childless men and women are fond of severe stigma and consequences resulting into divorce, social exclusion, abuse and ostracism (Inhorn & Patrizio, 2015). African society is structured largely around the lives of its children. Across the continent, children represent continuity with rituals and contemporary institutions designed to ensure children's survival and prosperity.

### 1.1.2 Childlessness in Men.

Parenthood and fatherhood is key and central for male identity in Acholi society with a title given to them as "Won Opio", "Won Okello" meaning Opio's father or Okello's father and many more. The essence of masculinity, as taught by society, is a man's ability to demonstrate strength and potency. However, the infertile man fails to demonstrate these characteristics. As a result, male clients typically report feeling the loss of their identity as a man, a husband, and as a potential father, both by society and by themselves. In essence, they are faced with a potential loss of their manhood (Huston, 2004). Thus, childlessness also attacks the core of the male identity, but in a slightly different way than it does for females. Among the Acholi, the childless man is protected and his inability is kept as a secret. Childlessness of the male is often not acknowledged and is less visible (Ofwono, 2002). Further, men can mask their childlessness in other socially sanctioned ways. Childless men may therefore be less traumatized. However, in

cases where the childlessness of a man is known in the society, such man may also suffer different kinds of trauma and stigma. The Effect of Childlessness on the Couple Relationship, Childlessness often comes as an unexpected shock to most couples. For many, having children is not a question of if, but when. Differences in the way couples commonly view childlessness can lead to tension and anger in marital relationships. According to Bernard (2004, p.399) infertile couple goes through feelings of disbelief, denial, anxiety and loss of control, isolation and guilt. Fred (1985) reported that almost 50% of women considered childlessness the most distressing experience of their lives, compared to only 15% of men. In addition, Abel (1988) found that wives considered childlessness an enormous role failure, while husbands perceived childlessness as a disconcerting event, but not a tragedy.

### 1.1.3 Childlessness in women

Although childlessness was a stressful experience for both men and women and had effects on their sexual functioning, it did not affect their levels of marital satisfaction. The experience of childlessness by childless women in Acholi marked various kinds of social, economic and emotional consequences. Those experiences are in many ways similar to those of childless women in other cultures. What Acholi childless women share with other childless women is the feeling of low self-esteem due to their childlessness? They are often described as being hollow "empty", barren or wasted and arid. The vast majority of these childless women made no distinction between failed bodies and failed selves (Gerald 2002). They seem to experience childlessness as a generalized role failure, not just as a failure of the body". Similarly, the feelings of guilt accompanying distress have also been found in studies of childless women in Acholi community Divorce, abandonment and remarriage by husbands are more frequent outcomes of childless women. The status of married women in the family identifies the root

cause of the problem. Mariano, (2004) in an ethnographic study on marriage, points to the "stranger" role of a newly wedded woman in her in-law's house that a woman must prove her usefulness as a woman, in order to contribute to the prosperity of her in-laws" family. The main way to show this is to give birth to a baby. If she fails in this task, she remains a permanent stranger in the family, and continues to hold a low status. Through bearing a child, a newly wedded woman gains acceptance and this is an experience that a childless woman never feels. In societies where motherhood is the synonym of womanhood, childlessness destroys the identity of a woman as a woman (Ogutu, 1996). Women are ostracized from the community and are blamed for their reproductive failing. They are seen as less worthy than other women, due to their barrenness as well as poorness, and are held responsible for fixing their improper feminine organ" themselves. In Acholi community, it is also the case that motherhood qualifies on to and is real womanhood.

### 1.1.4 African context about the place of children

Children are viewed in many African cultures as crucial to family survival itself, in that they help maintain household economies through their cheap labor in the home, in family agricultural or food-processing activities, or in trade or artisanship (Children and Childhood). According to (Mbiti 1969, p.105) he conveyed the importance of childbearing in African marriages, stating: "Marriage and childbearing are the medicines against death. While death continues to demolish life, marriage and childbearing keep ahead of it all the time" parts of Africa) people marry because they want to have children. This is the principal aim.

Scholars such as Chaibva, Olorunju, Nyadundu, (2020), assert that perceptions on childlessness in Africa in general and Nigeria in particular show that most traditional African societies

consider this phenomenon as very unacceptable. According to this perspective, every marital union must produce a child. African societies stress the importance of children in marriage. This is due to the understanding that having children is the only way for perpetuating the family line into the future generations. This is also affirmed by Oduyoye (1995, p.45) who notes that in most African indigenous communities, every newly born child represents an ancestor returned. In fact, childlessness is regarded as abnormal and counterproductive within most African indigenous societies (Kimathi, 1994). For the continuation of the clan, women must bear children, otherwise the family name was at risk of fading and even the clan cannot expand. In essence, children are a symbol of life and of hope for the future.

Having many children is necessary for the prolongation of the tribe or community. Also (Turaki 2000) he says that the African man has to have children to continue the survival of his family. It is firmly believed that Children are gifts from God, the gods and ancestors. (Gaskiyane 1997, p.5) elucidates: "In traditional cultures the greatest desire and requirement is to have children, especially male children, to be heirs of property" In this context of Africa, (Waruta & Kinoti, 2013) further contend that "Not only is the birth of a child important amongst the African people, but the gender of the child is also important. Male children are valued, especially in many patrilineal African societies'', shorter, "polygamy serves the prosperity and growth of the extended family and provides status and support for women in societies where they have no vocation other than marriage and the bearing of children to their husband's lineage." Besides that, (Egede, 1999) corroborates these ideas in affirming that children are seen as reincarnations of the ancestors, they add procreation value to life and serves as the link between the unborn and the Dead. As a complement, (Mbiti1991) notes the following about children: the product of marriage is children; children seal the bond of marriage, children are signs of longevity for

parents and perpetuate the family line, children bring glory and wealth. In Urhoboorature or tradition of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, the names given to children reveal the value and place of children in the society. Names such as: Omonigho (child is bigger than wealth), Omowho (the child is a person), Emokiniovo (children are brothers), Emorurukpe (children of light), Emamo-emo (good children), Emorirhe (children have come).

All these names indicate the value that is placed on children and their place in society. Children, especially male children were also valued for their economic purposes. In traditional African societies, rural communities and in the hinterland in Africa, agriculture whether farming or fishing was the major source of income and sustenance of the family. Children were needed to enhance labour and productivity. (Baloyi, 2013, p.171) he asserted that: "In most African cultures men (males) are generally to be the breadwinners. Stock and crop farming were the common means of survival, and both require strength and labour". Without children, there was no future for the family, ethnic group, community and others. Children help in household chores, and in the neighborhood and in the farmland and fishing activities. As the children become adolescents and young adults they apprenticed and learn various skills in the community. It is children who become young persons and adults and takes over responsibilities from their aged parents. Life was supremely valued in Africa and it is expected that children will grow old, become aged, live long lives and die at old age. Dying as a child was seen as a curse. Children are not giving proper burial. They are hurriedly buried without any proper ceremony or rites. It is a bad omen shunned by every family and African people.

When a woman is unable to have children, some African men turn to polygamy. It is always out of shame and pressure from outside that men decide to get more than one wife. Polygamy has many negative effects on the childless woman. Many women in Africa also suffer from the

negative effects of polygamy. (Baloyi 2013) he cites Yamani to presents the following definition of polygamy: "From its Greek origin, the word polygamy is understood in the broader sense to include any simultaneous multiple marriage unions for one person, such as female polyandry and male polygamy". The just mentioned author citing Yamani (2008, p.11) states that: "however, the word polygamy is used to explain the state of a man having more than one woman, including the religious, legal and customary aspects of these unions''. One of the reasons for polygamy is childlessness. The great value placed on children is necessary for the sustenance of the family and community, when in marriage there are no children some African men quickly take more women in order to give birth to children. Culture and Religion, traditional culture recognizes that infertility is a very good reason for a man to marry another wife. Polygamy suffers from a lot of pressure. There is competition in the family over economic resources that are often scarce. The childless woman is often verbally abused and called evil names by the man or the new woman (co-wife) of the in-laws. At times the bedroom is taken over by the new wife and the first or earlier wife is sent to the boy's quarter or other rooms outside the main house. The childless woman is humiliated and disgraced. A critical evaluation of polygamy helps us to see is that not only does it encourage the treatment of women as inferior beings, but it also foments rivalry between wives and forces many women to share already scarce resources with co-wives and their children (Struensee 2004).

### 1.1.5 Religio-cultural biblical views about childlessness

This is better understood against the background of attitude towards children in the ancient Near East. Just as in the African culture, in the ancient Near East: While marriage was an important rite of passage for a woman, childbirth surpassed this as the most important rite of passage. Marriage was not legitimated until the presence of the first child, thus the consummation of the

union was not complete until it produced offspring to carry on the father's lineage. (De-Whyte 2014).This means that, as in Africa, in this culture also the purpose of marriage was the perpetuation of the husband's lineage, hence the preference for male children, as in most patriarchal cultures (De-Whyte 2014). In the ancient Near East, therefore, an infertile woman was given little regard because she would not be providing an heir for her husband (De-Whyte 2014). But the status of a barren woman was worse than that. According to Jamieson, being a mother 'confers a high degree of honor in the East, and the want of that status is felt as a stigma and deplored as a grievous calamity' (Bible Hub 2017, cited in Ademiluka 2019). Ellicott's Commentary states that 'there is an Oriental proverb that a childless person is as good as dead' (Bible Hub 2017, cited in Ademiluka 2019). Commenting on ancient Israel, Kösternberger (2004) affirms that 'the most important duty of a married woman is the begetting of offspring for her husband otherwise she was viewed as a disgrace' (cited in Abasili 2015, p. 589). The Israelite woman carried the additional expectation of fulfilling 'the promise to Abraham, and bringing forth that seed in which all the families of the earth were to be blessed' (Bible Hub 2017, cited in Ademiluka 2019).

It is against this background of passionate desperation for children that the childless mother stories' (Scott 2011) cited in the Hebrew Bible (HB) can be understood. It is also from the narratives of these women, such as Sarah (Genesis 16:1–6), Rachel (Genesis 30:1–6) and particularly Hannah (1 Samuel 1:1–20), that certain beliefs about childlessness are derived. The approach here is to identify motifs that are common to the narratives, which indicate the beliefs of the narrator and their audience about childlessness. The Hannah narrative is the most detailed of them. The narrator begins by introducing Elkanah the Ephraimite with his two wives, Hannah and Peninnah. The latter has children but the former has none. Every year, Elkanah goes to the

annual festival at Shiloh with his family. At the ceremonial meal, Elkanah usually gives 'a double portion' to Hannah 'because he loved Hannah' (Ademiluka 2019 p. 3). As it is often the case in polygamous homes, Hannah's special treatment meted by Elkanah induced Peninnah's jealousy, as her taunts made Hannah miserable all the time. At this particular festival, Hannah did not participate in the meal, but after that session, she went into silent prayer to God. Perhaps because this manner of prayer was unusual in ancient times, Eli the priest suspected that she was drunk (Berlin 2004:230). Hannah was not drunk, but was 'desperately pouring out her heart to God asking for the gift of a son' (Ademiluka 2019, p.3). Hannah did not just ask for a son but also made a vow to consecrate the child to God as a Nazirite (Numbers 6). God answered her prayer and 'in due time Hannah conceived and bore a son, and called his name Samuel.

Next to the Hannah story in details is the narrative of Sarah and Hagar (Genesis 16). In her desperation to have a child, Sarah offers Hagar, her maid, to her husband Abraham for intercourse so that she may obtain children through Hagar. Abraham accepts the offer, and Hagar gets pregnant by him. Similar to Hannah's encounter with Peninnah, rivalry ensues between Sarah and Hagar so much so that the latter has to flee from home. She later gives birth to a son and names him Ishmael. As earlier hinted, the desperation of Sarah and Abraham was well-placed in a society where people cared about who would be inheriting their legacy. In the absence of a child of their own, Abraham and Sarah had put measures in place for an heir in the person of Eliezer of Damascus, Abraham's servant (Genesis 15:2). This decision was in line with the ancient Near Eastern custom 'in which childless masters would adopt people as heirs to care for their adoptive parents and perform their burial and mourning rites when the time came' (De-Whyte 2014). Very similar to Sarah's narrative is the case of Rachel in Genesis 30:1–6. Rachel is Jacob's second wife and rival to her sister, Leah. Rachel has delay in bearing a child and

becomes jealous of her sister; in desperation, she demands from Jacob, 'Give me children, or I shall die. But Jacob tells her that it is God who gives children. Like Sarah, Rachel gives her maidservant, Bilhah, to her husband in order to have children through her. The action of Sarah and Rachel in using their slaves as surrogates was also well-attested 'in ancient Near Eastern family law' (Fletcher 2006). In that custom, 'if your wife cannot have children, you can have children by your wife's slaves, and the child becomes yours' (Klein 2008, cited in Ademiluka 2019, p.6). Loumagne (2015,p.1) also states that: the practice of surrogacy was actually an accepted practice in ancient Near Eastern cultures as it allowed a barren woman to regularize her status in a world in which children were a woman's status. Wenham (1994, p.72) opines that Sarah's and Rachel's action was a resort to surrogate marriage. In addition, worthy of mention amongst barren mothers are Isaac's wife, Rebekah (Genesis 25:21), Manoah's wife, the mother of Samson (Judges 13:2–5) and the Shunammite woman (2 Kings 4:16–17).

It is also noteworthy that these special women gave birth to sons who became extraordinary national figures. Isaac, Jacob and Joseph were the patriarchs through whom the promise of a great nation to Abraham was realized (Genesis 12:2). Samson was the first deliverer of Israel from the Philistines (Judges 13:5), and 'Samuel, the great judge and prophet, is also the midwife of the Israelite monarchy' (Moss & Baden, 2015, p.59). Therefore, in a way, the infertility of these women was secondary to the biblical authors, their main concern being to demonstrate the involvement of God in the emergence of the nation Israel. These stories stress God's participation not only in the process of individual conception, but in the process of national conception, in the birth and sustenance of Israel as a people. (Moss & Baden, 2015).

The negative image of childlessness is communicated by promises declaring that, if Israel is faithful to God, there was no barrenness in the land, suggesting that childlessness is evidence not

of the blessing of Yahweh but a curse. (Byron 2010).This belief seems to be well known in the ancient Near East, as Loumagne (2015, p.1) asserts that 'in ancient Near Eastern cultures childlessness was regarded as a virtual sign of divine disfavor'.

Even in modern times, many people still have this belief that infertility is a result of divine punishment. However, a critical examination of the barren mother narratives and other relevant texts reveals other strands of thought present in the HB and OT traditions that point towards the contrary. To begin with, when infertility is considered as an affliction, there are texts that explicitly describe afflictions as divine punishment. For instance, in 2 Chronicles 26:19–20 King Uzziah is afflicted with a skin disease for offering incense in the sanctuary, which was the prerogative of the priests. Gehazi, Elisha's servant, suffered the same disease for asking for money for his master's free healing services (2 Kings 5–27). But in some other texts similar afflictions are faced by people naturally, not as a punishment. An example can be seen in Leviticus 13–14 where the laws on skin disease align it with events such as sex and childbirth, not with any wrongdoing. It is also noteworthy that righteous individuals are reported to have fallen ill as humans often do, not for having committed any sin, for example prophet Elisha (2 Ki 13:14), King Hezekiah (2 Kings 20:1), King Josiah (2 Kings 23:29) and Daniel (Daniel 8:27). It may be correct to say, then, that because certain ailments sometimes occurred as a divine punishment, and were simply extrapolating from the known to the unknown' (Moss & Baden, 2015, p.45). The assumption that infertility was always a divine punishment subsumes under this attitude. Of course, there are a few cases where infertility is explicitly a divine punishment. One instance can be seen in Genesis 20 where God makes all the women in the court of Abimelech, the King of Gerar, barren because of the king's seizure of Sarah, Abraham's wife. Another one concerns Michal who was barren because she ridiculed her husband, David, for dancing in the

presence of the Lord (2 Samuel 6:23). On the contrary, the cases of Sarah, Rachel and Hannah discussed previously are different because there are no wrongs explicitly mentioned that any one of them had committed to justify childlessness as punishment. In this light:

Childlessness falls in a class of biblical misfortunes, including disease, famine, sickness, and death, that share certain common features. They may occur as divine punishment, or without any explanation whatsoever. In other words, we are dealing with two distinct phenomena presented in a common form as divine intervention and mere happenstance presented in the form of childlessness (or sickness, or famine, or death). Death presents perhaps the best analogy: divine punishment, form of premature death, at times it can take the form of infertility and childlessness. However, we would be mistaken to read all premature deaths as divine punishment, just as we would be mistaken to read all cases of infertility as divine punishment. (Moss & Baden, 2015, p. 49–50).

### 1.1.6 Customary Marriage and childlessness in Africa

Customary marriage in Africa is a union between two families not just two individuals. Customary marriages are practiced in Africa, Asia and the pacific where traditional customs and laws have been passed through generations. Marriage in this study is defined as the union of a husband and wife with a key role of bearing children and becoming parents. Customary marriage is traditional and based on the customs, traditions and laws of a specific community, not governed by state laws, recognized and validated by the community, involve informal ceremonies and rituals performed and the requirements for customary marriage vary depending on the community. In this study, customary marriage is defined as ''nyom te kwaro /gang'' and marriage between a man and a woman performed traditionally at the girls or brides' parents'

home and according to this study childlessness in customary marriage can be defined as failure to bear children after and in a traditional marriage.

This is why an engagement ceremony, which is often also a dowry payment ceremony is a very important and involves two families knowing each other and this is conducted at the bride's home (Oomen 2000). In terms of customary law, a man may marry more than one wife. A woman may not marry more than one husband (Oomen 2000). There is no restriction on the number of wives a husband may have, except that he should be able to maintain all his wives and that dowry should be paid for each one of them (London 1987). The customary law initially was not concerned with consensus between the two marrying parties. The marriage was regarded as a union between two families rather than two individuals (Letsoalo 1998). An essential requirement was that the family councils had to agree with the identity of the two parties. The family council would consider the preference of the two marrying individuals. The expectations of a wife in customary marriage were bearing children, support from the husband, commitment and transparency, affection and respect among others. Customary marriage was only valid once the bride was formally transferred to the family of the prospective husband (Durban 1989). Customary marriage is formally recognized by the recognition of customary marriage Act. In Africa every woman is expected to bear and as be able to have children in their marriages without any doubt. In Cameroon, infertility is a reason for divorce among the Bangangte tribe, causing a woman to lose her access to land distributed by her husband (Feldman 1994). In Egypt, women go through a complicated ritual known as kabsa (a form of fertility-producing ritual) in efforts to overcome infertility (Inhorn 1994). Among the Ekiti of Southwestern Nigeria, infertile women are treated as outcast, after they die, and their bodies are buried on the outskirts of the town with those people experiencing mental ill-health (Ademola, 1982). Failure to give birth to a

child or get pregnant within the first year of marriage in most sub- Saharan Africa especially in Nigeria is childlessness.

### 1.1.7 Celebration of customary marriage

In Zimbabwe, Kukumbira (asking for a bride/woman's hand in marriage from her parents, but with her informed consent) is a customary marriage system where a grown up girl marries off, with her 'informed consent' and that of her parents, a man of her own choice (Kileff , 1970). It is a formal way of asking for a bride/woman's hand in marriage from her parents, but with her informed consent. In the Shona culture, kukumbira is the most legitimate and esteemed traditional customary marriage system. In this practice, the suitor is invited to the home of the fiancée for preliminary introduction. He becomes an authentic suitor if he agrees to marry. Thereafter the process of marriage begins. The boy's parents look for a munyai (intermediator) (Kileff, 1970, p. 34) who is usually a neighbor and well-respected old man with wisdom and knowledge of the Shona customs. Depending on the families being involved, some intermediators charge a fee for their services but others feel they perform a social service. The father of the boy (mukuwasha: Son-in-law) sends the intermediator to the father of the girl (tezvara). He does not approach the father of the girl directly. He goes through a neighbor, an aunt (vatete) or a grandmother of the girl (ambuya) who guides him to the homestead. Failure to observe this norm may result in the intermediary paying a fine (Kileff, 1970). The intermediary explains the purpose of his visit, the intention to marry. He utters the expression, 'Ndinokumbira kubikirwa' (I would like someone to cook for me) (Kileff, 1970, p.35). At the same time, the intermediary produces a badza (hoe) (nowadays money can be used instead of a hoe) and hands it over to the companion (aunt/grandmother/neighbor) who will then hand it to the father of the girl. This stands for muromo (literally meaning mouth) - permission to speak to the inlaws. The

girl is called upon to confirm knowledge of the suitor and to seek her informed consent to enter into marriage with him before other proceedings. When this is done, the munyai pays a certain amount called *masunungurahomwe* (loosening the pocket) to enable him to obtain money. This was US$0 01 in the past, and ranges from $4 to 8 these days. The contemporary wide gap difference of masunungurahomwe is probably a result of mixed conceptions and the changing philosophy in marriage practices across the country. The girl who is about to be married, her sisters, aunts or friends pick up a certain amount of money. This is expected to be a reasonable amount of money. After this munyai pays makandinzwanani? (who told you about me having a daughter?) in which the father inquiries from munyai how he came to know his daughter. Next, the father asks for a certain amount (pfuma) called rugaba/rusambo. In the past it was US$0.25-0.33 but it now varies (Kileff, 1970, p.36). Rugaba can be paid later if the munyai is not financially liquid. This money covers the burden the parents underwent to bring up their daughter. It also covers the benefits the husband and his family will enjoy after marrying the girl like child bearing. The munyai is then asked for danga (head of cattle). The total number of cattle can be ten or less. Nowadays, some people convert cattle to cash payment, but some cattle are compulsory. The father (of the girl) gets his own mhindura (bull) which is dedicated to the paternal spirits. The mother gets her most highly regarded and valued beast (mombe youmai). The beast is dedicated to the maternal spirits. After all this is done, her aunts / elder sisters would accompany the girl to the house of the boy. It should be noted that unlike in other forms of marriage, in the customary practice of kukumbira, all these procedures are expected to be done before the girl and the boy experience any sexual conduct with each other. Though the boy's virginity is not tested upon marriage, both are expected to be virgins and her aunts test the woman's virginity. If the girl passes the test, she is showered with gifts from both families.

In Yoruba Nigeria, the couple is adorned with beads and cowry shells, and the groom presents a dowry of 20 cowries, in Zulu south Africa, the bride wears a traditional isicoco head dress and the groom presents a dowry of cattle. Elders bless Masai of East Africa, the couple and the groom presents a dowry of cattle or goats. In Uganda among the Baganda and the Bagishu, at 17 years, the girl would be ready for marriage and the age of men is not emphasized much because even older men would marry younger girls if their parents have agreed. After the two parents had agreed, they prepared a day for their marriage to take place. It was secretive and only the two families involved. Since the girl was young, she was taken to the auntie for marriage training where she learnt about marriage roles from the bedroom, kitchen, and home management. This girl was told that she was going to get married and divorce was not an option, she had no clue about who was her fiancée. On the day the girl was to be given away, the husband to be came with sisters and some elderly people to receive her. They brought gifts to the girl's family which included dowry, fathers ''kanzu'', the mother and aunties ''Gomesi''. Thy feasted together and made commitment to protect the girl and then the girl is given away. Because the girl was young, she would go with her auntie to the palace where she was getting married to. The auntie would stay for a night. If the girl was found to be a virgin, the auntie would be given a goat in appreciation which was slaughtered and cooked without salt when she went back to the girl's father. She also brought a backcloth to indicate that she was a virgin. If the girl was not a virgin, there would be no goat and a hole would be cut in the middle of the backcloth, then sent back to the father. The bride stayed in the bedroom where she was looked after and fed for a month. After which another ceremony called ''okujja omugole mu kisenge''meaning getting the bride out of the bedroom would be done. On that day a special meal was cooked, usually prepared by the groom's sisters. They give the brides gifts that is a knife and a basket indicating that you are

welcome. From that day, the lady starts her official marital duties as a wife. the villagers would refer to her by the husband's name like ''mukyala Katamba'' meaning Mrs Katamba.

### 1.1.8 African view about marriage and childlessness

In the African communities, marriage is meant to bring forth offspring's. This is why childless marriages are not appreciated. According to Kimani (2001), such marriages could sometimes be voided. Mbiti (1999) supports this argument stating that lack of offspring distorts and disorients the very existence of an African and the entire community. This is because the African ontology depends on the fecundity of the living. It dictates the present and future of the community. Kimani (2001), in the same vein, argues that Africans procreate to ensure continuity of the community. According to Kenyatta (1970), childbearing is a duty that must be fulfilled by every African. The readiness for marriage in Africa is regarded as readiness for procreation (Abasali, 2015). In the African world view, to be married is seen as an opportunity to contribute to life of the community through procreation for the survival of the lineage and society. Hence the prayer: "May God grant you many children, you shall give birth to male and female and in nine months we shall gather to celebrate the birth of your baby." The perception of these wishes is that society expects much from every marriage than just the mere grand occasion that is witnessed on the day of marriage. Problems arise when after a year or two and such marriages do not produce children.

Among the Luo of Kenya, childbearing is a major component of marriage. It is the duty of every member of the community to participate in this; otherwise, they face serious challenges. Mboya (2001) cites that some of these challenges follow an individual even after death. Such people who don't have offspring call for elaborate death rituals to ward off their spirits. It is evident

from the above discussion that childlessness is associated with many challenges. These are especially experienced by couples who come from a background that does not appreciate childlessness.

In most cultures of the world, children are highly valued. Motherhood is celebrated, while childlessness is abhorred, however, in some parts of the world, some people choose to be childless (Morell, 1994). This could be due to a myriad of factors, some may perceive children as burdensome, while others a disruption to their marriage. This is affirmed by Kimani (2001, p. 65) who advances that: "today's families, modern or otherwise, have as their primary concern the gratification of sexual needs, with other consequences as a necessary or unnecessary bother".

AS much as society expects couples to have children, the burden of parenting may make some couples to be childless; Morell challenges the societal expectation of women to be mothers. (Morell, 1994, p. 2) further notes that , "Those women who do not give birth, the society looks at them as selfish and irresponsible." She substantiates that women without children are ignored and sometimes looked undermined. This could be because they seem not to be adding any value in society according to the various cultures. Yang et al., (2008) in their study among the childless couples of Korea support the above argument when they found out that even voluntary childlessness is unappreciated. Inhorn (2007), in his study among the Muslims found that childlessness is equally a challenge. Rabia (2013) corroborates this assertion citing that the challenges associated with childlessness make the affected Muslims seek various interventions to alleviate the problem.

Obianuju (2009) posits that marriage among the Igbo is indispensable and is meant for procreation. The birth of a child is important for a woman because it is a sign of motherhood. A

child fulfils marriage and portrays a woman as complete. Therefore, a woman going into marriage has the issue of childlessness to battle.

### 1.1.9 Childlessness and customary marriage in Uganda

In Uganda, the existing pronatalist ontology dictates that the sole purpose of marriage is for procreation. Children in an African context provide social security in old age, stability in marriage, support, domestic labor, wealth, family continuity, social status, and profound identity of motherhood. Consequently, the blame and stigma often fall on the woman for failure to provide children to the family, even in cases when the involuntary childlessness is due to male factors. There are various Ugandan texts on childlessness consulted and among these include;

1. "Women's experiences of living with involuntary childlessness at Kawempe National Referral hospital" by Asiimwe Suzan.

2. "Childlessness in Uganda: Context, Consequences and policy implications" by Stephen Ojiambo Wandera (research paper, 2017),

3. "Infertility and childlessness in Uganda: A sociological perspective" by Christopher M.B .Mukanku (2013), and

4. "The experience of childlessness among women in Uganda" by Florence K.N. Mirembe (research paper, 2019) from which some experiences of childless women and effects of childlessness were picked.

In Uganda, ''overcoming childlessness and infertility is a critical need despite a high national fertility rate of 5.96 births per women'' (World Bank, 2016). In Ugandan customary marriage is celebrated according to the rites of an African community and any marriage celebrated under

Part III of the marriage Act in 1973. For customary marriage to take place, both parties must be 18 years and above. The couple must not be related to the woman must be single but the man may already be married but not married under church or civil marriage, his subsisting marriage should be customary marriage (Mujuzi 2013). The marriage here is between two people, the agreement of parents to the marriage is therefore required, and as a form of acceptance of the marriage bride price is paid, however the woman's family writes a letter waving the payment of bride price (Ddamulira, 2013). Customary marriage, ''termed locally as "nyomkwaro" among the Lango/Acholi, "Kuhingira" among the Bakiga/Banyankole and "Kwanjula" among the Baganda, "Ekiitanu" among the Karamojong, and many more (Law of Uganda, 1973). Customary marriage is more valued than any other kind and type of marriages in Uganda. This type of marriage involves discussions or dialogue and consultation between two families and it is summarized and concluded with celebration following cultural norms, tradition and rites to which one belongs. Customary marriage is the main reason for legalizing marriages and major point of matrimonial institutionalization in Uganda. It is the expectation of every couple in customary marriage to reproduce and bear children, which becomes a sign of fecundity and childlessness. African traditional culture had great value for children, childless marriage was seen as cursed, and the woman in particular was even called a witch (Ochieng, 2019).

In Northern Uganda, customary marriage is the most preferred type of marriage which involves two families and it comes with payment of dowry, which includes money, cattle's, goats, ''nywal ber'' attributed to a big saucepan which means producing is good and other gifts brought by the man's family/groom to the bride's family particularly in Lamwo District. In Acholi these are the key requirements for marriage and once all these are presented depending on the agreement made by the two families, customary marriage is then complete and the groom can take his bride

with him and they are expected to be happy and bear children thereafter. The Acholi are a Nilotic luo speaking group of people from northern Uganda living in Lamwo, Kitgum, Pader and Gulu district and known as Acholi land. The Acholi are the descendants of a variety of Luo-speaking peoples who are believed to have migrated three or four centuries ago from adjacent areas of what is now South Sudan into what is now the Acholi district of Uganda. The Acholi have small chiefdoms of one or more villages, each with several patrilineal clans. According to Latigo (2006), prior to colonialism, "the Acholi people maintained a traditional government that was rooted firmly in their religious beliefs, norms, and customs, which demanded peace and stability in Acholi-land at all times, based on their philosophy of life. This structure was maintained by the real anointed chiefs of the Acholi, the *rwodi moo.*"(Latigo 2006). Although they were believed to have supernatural powers, the chiefs ruled through a Council of Clan Elders, so they never ruled singlehandedly. The council's representatives could mediate issues between clans, and essentially covered both civil and criminal functions, like a Supreme Court. It was a system of governance fully integrated with their religion and cosmology.

A childless woman would not be welcomed in an Acholi homestead, clan or family with joy and happiness but rather brought sadness, regrets and shame to the family and was never treated well nor loved. For this reason, there are various names used to depict a childless woman and childlessness in lamwo district with various meanings and these include:

1. "Laluu" which is the most common name meaning "the childless or barren one".

2." Labut ka" meaning "owns nothing".

3. "Labili" meaning "someone alone".

4. "Tong pe" meaning "no eggs".

5. "Lapong Choron" meaning "toilet filler".

6. Gi dwok gang" meaning "take her back home".

7. "En kene" meaning "one alone".

8. Achamo nono" meaning "the one who eats for no reason or nothing".

9. "Lajok" meaning a witch.

These names are attributed to a childless woman among the Acholi people of Lamwo District, Palabek Gem, Kal and Ogili sub counties respectively.

Customary marriage was chosen for the current study because among the Acholi, It is most preferred and common type of marriage that implies and shows appreciation of parents especially the girl's parents, their acceptance of marriage and of the bride the official handover of the bride to the groom as a wife and husbands family. It gives deep connection to cultural heritage and identity and it is the basis and foundation of marriage and permits the occurrence of other kinds marriages.

### 1.1.10 Naming children and practices performed

There is always celebration, joy and happiness when a child is born. One of the first activities is giving a name to a baby. In some cultures, parents choose the name, while in others, naming is a very important ceremony held by elders, and followed by feasting. There is a difference in a way cultures decide on names. Children can be named after the dead, according to birth other, based on events, according to biblical characters and celebrities. Names carry a lot of meaning and it is a lifelong form of identity whatever the origin. The umbilical cord is so significant in some

cultures that the baby will not be taken outside the house until it breaks off. For example, in the Kenyan Luo culture, the placenta of a girl must be buried on the left-hand side of her mother's house, while the placenta of a boy must be buried on the right-hand side. This is because within the Luo cosmological and symbolic system, the left side relates to impermanency and vulnerability, whilst the right signifies permanency and authority. So girls are regarded as impermanent tribal members as they will move outside the family when married, but boys will carry on as patriarchal authorities. In Thai culture, the placenta is salted and placed in a jar before being buried under a tree that corresponds to the symbol of the Asian year of the child's birth. Some cultures in Africa expect the mother to jealously protect the umbilical cord after it breaks off because it is used by elders to prove the true belonging of the baby to a clan.in Buganda, a tribe in Uganda, newly born babies are washed with herbs (kyogero) rather than soap for the first month. The reason is to give the baby a smooth skin, avoid rashes and for the child to be blessed with luck for the rest of its life.

### 1.1.11 Religious genre anchoring the study

African traditional Religion refers to diverse traditional religious systems in Africa characterized by spiritual power in nature, rituals and ceremonies, communal and family focus and deities. African Traditional religion was used to anchor this study because it encompasses various spiritual practices and beliefs of the indigenous African communities.

### 1.1.12 Motivations of doing the study

This study was motivated by the experience of childless women in the society specifically in my family. Who have suffered all sorts of humiliation, disgrace, violence, abuse, stigma and have no

way out for peace and fight for themselves and no help is offered to them by their families and spouses.

This study was also motivated by religion that advocates for love, peace and offers comfort to those in agony and encourages those that a hopeless and burdened to have hope and believe in God in all situations and finally, the study was scholarly motivated to bring out the cultural perspectives, experiences of childless women and coping mechanisms of the phenomenon to lime light for study purposes and be used for further research in future. This study therefore intends to examine experiences of childless couples in customary marriages in Acholi and the study findings will inform the community with appropriate coping mechanisms childlessness.

### 1.2 Problem Statement

Infertility is a major challenge in Uganda and about 10% to 15% of couple's experience involuntary childlessness, (Asiimwe, Osingada, Mbalinda, 2022). An estimated number of five million people are facing infertility mainly handled by the private centers in urban areas due to stigma, disrespect, rising from being childless (World Bank 2016). Women are blamed for reproductive retardation, uncertainties and problems and suffer from distress of mind, anger, dishonor, economic deprivation and rejection irrespective of the biological or medical cause of infertility, women receive the major blame for the reproductive setback and they suffer personal grief and frustration, social stigma, ostracism and serious economic deprivation. Childless women experience severe social and emotional morbidity in Uganda that is anxiety combined with depression and other health complications.

This is worse experience for primary infertility and most of the childless couples and persons are disrespected, undermined, regarded as evil and of bad luck in the various societies and

consequently even when childlessness is due to male factors the blame and stigma falls often on the woman (Asiimwe et al., 2022). Many assume that producing children is a natural phenomenon that they would spontaneously achieve in life. Those who are childless are generally blamed for it and held accountable and bearers of misfortune especially to the husband in-laws and the society. On the contrary, in Africa every woman, in a customary marriage, is expected to bear children, without fail. The predominant African socio-cultural perspective is that childlessness is to be traced back to the female rather than the male spouse in a marriage. Such a perspective is a cause of tremendous, often silent suffering, on the part of childless women. Despite earlier studies and research done on childlessness in several parts of the world like Asia, Europe and Africa having information regarding the causes, effects and solutions to childlessness in specific regions and not Lamwo District in Uganda. There is knowledge gap and so the current study will interrogate why women are blamed for childlessness, in case of the men being childless what happens, provide and make known the real perceptions on childlessness in Acholi, experiences of childless women and layout to the public the evident coping mechanisms of childless women in customary marriage. There is inadequacy in services rendered in the community to help these childless women concerning treatment, not sensitized and facilities are miles away that they cannot access rather they are silently being tortured in the community with no help and guidance to cope and neglected by their families. Therefore, the current study sought to make an in-depth investigation of and bring to light the nature of this phenomenon, as a way of sensitization, in a case study of Acholi people, Lamwo district, Uganda.

## 1.3 General Objective

The general objective of the study is to examine cultural perceptions about childlessness among the Acholi people in customary marriages and the experiences childless women in Acholi, Lamwo district.

### 1.3.1 The specific objectives of this study

The specific objectives of this study are:

i) To assess the cultural perceptions about childlessness in customary marriages in the Acholi region.

ii) To explore the experiences of childlessness among women in customary marriages in Acholi, Lamwo District

iii) To assess the coping mechanisms of childless women in customary marriages in Acholi, Lamwo district.

### 1.3.2 Research Questions

i) How is childlessness culturally perceived in customary marriage?

ii) What are the experiences of childlessness among women in customary marriages?

iii) What are the mechanisms of coping with the experiences of being childless?

## 1.4 Scope of the study

The scope of the study included geographical content and time.

### 1.4.1 Geographical scope.

The study was conducted in Lamwo District in Northern Uganda. Lamwo district has nine sub-counties and amongst these, only three sub counties were visited. That is Palabek Kal, Palabek Gem and Palabek Ogili because these areas were enough representative regarding the problem that was under study and the researcher was familiar with them, knows the language spoken and easily got respondents and interacted freely with participants.

### 1.4.2 Content scope

The study focused on the perspectives, experience of childlessness among women, and looked at coping mechanisms of childlessness among the childless women in Lamwo district in the specific sub counties.

### 1.4.3 Time scope

The study had a time scope from 2016-2022 that is for the last five years because the primary participants had lived in these years without children and some were still expectant, hopeful and too anxious to have children. This period enabled the researcher to get the information needed about the study.

## 1.5 Significance of the Study

Findings of the current study was significant to Government and Non-Government organizations who aim at building peace, stop violence and promote human rights. The Non-Government and Government institutions were also informed and have foundation through this research impact their implementations because they were informed about the experiences and problems faced by the childless in the community.

In addition, the Government and Non-Government Organizations was able to come up with strategies and projects to assist the victims and get solutions to those suffering out in the communities. Furthermore, be able to manage childlessness, empower vulnerable women through promoting the social and economic rights of women with proof of their experience because the research provided findings that paved way for justice and was able to provide legal aid services to the victims of childlessness.

Health departments used the findings to offer the appropriate care and know how to handle the victims depending on their experience, explore the causes and offer best guiding and counseling services and analyze the concept.

The study findings benefited academic institutions for example the topic of this study attracts attention, leads to visibility and greater reputation of the university, and makes it known. In addition, this benefited the institution as it helps it to improve the student's success, retention as tutors and helped in long term planning and the findings helped the institutions to guide students on research topics.

### 1.6 Justification of the study

Previous studies have investigated on childlessness for example;

1. The social and cultural consequences of being childless in poor resource area (Balen, & Bos, 2009).

2. Childlessness: concept analysis-PM (Gouni 2022),

3. Experiences of women living in Uganda with involuntary childlessness (Asiimwe et al., 2022). However, there is still information gap on the perspectives about childlessness, experiences of

childlessness among women, and coping mechanisms of childlessness. The current study therefore created awareness about childlessness, bought it to lime light, appreciated and built self-esteem amongst the victims. The current study also and added new knowledge on to the deposit of knowledge the people have and future researchers in the same or related field of childlessness and contribute to the understanding of what childlessness is accordingly and made it easier for the victims to cope and professionals in the field to know how to deal with childlessness. This study will create room for adjustment through the knowledge it provided through sensitization of the community, the childless, change the attitude of people about childless people, and negativity associated with childlessness in society and inform the government about inadequacy of health facilities and services offered at the health centres. This study is therefore different from other previous studies because it is based on Acholi cultural perspectives about childlessness brings out the insight of what childlessness is among the Acholi people, experiences, and its coping mechanism among the Acholi women in Lamwo district,

In conclusion, childlessness is a global challenge that is understood differently and responded to according to a particular culture and its traditions because of its complexity. Though procreation is the Centre of marriage and children are highly valued, childlessness is a phenomenon that cannot be easily explained and understood especially in customary marriage where the children are expected to be born and parenthood is encouraged, Childlessness is therefore unacceptable and a phenomenon traced back to the women. The next chapter furthermore presents theories of childlessness and literature review about childlessness in customary marriage.

# CHAPTER TWO

# LITERATURE REVIEW

## 2.0 Introduction

This chapter of literature review was a written overview of major writings and other sources that provided a description, summary written by other scholars. This chapter includes the theories of childlessness that is the second demographic transition theory by Ron Lesthaeghe's, preference theory by Catherine Hakim, Harris's uncertainty theory, fertility theory which include high fertility rates, cultural norms, economic factors and employment opportunities, Ancestral theory and community theory of childlessness by John Caldwell. It also consists of literature reviewed by other authors about the socio- cultural perceptions about childlessness that includes children being linked to labor, stigmatization, lived experiences of childless women like stress and loneliness, low self-esteem, affliction and hostility. Socio economic effects of childlessness on women in customary marriages which includes invisibility and not being recognized, abandonment, unawareness and ignorance and financial stress and coping strategies of childlessness that also includes adoption, fostering , medical treatments and conclusion of the chapter.

## 2.1 Theories of childlessness.

Childlessness is defined as a state of not having children (Asiimwe, et al., 2022). There are individuals that chose to remain childless because of their preferences, uncertainties and other factors like culture, community, and fertility issues. These theories include;

### 2.1.1 Ron Lesthaeghe's Second Demographic Transition (SDT) theory

This theory explains changes in reproductive behavior, including childlessness in developed countries. It also stresses those factors like changing values and attitudes, increased female autonomy and independence as the main driving forces behind fertility decline. The second Demographic transition entails sustained sub replacement fertility, a multitude of living arrangements other than marriage and the disconnection between marriage and procreation (Lesthaeghe (2010). Lesthaeghe (2010, p.216), argue that ''fertility is below the replacement level, development of different family arrangements and increasing cohabitation, decoupling of marriage from fertility, increase in the number of divorces, postponement of unions, increased non-marital fertility and the emergence of a greater number of childless women''.

### 2.1.2 Catherine Hakim's Preference Theory

Hakims's preference theory is a sociological theory, which aims at explaining the changes that women have experienced in contemporary societies according to two main lifecycle patterns that is fertility and employment. Preference Theory regards lifestyle preferences and values as the principal determinants of women's fertility choices and outcomes, and it emphasizes the importance of cultural factors as the key factors behind the recent changes in family and fertility that have occurred in all modern industrialized societies. Preferences obviously also shape men's decisions, but ''attitudes have an especially strong impact on women's behavior because women have genuine choices to make regarding employment versus home making'' (Hakim 2002, p. 432). Hakim (2000; 2002, p.432), states that ''fertility behavior is defined by personal values and individual preferences''. This theory ''assumes that couples consider their personal interests and income in deciding to have fewer or more children so that they end up considering the benefits. Although according to the economic paradigm, fertility and income are positively associated, this

theory argues that couples tend to invest in quality rather than quantity, which leads to a smaller number of children'' (Lesthaeghe, 2010). Preference theory concentrates on the value of having a child. This theory is based on general truth that categorize choice of individual's behavior. These general truths are essential for establishing preference representation functions and provide the rationale for the quantitative analysis of preference. Preference theory provides the foundation for decision science and economics. A basic topic of microeconomics is the study of consumer preference and choices (Kreps 1990). In decision analysis and operations research, knowledge about decision maker's preference is necessary to establish objective functions that are used for evaluating alternatives.

### 2.1.3 Harris's Uncertainty Theory

Harris's uncertainty theory (2015) posits that childlessness is influenced by uncertainty in various life domains including economic uncertainty due to financial instability, social uncertainty due to changing social norms, familial because of changing family structures and unclear uncertainties that is unclear life goals. Uncertainty theory states that ''decision-makers, in this case, couples, adopt a risk minimization posture whenever the economic, social, and personal context is uncertain. It is possible to highlight three variations of uncertainty that can affect couples' decisions'' (Goldscheider, 2015, p.207). According to these theories childlessness is a product of the gap between gender equity in the public sphere and gender equity in the private sphere (household), (Goldscheider et al., 2015; McDonald, 2000). Different social, economic, cultural, biological and environmental factors contribute to the increase of childlessness. This means people are uncertain about their fertility preferences and their strength vary from their preferences too. Some may feel strongly about a particular family size whereas

others, preference theory was adopted because are not attached to a particular number but have a range of acceptable family sizes in mind.

Below are some of the African cultural theories of childlessness by John Caldwell 1928-2016.

### 2.1.4 Ancestral theory of childlessness

Ancestral theory is a concept rooted in various African cultures, emphasizing the significance of ancestors in shaping individual and communal identity, values and practices. The key principles include ancestral reverence where ancestors are revered as guardians of family, culture and tradition. Continuity and legacy where children ensure continuity of family lineage, cultural heritage and ancestral legacy, Spiritual connection in which ancestors are believed to maintain a spiritual connection with the living, influencing their lives and decisions and then respect and honor where ancestors are honored through rituals, ceremonies and daily practices

### 2.1.5 The community theory of childlessness.

Community theory of childlessness suggests that there are key principles about this theory and this include;

Community interdependence, where childlessness impacts community cohesion, social support networks and collective wellbeing, social capital in which children contribute through forming relationships, participating in social activities and providing care, cultural continuity whereby children ensure cultural transmission, preserving community traditions, values and identity and lastly economic stability where children contribute to community stability through future workforce participation and caregiving (Mbiti 1969).

The community theory acknowledges that childlessness affects not only individuals but also communities, leading to social economic and cultural implications positively like;

1. Reducing strain on resources because fewer children can mean less pressure on community resources like schools, infrastructures and health care,

2.Childless individuals may focus more on personal development, contributing to community's intellectual and economic growth, greater community involvement since childless individuals have more time and engage in voluntary work, community activities and social events and form close bonds with relatives like nieces, nephews or younger community members.

Childlessness also has negative impact on the community and these include;

1. Lower birth rates, which lead to an aging population, potentially straining social security and health care systems.

2. Labor shortage, which affects the community economic growth, social isolation and feelings of disconnection from family oriented community activities by the childless individuals and result into cultural and traditional implications since in some cultures, childlessness is stigmatized and viewed as a threat to family lineage.

Because this theory supports continuity of culture and supports that children ensure cultural continuity, transmission, preserve traditions and are the future and hence childlessness is not embraced hence childlessness affect not only an individual but the entire community.

### 2.1.6 The fertility theory

Fertility theory in the African context explores the complex interplay between biological, social, cultural and economic factors influencing fertility decisions and this has 4 principles which include;

**1. High fertility rates.**

High fertility refers to high birth rate and population. With high fertility rates, African cultures often value large families for economic and social reasons. With this principle, traditional family values, limited access to education, early marriage and child bearing, cultural or religious norms promoting large families and limited female autonomy are factors contributing to high fertility

**2. Cultural norms** in which family size and childbearing influenced by societal expectations, economic factors where poverty, education and employment opportunities impact fertility decisions and lastly Health and infertility in which medical conditions and fertility affect childbearing. Cultural practices are shared perceptions of how people routinely behave in a culture (similar terms used are intersubjective perceptions or descriptive norms) and values are shared ideals of a culture (similar terms are injunctive norms). The concept of descriptive norm as common behaviors in a society helps to get a grasp of the concept of cultural practices (Shteynberg & Gelfand, 2009). The area of descriptive norms is well developed in social psychology (we use "norms" for short); norms define how people are thinking (shared reality) and behaving, and they control the behavior of people (Shteynberg & Gelfand, 2009); they are, conceptually related to cultural practices (Chiu, Gelfand, & Hong, 2010). Norms are both input as well as output variables in the development of practices: Norms prescribe certain behaviors, and once these behaviors are socially routinized, they become practices. Thus, cultural norms

lead to cultural practices and vice versa. Both are inferred by perceptions of common behavior of others "how do people think and behave around here?" norms and cultural practices are perceived to be outside the person. Consistent outside control of behavior can lead to routines.

### 2.1.7 Childlessness and Economic factors

There are various economic factors influencing childlessness and among these are; cost of living as childless individuals tend to desire high expenses and live extravagantly because they do not have any child to spend on, they prioritize education and professional goals, have limited expenses of health care and lack family-friendly benefits. This is because of voluntary childlessness by some individuals, temporary delay of parenthood until financially stable and some are unable to afford children due to economic circumstances.

Economically, this has consequences which includes reduced labor which is potential for economic growth, contributes to decrease of tax and strain on social services, pension and healthcare systems because many individuals tend not to pay tax and contributes to shifts in housing demand.

### 2.1.8 Childlessness and Employment fertilities.

Childlessness has both negative and positive impact on employment opportunities. Positively, it increases flexibility in such a way that childless individuals tend to have more freedom to pursue careers that require extensive travel. Childless individuals engage in longer working hours with varying schedules because this will not affect them neither their family hence childless individuals devote more time to their careers.

Childless individuals also have financial advantages that they are able to acquire what they desire for example; further education, training and career advancement,

However childless individuals also encounter negativity at work place for example social stigma that they cannot relate freely at workplace especially in activities that promote culture and value of children, have limited support network which potentially impact on mental health and well-being.

Some employers view childless people as less committed because they have no child responsibility and may not be eligible for benefits like parental leave, flexible work arrangements and health insurance.

This study therefore used the community theory whereby childlessness affects not only individuals but also communities, leading to social economic and cultural implications. This is also because this theory supports continuity of culture and supports that children ensure cultural continuity, transmission, preserve traditions and are the future and hence childlessness is not embraced.

### 2.1.7 The religio-culural biblical views.

This view emphasizes that women must bear children, cannot be ignored. Siwila (2015: 63) argues that the story of Hanna in 1 Samuel 1:1-20 reveals how barren and childless women were viewed and mocked in patriarchal times. The fact that her fellow religious sisters mocked Hanna puts religion in the spotlight when the issue of childlessness is raised. This mockery is often entrenched in many African tribes in the name of Christianity. In her article entitled 'A coming home to myself', Oduyoye (1995, p.46) relates her own story by narrating how the Christian

church and African traditional religions were used as tools of oppression against childless women. The fact that Christianity came into Africa as a male-dominated religion does not do anything to reduce the patriarchal male dominance, but rather reinforces it and adds religious validity. This is what Phiri (2007, p.48) highlights by saying that; ''This means that freedom from cultural oppression for African women, as a result of the coming of Christianity, came as a coincidence rather than a formulated understanding of their salvation".

Some African religions regard childlessness, barrenness as shameful, and a punishment of sin (De Whyte 2001). The same view is shared by Gehman (2002, p.173) who indicates that childlessness is often listed as a punishment for any anti-social act like jealousy, hatred and so forth. This kind of view demonizes childlessness to the extent that even in religious circles it becomes very difficult to break the stigma. Both Christianity and African traditional religions negatively portrayed childlessness and hence they perpetuated the stigmatization of the barren women through their patriarchal character.

Involuntary childlessness is a global phenomenon that negatively affects the couple, or the family involved. The experiences of women living with involuntary childlessness have not been well documented in the literature, specifically in the Ugandan context. Women are particularly affected by the consequences of involuntary childlessness, including intimate partner violence, mental illness, and lack of social support. A limited number of studies in Uganda have explored the experiences of women with childlessness. The importance of social-cultural settings, regarding childlessness in shaping values attached to children, reproductive technology, and family support system calls for the need to provide experiences of women with childlessness in Uganda.

This study therefore used the community theory in which childlessness affects not only individuals but also communities, leading to social economic and cultural implications. This is also because this theory supports continuity of culture and supports that children ensure cultural continuity, transmission, preserve traditions and are the future and hence childlessness is not embraced. Next below is the literature reviewed in regards to perceptions, experiences of childless women and their coping mechanisms.

### 2.2 The Socio-Cultural perception of childlessness in customary marriages

Previous studies indicate that, socio- cultural perceptions create understanding and knowledge of circumstances like childlessness surrounding the society or community. The first perception is that Childlessness is linked to loss of labor. Not having children is regarded as a total loss in a family because without the children, everything moves slowly and there is no progress. Having no children is considered as a major life problem (Balen & Bos, 2009). This is because no one will help you like your own child both in especially in times of need that is to say good and bad times and no one ever likes and desires to stay and live where there are no children. Children are perceived as helpers in their families and community at large. Children especially in some part of the world, contribute to the household through selling products in the market, tending livestock, fetching water, cooking, and farming (Lancy 2008). Besides their labor contribution to secure parents and family's survival. Children support aging parents in the absence of social support systems for the elderly (Inhorn & Frank, 2002). Deribe, Anberbir, Regassa, Belachew, & Biadgiligm, (2007), found that most of the childless couples get worried about not having helpers in their old age. In many African communities a wealthy person without children might not get recognition in a community (Dyer, 2007), as much as he/she would have had.

Ugwanyi (1999, p.262) states that the number of children a man has determine the socio-economic status of the man. Childlessness demoralizes some of the affected couple's zeal to accumulate wealth, this is because they view that wealth accumulated would go to the community when they die, because of this, most of the couples squander their money while they are still alive. Culture also measures the political strength by the number of children a man has, childless couples are not recognized in the society they find themselves in a political desert''.

Ugwanyi (1999, p.1434), explained that ''children help to render valuable services and this create source of income on their father's farmland, cattle, rearing and in agricultural pursuit, besides this, the females are source of income to their parents when they get married''. Cultural beliefs come in various forms and the cumulative effect of these beliefs is a set of taboos and norms whose counteracting effect results in childlessness (Larsen, 1996).

**Stigmatization**. Most people regard the childless individuals as insignificant in the society and their perceptions of childless individuals and community members, limit the extent of knowing and understanding the medical causes and solutions to infertility (Amakwa, 2013). In many families the husband may decide not attend to the women financially or even regard her as anything. Different names are attributed to childless women, such as woman-man, just eating without fruitfulness, and are excluded from women groups. (Sampson & McCormick, 2014). Childlessness can be stigmatizing in a society that promotes and encourages parenthood because of its social norms and culture.

Childless women are bothered with uneasy and troubled relationships with their husbands, living a worried and scared life daily with fear that their partners may choose other women over them if the infertility and childless problem continues. Men are accepted to have other choices to

mitigate and manage being childless through marrying another woman or bearing and producing children outside the marriage. This is however not so in the case of women (Inhorn & Zeynep, 2016), and this obviously increases their regrets, worries and fatigue.

The society as well contributes to the desire to conceive and bearing children because of the wide range of its expectations. In most societies, producing children is a norm, in most cases childless couples without noticing feel, and become divided and separate because of the condition and circumstances unintentionally (Ying, 2015). This condition could trigger and bring about various social problems in the lives of childless women or women with infertility. Women suffer from verbal violence and physical violence inflicted on them by people around them especially in other parts of Africa and some Asian countries including Egypt, Pakistan, Kuwait, Turkey, and Iran (Sami, 2012, p.7). Buor (2017, p. 42–63), states that it is rational to expect that couples who are experiencing childlessness and fertility problems unfortunately feel being avoided by people in the community especially their family members due to delayed and prolonged inability to bear their own children and due to the pressure and high expectation of the society. The reason as the society is seen to be expectant of a child or children being born after marriage. Women with infertility setbacks in Pakistan for instance, are regarded to carriers of bad luck and omen, denied from attending important events in society such as marriage ceremonies, birth ceremonies and other celebrations and ceremonies in the society. Childless women are treated with disrespect and are not permitted to hold and have conversations with any person's child and other people's children (Jisha & Thomas, 2016). The Ghanaian society does not regard people with infertility as carrying bad luck and omen nor are they limited from attending public events. However, they are underestimated, undermined and despised and seen as people without responsibilities and for that

reason, they are regarded to as people who do not need financial support because they don't have any responsibilities.

### 2.3 Experiences of childless persons in customary marriages

Experiences are an event or occurrence, which leaves an impression on someone. Below are the experiences that the childless go through.

Stress and loneliness. Childless women experience stress and loneliness and childlessness has a persuasive and significant impact on married couples with infertility especially on their emotional well-being, ruining and sabotaging affected women in the communities and families in which they belong. Most experiences emanated into isolation and pressure emotionally however, it has been suggested that family support and support from friends, and new treatment chances and opportunities can mitigate all psychological problems and discomforts because infertility is hurting and can be so irritating. According to Keskin, and Coksuer (2011), regardless of the causes, infertility is a tough and strenuous issue for women. Significantly, most scholarly articles have integrated the mental problems and issues of childlessness and its treatment which is a serious note and important. It is indicated that most childless women and those suffering from infertility felt miserable and unhappy especially when interacting with those having children and pregnant women (Domar 2011).

Low self-esteem. The experience of childlessness by childless women in most Nigeria communities is marked by various kinds of social, economic and emotional effects. Those experiences are in many ways similar to those of childless couples in other cultures. What most west African childless women share with other childless women is the feeling of low self-esteem due to their childlessness? They are often described as being hollow, empty, barren or wasted

and arid. Gray (2002) observed that vast majority of these childless women made no distinction between failed bodies and failed selves. They seem to experience childlessness as a generalized role failure, not just as a failure of the body. Similarly, the feelings of guilt accompanying distress have also been found in studies of childless women in many Nigeria communities.

Affliction as a state of having pain, distress, grief and misery. People trying to cope with involuntary childlessness may experience symptoms of affliction and agony similar to those that experienced by bereaved people, such as depression, anxiety and health problems (Stearns, 2009) Politically, Specific instances of childlessness more generally for people in positions of power or influence, have had enormous impacts on politics, culture and societies especially in cases of royal succession. Since male children were needed as heirs to property and titles, lack of a male child was considered a type of childlessness in many cases.

**Hostility**. Most childless women have experienced and gone through hatred and malice inflicted on them by their own family members especially the in laws because of the circumstance in which they are and surrounding them. According to Bruner (2013, p.13) majority of families perceive childlessness and infertility as a woman's problem, inability and not in any way a man's fault and because of this the families are aggressive towards infertile women.

It is reported that majority of women with infertility receiving treatment were troubled because of the declarations and comments made by other women which involved their comparison with other women especially those that married after them and already had children and statements mentioned about them being childless (Ramezanzadeh & Aghssa, 2014, p.4). There is a difference noticeable developing and developed nations regarding infertility (Greil 2010). The ability and capacity to produce offspring's in underdeveloped countries is dependent on the

choices the couples make and their decision specifically by and among women or women. (Baor 2013). In developed societies, as an alternative woman choose and decide to be childless by choice and childless women are considered to have planned and desired to be childless intentionally (Greil 2010).

Therefore, the experiences of infertile women with their families, friends and in the communities associating womanhood to motherhood is different across cultures. Making unessential and inappropriate statements and communication ruins and alternates evolution of womanhood (Martinez 2016). It is extremely difficult to conceal infertility in communities where there is no knowledge about childlessness and notion about planned and deliberate childlessness. Complications concerning childlessness are more notable and outstanding particularly in under developed countries such as Ghana (Dyer, 2008).

### 2.4 Socio economic effects of childlessness on couples in customary marriages

Childlessness has socio economic and emotional effects. All human beings are expected to be treated with respect and dignity. The effects are problems faced by the childless both men and women but women are the most affected and below are some of them.

**Invisibility**. Having no children voluntarily or involuntarily, contributes to a kind of poverty and invisibility that is not being recognized. The childless are not considered and visible to anyone in terms of responsibilities and their ability. specifically, strong negative feelings were evoked among family members due to voluntary childlessness (Rasak& Oladipo , 2017). Childlessness is not only a medical condition but it is also a social-cultural construct. The weight of the crisis of involuntary childlessness cuts across socio-economic and religious boundaries. Although couples

might be clinically proven to be unable to have children, it remains a socio-cultural issue where parenthood is given a place of pride (Dube et al, 2018).

Marital instability. Another perception of childlessness is that marital instability. Childlessness as result of infertility in women could lead to marital instability (Deribe, et al, 2007). Some husbands lose interest in women and on the other hand plan to marry another woman to get a child. These practices of divorce, separation and remarriage expose childless women and men to Sexually Transmitted Infections and Human Immune Virus /Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome and also men tend not to support the women in most cases.

Childless couples and women are disturbed and troubled with difficult and uncomfortable relationships with their partners and constantly in distress and fright that their partners and husbands would choose other women over them if infertility issue continues. It appears to be that men are basically supported and allowed to make other choices, decisions and have alternatives.

Abandonment, replacement and divorce by husbands are more frequent outcomes of childless women. Mariano (2004, p.55) explanation of the status of married women in the family ''identifies the root cause of the problem. In her ethnographic study on marriage, she points to the stranger role of a newly-wed woman in her in-law house. This woman must prove her usefulness as a woman, in order to contribute to the prosperity of her in-law family. The main way to show this is to give birth to a baby. If she fails in this task, she remains a permanent stranger in the family, and continues to hold a low status. Through bearing a child a newly-wed woman gains acceptance and this is an experience that a childless woman never feels''. Than just the mere grand occasion that is witnessed on the day of marriage and problems arise when after a year or two and such marriages do not produce children because the perception of these wishes is that society expects much from every marriage especially children. This may lead to a

replacement for another wife that is deemed capable of procreating and causes danger for the couple especially the woman.

Unawareness and ignorance about childlessness. socio-cultural perception of Childlessness and Marital instability about childless individuals and community members, causes ignorance since the perception is determined by culture and there is no effort made about sensitizing the medical infertility causes and solutions (Amakwa, 2013). The Nigerian setting is clouded with severe stigmatization, abuse of childless women. Childlessness has socioeconomic and emotional effects; in many families the husband may decide not attend to the women financial or even regard her as anything. Other women call the childless woman different names, such as woman-man, just eating without fruitfulness, and many of such couples especially women are excluded from their women age group.

Financial stress. Socially, ''childlessness has also resulted in financial stress and sometimes ruin in societies which depend on their offspring to contribute economically and to support other members of the family or tribe'' (Matthews, 1986 p.46). In the 20th and 21st centuries, ''when control over conception became reliable in some countries, childlessness is having an enormous impact on national planning and financial planning'' (Gilbert, 2007 p.46).

### 2.5 Coping mechanisms for childless couples in customary marriages

Coping mechanisms refers to cognitive or behavioral efforts to manage stressful events that are perceived to exceed an individual's personal responses (Lazarus et al, 1984). Coping strategies could be adaptive or maladaptive. Adaptive coping strategies are active type which focuses in solving the stressors and maladaptive coping strategies are passive and emotion focused strategies. (Lechner, Belman, & Van Balen, 2007). Some of the copying mechanisms include;

**Adoption** is the act of legally placing a child with a parent or parents other than those to whom they were born (Gutenberg, 2009). Adoption can either be an open or a fully disclosed adoption. It allows identifying information to be communicated between adoptive and biological parents and perhaps, interaction between kin and the adopted person (Gutenberg, 2009). One of the main reasons for adoption a child from the unrelated family is the infertility (Omosun & Kofoworola, 2011). Adoption as coping strategies was found to provide significant positive influence on facilitating self-esteem, psychological health and resulting in lower stress among women with infertility and self-efficacy (Warren, 2011; Valsangkar, et al, 2011). Adoption gives opportunity to hopeful parents to raise a child they would not have otherwise. Adoption is guaranteed way to add a child to their family without the financial and emotional risk involved in Intra Vitro Fertilization by couples struggling with infertility but also have a stable family and help to develop a special relationship. After completion of the pre-adoptive fostering period as required by the law, an adoption is made legal. His is done by making of an adoption order in court, which is done in either the magistrates or high court. This finally means that you are the legal parent of the child and your case is closed.

Adoption has been practiced more in certain developed countries compared to under developed countries. This is because, in low income countries like Nigeria, most frequent adoption in practice is that of informal type which involves direct request from a member of a family to allow his/her son/daughter to stay with infertile individual. Women who adopted a child in developing countries, were only 1.2% but 27.2% wished to adopt a child (Nwobodo & Isah, 2011).

In Cameroon, out of 300 women, majority (62.1%) had heard about adoption through the media, 17% knew who to meet in order to adopt a child, 76.7% were in favor of adoption but 48.7% of

them said no to adoption. Only one percent of patient had adopted a child (Nguefack , 2014). It further, established that, 85% of women with secondary infertility rejected adoption. This may be probably more applicable to those who had at least one child (Charlotte, Clovis, Halle, & Eugene (2014). 2014). Similarly, in western Africa, majority of women with infertility (85.7%) had heard about child adoption and majority (59.3%) of them knew the correct meaning of the adoption. 68.3% of the respondents love an adopted child but only 33.7% were willing to do adoption (Omosun & Kofoworola, 2011). Craving for a biological child was the major reason given for their unwillingness to do adoption.

Many factors are involved in accepting adoption as a coping strategy. This include level of education, social beliefs, duration of infertility and socio-economic level among others (Adewunmi, 2012).

**Fostering:** The act of caring for a non-related child placed in the home of an individual who is licensed as a foster parent. For childless couples adopt to fostering children as a strategy to cope with their state of childlessness. Children who are not able to stay in their parents, birth homes and together with their real families (orphans and abandoned children). Fostering links them to new families that are secure and help the children develop in a safe environment and this gives an opportunity for the childless to foster children though they remain a part of their real families. Their families are acceptable and lawfully in charge of the foster children because the foster parents have lawful custody and over their foster children. These children live with their foster parents' are considered as part of the household.

Fostering is considered as cooperation linking foster parents, family of the foster child, service professionals and the authorities responsible who connect and join efforts to execute the best result and success for the foster child.

Fostering adaptation include different types in which there is; available, including short-term fostering, secondly long-term fostering, thirdly parent and child fostering and fifth, therapeutic fostering.

Resistance to fostering due to cultural beliefs about child rearing: In some settings, there is strong resistance to the idea of bringing a child from outside of immediate kinship networks into the family. In some African settings, for example, some ethnic groups believe that a child entering the family brings with them unknown ancestors and the spirits of ancestors, and this can affect willingness to foster (World Vision 2009). Similar norms leading to a resistance to foster care are also reported in the Middle East and some parts of Asia (Tolfree 1995).

Medical treatment. Another coping strategy is seeking for medical treatment. Medical solutions to involuntary childlessness have become even more powerful and appealing to the infertile in recent times. Harkness (1987, p.173-177), states that ''throughout history and across cultures, medical solutions to infertility have been diverse and varied such as relics, charms, incantations, eating special foods, vaginal treatments to enhance male sexual potency, and special potions and/or poultices. Whether primitive medical treatments or the more sophisticated assisted reproductive technologies of today, medical treatments for infertility have always been actively pursued and held particular power and influence for couples who are childless''.

Since there are a number of hospitals and Clinics in the country which specialize in the treatment of infertility and childlessness, conventional medicine has become a very important option for people living with infertility. Clinics which use technologies that are more modern have been set up in Uganda recently and so though expensive, some of the people living with infertility have resorted to these modern treatments.

The ultimate goal of infertility treatment is a healthy pregnancy and the birth of one healthy infant. There are various treatments for infertility, depending what the problem is. Identifying the cause of the infertility is important as it may affect the choice of treatment. If the cause is known, the treatment can be tailored to the problem. A fertility treatment plan, involving both the man and woman, may include changes in nutrition, lifestyle, and environmental factors. There are other modern treatment methods such as In-vitro fertilization, Artificial Insemination (AI), Gamete Intra-Fallopian Transfer (Harkness 1987).

Other coping strategies adopted by women in a study conducted on Israeli women, it was established that, ''women with infertility adopt eight different coping strategies in an attempt to cope with infertility and infertility related problems. The strategies include investing in oneself, compensation'' (Benyamini et al., 2008 p.221-241).In Acholi, limited studies have been done showing how the childless couples manage and cope with being childless hence this study aims to bring out clearly the perceptions, experiences of childlessness among women, and copying strategies used by Acholi women.

### 2.5.4 Conclusion

The literature was reviewed in relation to what other others studied about childlessness in African marriages. These studies established the social cultural perspectives, experiences, and coping strategies to deal with childlessness. However, the studies do not bring out a clear situation of what the childless women go through in Acholi, the voice of men, what men say and what happens when they are the ones impotent hence . Therefore, this study intends to clear the situation as it is in Acholi Lamwo District.

# CHAPTER THREE

# METHODOLOGY

## 3.1 Introduction

This chapter provides the methodology upon which the study was carried out. In the first section, it provides the research design which describes in details the nature of the study and the motivations behind the choice of the design; Following, is the targeted study area, study population, sample size and sampling procedures, data collection methods an instrument, data analysis and ethical considerations

## 3.2 Research Design

This research used a qualitative research approach. Qualitative research refers to inductive, holistic, subjective and process-oriented methods used to understand, interpret, describe and develop theory on a phenomenon or a setting and is a systematic, subjective approach used to describe life experiences and give them meaning (Morse & Field,1996, p.199). Through this, a phenomenological study design was used to explore experiences of childlessness among women. This design was used because it allowed engagement in flexible activities that can describe and understand complex phenomenon and focus on essence of human experiences and understanding the meaning people attribute to the experiences hence to gain insight into actions and motivations. This design was also chosen because it was appropriate in producing data required for qualitative analysis, allowing simultaneous description of views, opinions, perceptions, experiences and beliefs at a single point in time. It also allowed collection of views at a single point in time as it involved observation of all the population or a representative subset, at a

defined time (Gay, 1996). It also broadens knowledge about childlessness helped understand the situation.

### 3.3 Study Population

The study targeted childless women, clan leaders, traditional healers, traditional religious leaders, and people with children and professional doctors. This included childless women who have lived childless in a period of last five years in customary marriage from 2016-2022 because they alone know what they are experiencing and how they feel. Clan leaders because they decide, organize, arrange and initiate marriage and are well versed with what culture demands. Traditional healers because in most cases that is where they run for intervention and have untold stories. Traditional religious leaders because they are directly involved in ordaining the marriage and prepare the couples for marriage through carrying out spiritual practices, preserving customs and traditions and professional doctors because the childless women seek for medical assistance from them, make consultations and are informed, guided and counseled accordingly. The doctor's involvement in this study is important because they directly engage with these childless women, are well informed about their experience, and treat them. These people were in position to provide relevant and detailed information since many of them have had, experienced, and seen a lot regarding culture, tradition, childlessness and marriage.

#### 3.3.1 Population size

The sample size was 35, which comprised of 6 childless women, 3 clan leaders, 3 traditional religious' leaders, 3 traditional healers and 4 professional medical doctors. The primary respondents were childless women and key informants included the clan leaders, traditional healers and professional medical doctors. Focus Group Discussions comprised two groups one

for males and one for females and each Focus Group Discussion had 8 participants who all had children.

**Table 1 : Sample size**

| Category of respondents | Sample Size | Sampling technique | Methods |
|---|---|---|---|
| Childless women | 6 | Purposive | In-depth Interviews |
| Traditional Religious leaders | 3 | Purposive | Key Informant interview |
| Clan leaders | 3 | Purposive | Key Informant Interview |
| Traditional Healers | 3 | Purposive | Key Informant interview |
| Professional Doctors | 4 | Purposive | Key Informant Interview |
| Mothers and fathers | 2 FDG's (1for men with 8 members and 1 for women with 8 embers) | Purposive | Focus Group Discussion |
| Total | 35 | | |

**Table 2: Number of people drawn from each sub county**

| Category of people | Palabek Gem | Palabek Kal | Palabek Ogili | Total number | Reason for selection |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Childless women | 2 | 2 | 2 | 6 | Chosen for their direct experience of childlessness. |
| Traditional religious | 1 | 1 | 1 | 3 | Selected because of their |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| leaders | | | | | expertise, unique position and their prominence in the villages |
| Clan leaders | 1 | 1 | 1 | 3 | Selected because of their authority and unique position and were willing to participate well versed with the topic and available. |
| Traditional Healers | 1 | 1 | 1 | 3 | Most prominent and Selected because of their expertise and unique position, and because of their experience with childless women. |
| Professional Doctors | 1 | 2 | 1 | 4 | Selected because of their expertize, direct engagement with childless women, their expertise and unique position they hold, ell informed and for their willingness to participate in the study. |
| Mothers | 2 | 3 | 3 | 8 | Selected because they engage with childless women, have witnessed their way of life |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | and some are family members, were willing and available to participate in the study and had children. |
| Fathers | 3 | 3 | 2 | 8 | Selected because they engage with childless women, have witnessed their way of life and some are family members, were willing and available to participate in the study and had children. |

### 3.4 Sampling Procedure.

A purposive method was used to select the childless women, clan leaders and traditional doctors. This method was used for these groups because they have experienced and had the required information and examples about the subject to be investigated and can provide information about the phenomenon under investigation. For childless women purposive method was used and, for clan leader's, traditional religious leaders, traditional doctor's and for professional doctors' purposive method was also used. Focus Group Discussion was held with mothers and fathers and both groups had separate discussions. This was guided and managed by a moderator and later recruited and scheduled the participants for the discussion.

### 3.5 Data collection methods and instruments

Data collection method is a process of collecting data aiming to gain insights regarding the topic while an instrument is a tool used to collect and analyze data according to the research interests (Taherdoost 2021).

#### 3.5.1 Observation method

The method was used to collect data from the childless women as the researcher interacted with them accordingly and involved studying the attitude, response and reaction of the participants persistently (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This was done in the village sub counties where participants stay, through creating rapport with participants, recording data and making observations of participants through watching them and noting their character, environment where they stay and attitude. Some participants were observed crying (shading tears), sad, lonely and worried.

An observation guide was used to collect primary data from the respondents. It involved interacting and gaining a rich picture of participants in their natural environment. This data collection method allowed the researcher to better understand the social behavior, ideas and attitudes of childless women and the community.

#### 3.5.2 In-depth Interviews

In-depth interview (IDI) is a qualitative data collection method that provides opportunity to capture and get rich, descriptive data about how people behave and think. It is an open-ended discovery-oriented method to obtain detailed information about a topic from a participant. The goal of an in-depth interview is to explore in-depth a participant's point of view, experiences, feelings and perspectives. Kvale (1996) regards the interview as one of many modes of human

interaction and described as a professional conversation (Kvale 2006). This was done through conducting a number one on one interviews and having face-to-face engagement with participants. In-depth interview method is important because it can uncover valuable insights, and enables the researcher to find out detailed and real stories and it is effective for providing reliable, and comparing data with different participants and this helped in exploring participants thoughts, feelings and beliefs about the topic and collecting open ended data. Hence increased mutual understanding and co-operation between the interviewer and the interviewee and helped collect new and fresh primary information, as it was needed.

An interview guide as an instrument was used to collect data from, childless women and was chosen because it allows great flexibility in the questioning process and probing for additional information through supplementary question, which was possible.

### 3.5.3 Key Informant Interviews

This was done with people well versed with the community and the study, childlessness. This was purposely done to collect information from a wide range of people including clan leaders, traditional religious leaders, professional doctors, traditional healers in the community who had informed perspectives and views about childlessness. The researcher held interviews with these people one by one introduced herself and interacted with them through asking various questions while recoding each one of them about the topic.

Key Informant Interview (KII) guide was used to introduce the researcher to the participants and shared the goal of the study who was involved and why, explained the purpose of the study that explored the perspectives of the community about childlessness, experiences of childlessness among women, and coping mechanisms of childlessness and then engaged the participant in the

interview. This enabled a good flow and cooperation during the interview and gave confidence to the participants involved.

The difference between in-depth and key informant interviews is that in-depth interviews explore personal experiences, behaviors, attitudes and opinions and key informants are experts and so the key informant interview gathers expert knowledge, experiences and insights and is used to secure a participant or respondent with unique knowledge of the topic of study. There are words identified from these interviews include "Labil ka", "Laluu", "Odwok gang", "chan"," Labili" and themes included security, clan foundation, joy and happiness ,hostility, exploitation, prayer and many more.

### 3.5.4 Focus Group Discussion

A focus group discussion is a group interview involving a small number of demographically similar participants. This method works in a way that it brings a small group of people together to answer questions in a moderated way. The study had two focus group discussions one for males and two for females and both groups were mothers and fathers who had children in their marriages. Each group consisted of eight people with a moderator, a note taker, participants and observers and this was because either group had their own attitude and understanding about childlessness and had different views, and represented the community. A group of males and females were met separately and, in each group, questions about perspectives, experience of childlessness among women, and coping mechanisms would be asked in reference to childlessness. The views of participants were recorded.

The focus group took 45 minutes to 1 hour in length per group. The researcher identified the participants whose number was eight, the researcher was the moderator who led the discussion, and carried out the Focus Group Discussion. All the participants involved had married before,

had knowledge about topic of discussion, had children, and were members of the community and potential participants. Participants were willing to participate, had information about the topic and were appropriate to answer the topic questions. The participants converged at the trading Centre Palabek Kal under ''Techwa'' for the male and for the females at Pentecostal Assembly of God church in Palabek. There was no facilitation made because the trading center was well known and ''Techwa'' was easy to identify and for the females the church was a conducive, accessible and comfortable place for them to discuss from.

### 3.6 Reliability

Reliability concerns the consistency with which an instrument measures whatever it measures. The method was used in pretesting the instruments in Lukung village, Lukung subcounty. After the researcher made comparison between the preliminary data and those from previous studies using the results from the pretest so as to measure accuracy; establishing that the instrument possessed this quality or reliability, and the evidence in that respect reported ensured that the tool is reliable and was constructed in line with set objectives.

### 3.7 Data analysis

#### 3.7.1 Qualitative Data analysis and presentation

In this study, qualitative data was analyzed using narrative analysis method that involved determining words, interpreting research respondent's interviews and stories, themes within the content. This technique emphasizes studying the messages contained in the communications of the individual participants (Cortazzi, 2014) and categorizing them as per the themes. This method was also used because it uncovers the hidden ideologies embedded in stories.

The researcher listened to the audio recording while noting down and made a summary of what was said in the texts during the interviews and discussion and made notes, relating participants' stories to discover differences and repeated similarities, Data was manually analyzed by the researcher listening, noting down and reading through and interpreting the interviews. This aimed at offering a summary statement for each element that is discussed in the interviews. Audio compilation was translated and converted from audio recording to written text format and interpreted from Acholi to English. Textual presentation was used to provide narrative framework for the data, offering explanations, insights and the broader implications of the findings.

### 3.8 Ethical Considerations

The researcher collected an introductory letter from the Department of Religious Studies and Philosophy office. This was used to introduce the researcher to the district and sub county clearly stating the study. The study was allowed to be conducted in the specific areas and the researcher introduced to the informants for easy identification and helped the participants to believe that the study the researcher is conducting was relevant and authorized.

This study involved voluntary participation of the participants through explaining what the study was about and its aims and intentions. In this study, the views of participants were confidential and the use of initials were utilized to indicate names and emphasize confidentiality and indicate different participant's names and meanings. The researcher considered all research directives, as well as seeking permission from the required offices and officers. This helped to avoid unnecessary pain, tension, fear and harm among participants, and enabled the researcher to build trust among the participants and administrators in the field. Findings are presented in the next chapter that is Chapter four.

# CHAPTER FOUR

# PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSIONS

## 4.0 Introduction.

This chapter provides findings from the study and the study explored the views of professional doctors' views, traditional healers, clan leaders, traditional religious leaders and the views of people with children about childlessness. This study further took interest in perspectives about childlessness, experience of childlessness among women and coping mechanisms used by Acholi women. The primary participants in the current study were childless women customarily married and been in marriage for the last five (5) years and more. The method used to get data from them was in-depth interview. It further provides discussion of findings as well. Below is a table showing biography of primary participants.

**Table 3: Primary participant's biography information**

| NO | AGE | EDUCATION | OCCUPATION | RELIGION | YEARS IN CM |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 38 | Primary | House Wife | Born again Christian | 7years |
| 2 | 40 | Never been to school | Hawker | Catholic | 10years |
| 3 | 39 | Primary | House wife | Born again Christian | 8years |
| 4 | 36 | College Diploma | Nurse | Catholic | 6years |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 5 | 39 | Secondary | Teacher | Moslem | 9years |
| 6 | 41 | Primary | Housewife | Catholic | 10years |

### 4.1 Cultural perceptions of the Acholi people on childlessness

A perception is the way in which something is regarded, understood and interpreted. The themes obtained were summarized into major categories of; Parenting, womanhood, foundation of the clan, supernatural factor, security and source of happiness and gender bias.

#### 4.1.1Parenting

Participants perceived parenting as having and raising a child or children and providing and taking care of them as they grow. Throughout the interviews, parenting was accorded high value and 12 of the key informants noted that having children is a fulfillment of life and an achievement of an adult. Parenting is valued and children are celebrated. The clan leaders during the interviews confirmed that childlessness neither is accepted in Acholi tradition in the communities and societies nor is a childless woman welcomed in a home and allowed to stay for long without any signs and bearing her own children. Meaning when a woman is married, she is expected to conceive and give birth in her first year of marriage. This is why, when a woman or a man had fertility problems and the problem was known while still young or an adult, ''Abila'' (a ritual normally carried out to enable procreation and put things right) was done when they realized the root cause of the calamity by the time when the victim was young. This was done by the childless woman or victim referred to as ''Laluu'' (Acholi language) meaning childless and barren woman sharing a bed with her biological mother as though she was a baby completely naked for 4 days and later it's believed that she would be able to conceive and produce children

of her own after this act is done. The childless women in the current study acknowledged that they have never been accorded any parental right and duty in their homes as wives because of being childless and not having any child of their own nor try to mother or be a parent to any child in the family they are in. A 36-year-old childless woman married for 6 years stated that, "I have not achieved my dream as an adult, I cannot mother anyone of my own, not even in the community, ''bedo laluu olana matwal, bedo pe ki nywal omiya chan madit''meaning being childless has ruined and brought me great poverty that I can't be a parent to anybody". (NA, Palabek Ogili).

Another childless woman aged 38 who has been in marriage for 7 years said that, "Nyolo obedo gin awaka dok tic pa mego ki wego", meaning parenting is something that is of pride and responsibility of both a mother and father, she adds on saying that: it is not easy but it's a calling that needs family, love, commitment and passion" (LJ Palabek Kal).

Furthermore, other women during the discussion also reported that in parenting a woman has more roles to play and children spend more time with mothers and are so close to them. This is so true because mothers are always available to the children and in most cases the fathers are passive, absents and do not have time as much as the women do for the children. A 40-year-old woman during the focus group discussion stated that;

> ''Mego tye dok mego, wego bedo pe ento mego bedo tye kare weng, mego genyo ga weng ikom lutino dok tiyo matek ni lutino dongo maber dok bedo kom dano ma opore, dok tic che dit idong pa lutino'' literally meaning that a mother is mother all the time even in the absence of a father, she works hard that children grow up to be responsible

and mature people. A mother has a big job to do in the development of children (AF, Palabek Kal).

This is similar to research that points out that children living with parents especially mothers have positive experiences when facing tougher stay (Cabrera et al 2011, pp.82) and the formation of a child's character is greatly influenced by the right bond between a mother and child (Kalmijin et al.,2019, pp.339).

### 4.1.2 Womanhood

Womanhood is generally perceived as a stage of adulthood with ability of bearing children and succeeding in life. Childless women perceive womanhood as producing children of their own, a dream come true and an achievement for them. Having children of your own showed real womanhood and considered the peak and major aim of customary marriage. Customary marriage is important and liked by the Acholi people because with it, dowry is paid and a woman is officially given and handed over to the husband and advised and encouraged to start their own family and have children in their marriage. Childless women reported that womanhood is best understood and confirmed through having biological children in marriage and being called a mother. ''Ibedo mego dokdako mader ka inywal'', literally meaning that a woman becomes a mother and a real woman if she produces children and she is always referred to as ''*mego lonyo*'' (Luo language) simply meaning that a mother is wealth. A childless woman aged 41with 20 years in marriage stated that, "I have tried all I can but I have not achieved any dream I have as a woman, ''bedo dako mader oloya woko, apee ki china mo keken woko, kwon a tek'' meaning,I have failed to be a real woman, I have no placenta of mine out, my life is hard" (AB, Palabek Gem).

Men in focus group discussion pointed out that is crucial for a woman to have their own offspring and it is considered an extremely crucial stage that brings one fame and respect and qualifies one into real womanhood and as well calls for celebration. A man is never considered childless and can never be. Without a child, a woman is considered incomplete and regarded not a real woman. This is well illustrated by men in a focus group discussion who said that;

> A real woman gives birth to children and can be called someone's wife with pride, without children a woman is not a real woman. "Remo ni pek loyo pii dok ma megi bedo megi matwal'' meaning your own blood is thicker than water! What is yours, you own forever (OS, Palabek kal).

A woman is an adult who is female and woman can be considered a mother by the fact that they have given birth. A person enters motherhood when they become a mother. This most commonly happens when a child is born and motherhood is a state of being a mother who is a female parent of a child and Womanhood as a state of being a woman. Womanhood is associated with the qualities of a woman Womanhood is therefore associated with bearing children because an adult woman is expected and obligated to bear children and become a mother. Womanhood initiates motherhood. Among the Acholi, one becomes a woman especially when she has her first period and its believed that one is grown, an adult and recognized more especially after giving birth and considered a real woman regarded as "kom dako" in Acholi language, when a woman fails to give birth, she is not considered a real woman and remains just a woman "dako". When a woman loses all her children she gave birth to, she remains a woman regarded as and she is respected.

### 4.1.3 Foundation of the clan

According to Acholi society, a clan is a group of people with the same ancestral lineage. A clan is an origin of belonging and gives a sense and right of belonging to an individual and fosters a strong bond for its members and provides protection to its member. A person becomes a clan member at birth from the father's side and named according to clan. Among the Acholi Childless women reported that children make up a home and represent a clan to which they belong and a home without children is nothing and no one likes to come to that home. Children build on and make a clan. Clan leaders described that childlessness adds no value rather brings an end to the clan because it does not ensure continuity of the clan because one is not able to produce children who are the future and are the clan. Children build up a clan and make a family and society. This is well illustrated by one of the childless women aged 39 who said;

> ''Lutino obedo gin ker per kaka doc labong gin kaka pidongo, bedo tye gi weko bedoyot, kwo mit dok konye tye'' meaning children are the successors and future of the clan and without children the clan cannot grow, the presence of children makes life easy, good and meaningful (AJ, Palabek Ogili).

Another childless woman aged 41-year-old childless woman from Palabek Gem who has been in marriage for 10 years said that "I have failed my clan! I am a failure, I cannot fulfill my obligation as a woman, I am hopeless, there is no joy I bring to my people, "atye dok tibu dok ayima pee, lutino bene pee" meaning "I am a shadow and my I do not have a future, not even children" (AB Palabek Gem)

Furthermore, a clan leader from Palabek Kal aged 50 years who has 25 years in marriage said;

> whenever I see grand children around and children growing here they make me happy and I know one was just like me and do what I do. As a clan leader we support families with no children by advising and marrying for the man another wife regarded as the second wife so that they produce children and the clan grows and everyone is happy (OV, Palabek Kal village).

According to this study, the childless women felt guilty for not being able to bear children and add on the number of clan members and participate in bringing up clan members and grooming them. They feel they have let the clan down because at the back of their mind they know that bearing children is their obligation and yet they have not been successful in bearing children that they bring or give as their contribution to the clan as expected of them to expand it and ensure clan continuity. They also experience pressure from the clan as they remind and demand them to fulfill their obligation as women married in their clan.

### 4.1.4 Supernatural factor

Supernatural factors refer to phenomena that are beyond the laws of nature. Something supernatural is unable to be explained by science or laws of nature related and seeming to come from magic, God, gods and other powers. This is related to Childless women reported how their state is beyond their understanding and other humans and that they feel it is God's plan and see their state as being punished by God and only him knows why they are the way they are and unable to have children of their own. Traditional healers reported that childlessness is considered as a divine factor. It is believed that infertility could be as a result of divine punishment that is supernatural but mostly attached to evil spirits, witchcraft and being Gods will. The childless women learnt to accept their state and believe that they cannot do anything to help themselves

anymore and believed that only God who knew their problem and can help them out. This is well illustrated by a childless woman aged 41 who said that,''Obedo miri pa lacwec owego atye kuman paromo tito ne, en kene aye genyo''literally meaning, its Gods wish that she is like that and cannot explain but only God knows (AB, Palabek Gem).

### 4.1.5 Security and source of happiness

All the interviewed childless women reported and expressed their agreement that children bring joy, happiness, honor and provide security. Their parents are blessed to have them and always proud because they have children. They reported that they have witnessed how families with children bond, relate and get back together in case of misunderstandings because the children lure and bring their parents together and work as a family with love. The children help their parents in all kinds of work and represent them in the village activities, occasions and very many other things and defend and protect their parents. Childless women also reported that children are pride to the parents and in the clan in which they belong. When the children grow up, they perform different tasks and make accomplishments which makes one proud and so there is no way a childless woman can be welcomed and accepted to stay when she is not able to produce.

A 36-year-old childless woman married for 6 years stated saying:

> My brother has 3 children and they only honor him as won Okello and they help him with his hens and goats every day, I have seen Min okello playing with the children, singing and dancing and she always laughs and has nothing bothering her, they wash for her and also cook, the joy and happiness they bring and give her s priceless, "bedo laluu tye dok acena bota pien panoo kit kuc eni" meaning being childless is a curse for me because have never been had this kind of joy (NA, Palabek Ogili).

Another childless woman aged 41 in marriage for 10 years said:

> "Lubanga Kene aye miyo yom cwiny palutino ikwo wa, yom cwing me kwero latin tye dok awaka igang matye kede lutino ,ka lutino pee bot in obedo alany dok awanu", meaning its only God who brings happiness of having children in our lives, the happiness of celebrating children in a home is pride, having no children is an embarrassment and it hurts( AB, Palabek Gem).

It is regarded to as shame to the home she is married and the clan. This is also well illustrated by a 41-year-old mother with 20 years in marriage during the female focus group discussion, who stated that;

> I regard children to as security in a home and where children are, the home is accorded maximum respect. The children protect their parents especially us women from harm resulting from different issues especially family, clan, community or other places, protect their properties and carry on their legacy (AB, Palabek Gem).

During the female focus group discussion, the women said that children supported them and protected them from troubles. They especially depended on the male children for protection and mentioned few female children that are confident, fearless and strong. These women 6 of 8 assured their safety with having children around in the discussion. A 38-year-old mother from Palabek Gem who has been in marriage for 15 years stated;

> My son always fights for and defends me from my in-laws and their aunties who have always tried to take away all that their father worked for forcefully and when they try to chase me away from my house. ''Aworo ma wiya lamal lutino cung piira dok ngat ma

nywara peko'', He has failed all their plans and he still ensures we are safe for us all as a family (LJ, Palabek kal B village).

The childless women interviewed felt sad because they are not able to have the joy of motherhood and unsecure because they have no child that can represent them in future. These feelings were associated to as a result of being childless. Accordingly, it is also possible to find sad women in marriage yet they have children due to issues like misunderstanding with their partner, children disobedience and other factors like sickness and lack of basic needs and other responsibilities but they do have the joy and happiness that God blessed them with children. The childless women's declaration that children bring joy this is in line with parental and family joy because the family is expanding and in most cases, the children engage their parents in various games that create memories and happiness. The parents are honored and respected as adults and responsible persons with children and for the fact that they have met their obligation of bearing and raising children.

### 4.1.6 Gender bias

Childless women discussed that they suffered from the effects because they are often blamed and called barren without examination, proof and the man is never hinted on. Women reported that they were and are given responsibility to birth children. They are anticipated to produce children as soon as they are joined in marriage and considered as a burden with time. These childless women in their families are blamed for not producing children and judged entirely for not bearing any children in the family and its considered bad luck and considered calamity to the family. Even when it is the man with the problem and inability, it is always ignored abd silenced

and the woman suffers the consequences. A childless woman from Palabek Ogili aged 36, married for 6 years stated that;

> All the blame is put on me because we have lived for all these years without any child, they hate me for not being able to have a child for all these years and always say ''itye tee madit igang kany dok peko ma pi yupee'' meaning; I am a big burden and a problem that cannot be corrected (NA, Palabek Ogili).

In addition, men in the focus group discussion in Palabek Kal disclosed how it is the woman's responsibility to birth children alive and an abomination when she fails to have children always considered failures of adulthood and no man is ever blamed for having failed to have children.

### 4.2 Experiences of childless women in customary marriages of Acholi community

An experience is practical contact with and observation of facts or events. Experiences generated included stigmatization, trauma, financial instability, intense pressure to have children, aggression and harassment, exploitation, lack of support and security, ridicule, isolation, status loss, marital instability, divorce, extra marital affairs, restrictions, spiritual crisis, and witchcraft.

#### 4.2.1 Stigmatization

This is when one is treated unfairly, regarded as worthy of disgrace or great disapproval. Childless women described how they are verbally assaulted and violence is inflicted on them by their families especially from the in laws. There is always something to say about the childless woman in that home which results into stigma, disgrace, and they are dishonored, accused, and frustrated because of their inability to have children, conceive and they are always judged because of what they are and called ''Laluu'' regarding to a barren woman.

Childless women also reported how they feel forsaken and hopeless for their desire to bear children of their own and experience motherhood. Women without children were judged as incomplete or lacking fulfillment in life. This stigma results from the way they are called, ignored in certain occasions and not recognized in the society because they have no children of their own and no one respects them. In an interview with a 41-year-old childless woman from Palabek Gem who has been in marriage for 10 years said;

> I am hopeless, no one helps me and have no fruit to leave tomorrow. I have no voice neither can anyone stand for me and defend me; I have been abandoned, I am pointed at wherever I go, talked about, am not free, I keep my head low and I cannot even talk among people (AB, Palabek Gem).

Similarly, another childless woman aged 38 and married for 7 years reported how she is embarrassed stating that:

> "kwo na tek dok mit te pe pi latin ma pee pi mwaka eni weng, ki rwema woka igang ka kwe tye dok gen mo pe ikom an" meaning: my life is hard and not enjoyable at any moment because I have not had any child for all these years, I am chased away from any family celebrations and not considered in anything and not trusted at all nor entrusted.

Furthermore, childless women tend to be disrespected regardless in the villages and communities that they come from. Childless women 4 of 5 reported that they are insulted by the community members and by both young and adults. This is confirmed by a childless woman,39-year-old childless woman from Palabek Ogili who has been in marriage for 9 years who said that, "I am insulted every day; I do not have joy and am always sad. All the time they say I eat food to fill the toilet ''Gi lwonga ni an lapong choron konya peke dok an laluu matwal'', I am not

important am just wasting food and other resources and call me sort of names I don't have what to do" (AJ, Palabek Ogili,).

Similarly, another 41-year-old childless woman in marriage for 10 years stated saying: that "everyone in the village knows me because of being childless, I am called "Lajok" meaning a witch yet totally I am not. No one wants to be nor associate with me. They talk about me and say I am a great disappointment to my family and have an evil eye and a disgrace" (AB,Palabek Gem).

This clearly tells how inhuman the childless women are treated I the societies and communities they come from and yet they cannot explain and speak out for themselves. The stigma experienced by the childless women is beyond imagination because every day seems to be a new chapter of disgrace, disrespect, insults, frustration and violence

### 4.2.2 Trauma

This can be defined as a deeply distressing or disturbing experience. Childless women described how they are traumatized and their mental health affected and 4 of 6 suffer from manipulation, humiliation and intimidation which affects their thinking, and confuses them because of the situation they are in. They are blamed and feel ashamed, guilty, and are often threatened in the community and not at peace because they have no children. A 36-year-old childless woman in marriage for 6 years stated that, "even the children around despise me and are told not to be near me by their parents, ''Bedo dako tek dok lit labong latin'', being a woman without any child is uneasy and hard" (NA, Palabek Ogili,).

Similarly, a childless woman aged 41 with 10 years in marriage said:

> I am unsecure because I have no child at all, I am intimidated that if I do not give birth any soon, I am going to be beaten and chased away by my husband. The humiliation I go through from my family and the community is so painful and I am insecure but no one can help me (AB, Palabek Gem).

Furthermore, majority of childless women reported their experience of being rejected and disappointed by their husbands and their family and this inflicted pain, anxiety and depression. Rejection comes in when nothing yields from marriage especially from the woman that is producing children. Some have been abandoned and suffered from a lot of pain, anxiety and depression.

This is well illustrated in an interview with one of the childless women aged 38 from Palabek Kal married for 7 years who said; I spent 1year and 2 months with my husband in our marriage and he rejected me because I had never tried to conceive. My mother-in-law was so demanding for a grandchild from me. Finally, there is no more desire and interest in me, my husband chased me like a dog without a home (LJ, Palabek Kal A).

Another childless woman aged 36 married for 6 years also said; "my own family rejected because I cannot have children and my husband's family was complaining and I had nowhere to go other than sticking to my husband who also abandoned me in the house" (NA, Palabek Ogili).

In relation to the above, childless women reported being oppressed and tormented by their families and community. They have pain of being rejected, have lost hope, and feel God has forsaken, abandoned, and is punishing them. Majority of childless women confirmed how they

felt terrible for being rejected and failure to bear children of their own and this make them feel worthless and small.

### 4.2.3 Financial instability

Men in this study reported that they felt cheated offering support to the women yet they don't gain from anything and they are not appreciated. The men considered their support going in vain. One of the men aged 42, with 10 years in marriage during focus group discussion stated that. "t is of no importance to spend money where there is no fruit, ''Konye pe, bedo calo bolo ofuk I pii, konye pe mader'' meaning it is of no importance, it is just like throwing a tortoise back into the water" (OO, Palabek Gem).

Another man aged 37 with 8 years in marriage during focus group discussion said;

> "miyo kony me nono neki nono, gin ma konyo pe pi ibalo iyee lim?,bedo calo jolo chan ma I genyo. Dako ma pi nywal lim mo pe ma ikero ikomo" literally meaning that giving support for nothing kills you for no reason, will you waste money on something without value? it's like welcoming poverty when aware. A woman who cannot produce. no money nor support should be given to her. (OC, Palabek Kal).

Furthermore, childless women reported that they have no support from their families with basic needs and financial support was withdrawn. They also failed to afford treatment and other investigations recommended by the doctors, food, housing, clothes and very many other things that they survive on their own and no one supports them.

A childless woman from Palabek Gem aged 40 with 10 years in marriage said;

> I couldn't manage and afford the medicine recommended to me by the doctor. I sat home for months and decided to go visit the doctor I was recommended to see but I failed because I couldn't pay for consultation fee not even a scan for myself''. ''Wa dek acama pa acamo ngo ma cwinya mira wa bongo'', I cannot even buy myself food I desire to eat and buy new clothes (LN, Palabek Gem).

Similarly, another childless woman aged 36 years with6 years in marriage stated;

> My husband told me it not his responsibility to support me because I am childless, he said: "Pi tic cha mi piri nono, kony pe dok abalo gin mo keken ikomi kuu" meaning it's not my duty to feed you for nothing, you are not useful and I won't waste anything of mine on you. My husband never supports me (NA, Palabek Ogili).

### 4.2.4 Intense pressure to have children.

Women discussed that there is too much expected from them immediately when married and as a woman and wife especially by the man's family and society. The pressure worsens and the demand becomes too much after first year of marriage without a child. Childless women are criticized because that is not their expectation and parenthood is highly valued that every woman has to bear children in their marriage. The whole community always has to consult and want to know what is happening and what could be wrong with them. Majority of the childless women, 4 of 6 reported that their mother in laws always demanded to have grand children from them.

A childless woman from Palabek Kal aged 38 confirmed this when she said that;

> I am always asked especially by in laws who always say to me that ''in mono ibedo mego awene? ngo mono ma ikuuru? Amiro Latin mwaka eni. Lim na cero nonoo koo.'' Meaning when will you be a mother, what are you waiting for? I need a grandchild this year; my money I paid will not go for nothing (LJ, Palabek Kal).

Similarly, another child woman aged 39 with 9 years in marriage also confirmed this stating that, "my husband demands for a child every time he gets to me and always says today is the day and warns me every and he reminds me he needs a child and my sister in law as well questions me when I will have a child whenever she meets me" (AJ, Palabek Ogili).

### 4.2.5 Aggression and harassment.

According to the findings, aggression and intimidation was referred to as being attacked and violence and frightened. Concurrently, majority of the childless women that is 5 of 6 reported that they are violated, intimidated and threatened in their marriages and homes because they have no children. They reported that they are abused by their husbands and in laws, insulted, discriminated, and restricted from interacting with other people in the community. A childless woman from Palabek Ogili aged 36 with 6 years in marriage said;

> My husband forces, beats me and I am abused whenever he wants pleasure and I painfully have to bear the pain and harassment because no one can help me and the society will laugh at me. He threatens to harm me more if I refuse or tell anyone. I am helpless (NA, Palabek Ogili).

Furthermore, a childless woman aged 38 with 7 years in marriage revealed saying that "my mother in law always insult me that I can't have a child and claims am wasting her sons time and filling his house, my sister in law picks up fights whenever she is around and this makes my life miserable and hard (LJ, Palabek Kal).

Similarly, during the female focus group discussion that involved mothers, a 37-year-old mother concurred with childless women facing aggression and harassment stating that;

> "chan ma laluu wok iyee pi tite, chayo dok ki wunu lulu kit mo keken pien dawn mo pi gi peke" meaning the aggression the childless go through is unexplainable, they are undermined and harassed anyhow because they have no voice and no one speaks out for them. She added on that in all families with childless women, the childless women suffer silently and never get justice (AS, Palabek Ogili).

### 4.2.6 Exploitation

These women described how they are exploited in the fields, overworked as others family members look on because they have not been able to have children and this is so sad because they never benefit from any efforts they make yet they do work a lot. A 38-year-old childless woman from Palabek Kal in marriage for 7 years said;

> I work hard in order to stay in this home and please everyone especially from the man's side so as to be favored to stay. Despite all the insults and every form of torture, am assigned all duties and my mother in law doesn't want to see me sitting down. I go to the garden, cook food and my efforts are not appreciated because I have nowhere to go because I was married, I am a maid in this home not a wife anymore (LJ, Palabek Kal ).

Similarly, another childless woman and participant aged 41 with 10 years in marriage said that, "I am given the biggest portion of land and garden to dig within limited time and after expected to prepare meals for everyone at home and plan for them without resting. I don't have time to rest and no one sees the pain and appreciates the work I do than just adding all duties on me" (AB, Palabek Gem).

In addition, according to the study, the childless are exploited due to the fact they don't have anyone to help them, manage any assets they have and may have had especially those aged and offer them security and the clan member easily transfer and misuse their assets. They are helpless, over worked without pay and don't have anything of their own and are never supported.

### 4.2.7 Lack of support and security.

Childless women narrated how difficult is it for them to live because they do not have anyone to help them and support them economically. There is no support to help them get and seek for medical assistance not in traditional treatment which is at least at low cost and do not have any security because they do not have children of their own and no one protects them nor supports them.

A Childless woman aged 40, been in marriage for 10 years said;

> I am getting old and I have no one to support me and care for me when I am old, I do not have anyone I can count on, not one from family because none supports me in anyway and I do not have security at all, none of what I had exists, all of it was taken away because I have no child, I have wandered a lot and am helpless (LN,Palabek Gem).

Furthermore, a childless woman aged 41 with 10 years in marriage revealed stating that, "I lost all that I had to my relatives who have children and I am left with nothing. I try to demand for my land but no one hears me out, my relatives claim I have no child and so I don't need to have any assets. I have no one to help me get my properties back and no one to fight for me" (AB, Palabek Ogili).

### 4.2.8 Ridicule

Childless women described how they are insulted and verbally abused by their families and by the community at large. There are words uttered against the childless women and reported that this makes them feel so small and useless because the insults create deep wounds in their hearts and never heal because the abuse and insults are endless that they can commit suicide.

A 38-year-old childless woman who has been in marriage for 7 years said that;

> I am restless and tired of this kind of life, my heart pains always because of the words used to insult me and abuse me and how they describe me is so sad and not nice for someone like me, "konya a kwo odoko pee, kwo tek dok mitte pee, ate calo lee" meaning life has become meaningless and not worth living am like an animal not a human being (LJ, Palabek Kal).

Similarly, anther childless woman aged 41 with 10 years of marriage also stated that:

> "Leb ma gi wajo ikom an, obedo mateku ka cwiny pi tek iromo to. Akany yet madwong nino weng, atye dok gin ma konye pee bot dano, arem ma dwong dok gin atima pe" literally meaning that the words said about me are so big and unbearable that if your heart is weak you may die. I endure many insults every day, I am worthless to other people, I

have too much pain and I cannot do anything, I can commit suicide and rest (AB, Palabek Gem).

### 4.2.9 Isolation

Childless women reported how they are isolated and isolation has become part of their life. They described how they are excluded from many occasions that involve celebrations, social gatherings and family meetings. The childless women emphasized on being rejected and considered being a problem and outcasts in the community. A 40-year childless woman has been married for 10 years from Palabek Gem stated that, " I am lonely., no one associates with me and I am burred from attending any gathering because I am childless and that I have nothing to add nor contribute for the sake of the community. No one who accepts me, I am unlucky and always rejected" (LN, Palabek Gem).

Furthermore, another childless woman aged 36 from Palabek Ogili, married for 6 years said that, "I was rejected over and over by my own family, I have nowhere to go than stay on my own, no one to speak to, look at and share with my agony and problems, my life is useless to others" (NA, Palabek Ogili).

Similary, during the female focus group discussion, a mother aged 40 concured to childless women being isolated when she stated that;

> "Laluu pol kare bedo kene kene, dano pe ma bedo kede pien tam onyo gin mo pee ma gi nywago dok tam tye ni lajok dok pi mito dano", literally meaning that a childless woman always stays alone , no one stays with them because there is nothing they can share and converse about and they think that the childless woman is a witch and hates other people (AF, Palabek Kal).

### 4.2.10 Status loss

According to the findings, status loss was one of the experiences encountered by childless women in the community. They reported that they are not respected in the community and the community treats them anyhow, they are pointed at, laughed at and undermined. They also reported that children are also lured and taught to disrespect them and this hurts them more.

A childless woman from Palabek Ogili aged 39 and married for 9 years stated that;

> "Atye gin anyera dok odilo pa dano, walutino nyera, pigi wora. Dano kany weng pigi mia wooro dok gi caya nino weng" meaning I am like a ball and something that people laugh at and play with anytime they want, even children laugh at me, they never respect me and they despise me and undermine me always (AJ, Palabek Ogili).

Similarly, a 41-year-old childless women who has been married for 10 years stated that, "I am an adult and grown up woman but no one respects me not even children that I saw grow up, my husband insults me before people and does not give me any respect, I am ashamed of myself "(AB Palabek Gem).

During the male focus group discussion, one of the fathers aged 37 said that:

> "Pet ye kit mo keken ma woro romo bedo rom ikin min latin kede laluu. Laluu kit woro ngo ma kimine dok pingo? latino mo pee dok pikonyo gang" literally meaning that there is no way equal respect can be accorded to a childless woman and a mother to children, which can respect can you accord a childless woman, and why? She has no children and helps no home (OC, Palabek Kal).

### 4.2.11 Marital instability

Childless women described how they are threatened to be divorced and separated from their husbands because they have not got children for their husbands. They emphasized that living in marriage without marital relations is hard and this is what happens to the childless women and their marriages are not stable as they are chased every time there is a small misunderstanding and the issue of not having children comes and they are reminded about being childless. A childless woman from Palabek Kal, 39-year-old and been in marriage for 8 years while crying said;

> My husband chased me from the bedroom and brought in another wife in my bed because we have no children. He always says 'In dako ma laluu, kabedi ni peke, dok pikany, yin kama iromo bedo iyee''. I have no peace at all at home, am always in tears and in worries, I sleep on the chairs daily and no one minds about me, am not allowed to enter the bedroom and I cannot go return home. There is always trouble for me and always blamed for whatever does not go right (AS, Palabek Kal B).

Similarly, a 40-year-old childless woman in marriage for 10 years also stated that;

> My husband has become my enemy and never wants to see me move before him and always says am struggling for no reason because I have nothing that I do that pleases him and always reminds me of bringing him another wife and having children from out because I cannot bear children for him (LN,Palabek Gem).

During the female group discussion, a mother of 3 stated that, "here is no way you cannot fear losing your marriage when you do not have children, a man's pride and wish is to have his own children and if not he finds anyway out to rescue himself" (AF, Palabek Kal).

Furthermore, in the male focus group discussion of fathers, one father aged 50 stated that;

> "Dako ma pi nywal pi dako ma ibedo kede gang, kel dako ma nywal dok ma konyo tye, me kabalo kare ki Laluu" meaning, a woman who cannot bear children is not one you can stay with in your house and home, bring another woman who can bear children and has value than wasting time with a childleswoman (OT, Palabek Gem).

### 4.2.12 Divorce

Childless women reported how they were divorced by their families because they could not conceive. This was emphasized by 3 childless women who said they have been divorced twice and life is not easy for them because they cannot tell what comes next and what will happen only hope things work out and they get some beat of happiness like other women.

A childless woman from Palabek Gem 41 years old been in marriage for 10 years said:

> "Gi ryema gi riyo ni kona pee, anywal ku igang ma ki nyomo iyee", gi dwoga gang wa , ka bene jo gang a odwogo akumu ma cwara olego ni gi dwok en I nyom dako ma nywal" literally meaning that; I was chased twice from my marital home that I am not important and I don't produce children. I was taken back to our home and my husband's family asked for the dowry the paid so that he could use it to marry another woman who can bear him children (AB Palabek Gem).

Another childless woman aged 40 with 10 years in marriage also said that, "my husband always takes me back to my home people demanding for his dowry and asking for divorce saying I am old and there is no chance and hope for me to have children with him" (LN,Palabek Gem).

Furthermore, during the male focus group discussion, one of the fathers aged 45 said that, "there is no way you can stay with a woman for more than one year without child5en and you do not chase her and marry someone who can have children and secure your future. "Laluu neko ayimu nono" meaning childless woman kills your future (OJ,Palabek Ogili).

This indicates how divorce is inevitable in childless marriage and it comes with the demand to pay back dowry paid on return of the childless woman officially in their home

### 4.2.13 Extra marital affairs

This is a sexual relationship between a married person and someone else other than their spouse. Childless women reported how their husbands got involved in extra marital relationships and abandoned them in search for children and no longer consider them. It hurts them that the husbands move out and they are neglected, not committed to them anymore nor supported especially financially. This has resulted into may things that include sickness and diseases, affected them emotionally and lowered their self-esteem.

A childless woman aged 41 with 10 years in marriage stated that;

> I have suffered from infections that I can't explain and I have never healed because I have no chance to, my husband moves out without my consent and now we are three women and others that I don't know. I always fall sick and he never respects me even when am sick, he goes and comes back any time and day he desires and never explains anything (AB, Palabek Gem).

Similarly, another childless woman aged38 with 7 years in marriage said that, "my husband left me in the house and went on with another relationship with someone else because I have failed to

conceive. He only comes once in a while and he does not give me any of his time and complains that I am wasting his time and he needs a future to build having children" (LJ, Palabek Kal).

Furthermore, one of the mothers during the female group discussion said;

> There is no man who can patiently endure for more than one to two years without having children in marriage and stay calm they always move out leaving you unaware and have affairs and children out of marriage and always say "mon pol ataa" meaning there are very many women out there (LG, Palabek).

Childless women described how they have suffered from infections and diseases that they do not know their whereabouts and feared to ask their husbands about them and painfully endured the pain and silently suffered the effects as they tried to stay and save their marriages. This description confirms the silent suffering of childless women and I have no one to talk to.

### 4.2.14 Restrictions

According to the findings restrictions described as being limited and controlled was also reported by childless women. The childless women reported that they are restricted in many ways including rejecting them from movements, association, owning land, having portions of in heritance and denied having any assets by their families and spouses to an extent of being denied burial rights especially by their husbands and spouses.

A 36-year-old childless woman married for 6 years from Palabek Ogili stated that;

> All what I had was taken away by my family, my land and house was withdrawn by my husband not until I produce a child. I am not allowed to have any single property nor anything good for myself. My family hates me and my aunt always says, " ka yigi kany

pe, dok gangi" meaning " there is nowhere to burry you here! Go back to your home", my life is hard.

Another childless woman aged 39 married for 9 years also said that, "my husband does not allow me to move anywhere than staying home claiming that I will bring him shame and people talk about him, he does not allow me to talk to anyone around and a few people who wish to talk to me, my life is caged, I have no liberty" (AJ, Palabek Ogili).

### 4.2.15 Spiritual crisis

Childless women reported how they are spiritually considered unholy and not worth because they are regarded and seen as sinners and being childless is just a punishment to humble them. The childless women described how they are considered as people as people with an evil eye and don't wish other well, not to associate with, cursed and would bring disaster to others in the community.

A 38-year-old childless woman, married for 7 years from Palabek Kal stated that;

> I am distanced and called the cursed one in the village because I have no child and yet married for all these years, whoever talks to me touches me is scared that they would be like me and become childless, not worth living, useless, unholy, sick and ill because of me, cwinya ber ento atye dok gin aringa bot dano, dok ki lwora nono" meaning I have a good heart but people run away from me and fear me for no reason (LJ, Palabek Kal B).

Another childless woman aged 41 with 10 years in marriage stated that, "all people that see me are scared and always say I am a great sinner and cursed and I will harm them and make them unfortunate like me" (AB, Palabek Gem).

Furthermore, during the female group discussion, a 40-year-old mother stated that, "all childless women are associated with having a bad heart and an evil eye that don't wish others well and can easily harm their children since they are childless and cause them pain in any way they wish to. Even when the childless women are innocent they are always judged unfairly" (AF, Palabek Kal).

### 4.2.16 Witchcraft

According to the findings, childless women reported how they are called witches and that they are witches capable of performing all sorts of witchcraft since they are childless and could easily harm the community. They emphasized that they are minimized because they are considered failures that resorted to witchcraft because of childlessness.

A 40-year-old childless woman from Palabek Gem married for 10 years said that, "I am called a witch and yet I am so innocent and I do not know anything about witchcraft, I am just an unfortunate childless woman trying to live my life with my own pain and problems yet they still call me "Layat and ajwaga" meaning the witch" (LN, Palabek Gem).

Similarly, another childless woman aged 38 with 7 years of marriage stated that, "for all these years' I have been feared that am a witch and I harm other people's children because I have none. L have never practiced any witchcraft but being childless has made me be called a witch wherever I go" (LJ, Palabek Kal).

Furthermore, a 40-year-old father during the male focus group discussion stated that;

> Bedo Laluu pi miri pa dako moo keken pien , tye dok tee madit maopong ki yet, lep madongo kede ying ma pe opore, Laluu mo keken ikin dano tye dok layat onyo latyet dok labal madit weko pee ki latin mo keken" meaning being childless I not someones wish, it's a burden that is full of insults, and being called all sorts of names. Any childless woman among other people is considered a big sinner, and that's the reason claimed against them for not having any children (OT, Palabek Gem).

### 4.3 Coping mechanisms of childless women in customary marriage in Acholi community

These are behavioral and cognitive tactics used to manage conditions and demands that are distressing. The study indicates that prayer, medical treatment, traditional herbs and healing, family support and guidance and counselling were the major findings.

#### 4.3.1 Prayer

All childless women described how they resorted to prayer in groups, accepting believers to come to their home to pray together with them, attended crusades and had individual prayers with pastors, reverends and priests so that they could be delivered and hope that God will provide when they ask through prayer and can comfort them in their difficult situation and handle them. Childless women said they afford to fast because they need God to help them and change their status and they fast monthly and attend Friday overnights and fellowships with other women in churches like Pentecostal Assembly of God churches.

A childless woman from Ogili, 36 years with 6 years in marriage said tthast, "being without a child is hard, painful and not easy to go through, prayer has been my weapon and whenever I

pray I feel relieved and I gain comfort in my heart that I have poured out how I feel and I believe and hope that I will go through this problem" (NA, Palabek Ogili).

Similarly, another childless woman aged 38 with7 years in marriage stated saying that, "prayer is the only thing I can do because no one understands me, I think only God can hear my prayer and understand my silent suffering and the tears I shade every day. Prayer is my weapon and comfort, no one will ever understand what I go through than God (LJ, Palabek Kal).

Furthermore, during the female group discussion, one of the mothers aged 40, stated that:

> Lega obedo gin ma miyo niye dok chogo cwiny dano, Bedo ber tutwal ka laluu mo keken lego bot Lubanga pien dano pi nyang ngo mo gin giwok ki iyee, lega pire tek dok yabo yoo" Literally meaning, that prayer is so important and gives one hope and comfort. It's good for a childless woman to pray to God because people do not understand what they go through. Prayer makes a way (AF, Palabek Kal).

A traditional religious leader aged 40 with 15 years in marriage in his experience of handling childless women said;

> It is better to turn to the Lord in prayer than blaming each other so that there is a break through? Even Christ turned to God in prayer in many difficult times and all was well and also stated Hannah Wife to Abraham in Old Testament "1 Samuel 1:2-2:21" as one of the examples in the Bible to support her statement as she prayed for a son, promising to dedicate him to God. Her prayers were answered and she brought the child Samuel to Shiloh for religious training (OJ, Palabek Kal PAG).

These statements indicate the necessity of and hope childless women put and have in prayer. Even in the Bible, childless women like Hannah turned to God in prayer sobbing to God to be blessed with Samuel, 1Samuel 1:9-18, Rebekah prayed for children despite difficulty in conceiving and Rachel in Genesis 29;31ff prayer for children competing with Leah and so many others like Elizabeth and Sarah . Therefore, prayer is a weapon of hope and comfort for these childless women. They believe when they turn to the Lord in prayer he listens and answers them.

### 4.3.2 Medical treatment

Childless women involved in this study reported that seeking for medical assistance is very important. It helps couples know the victim, get proper treatment and know exactly what the problem is. This prevents it from being more severe possibly treat and allow it heal from Palabek Kal health center IV and Ogili health centre II. The childless women repeatedly said that they mostly visited Palabek Kal health center IV and 5 0f 6 had visited doctors and are attended to. The doctors in the facility had different schedules and programs for these women and always encouraged and referred them to Palabek Kal health Centre IV for assistance. A 36-year-old childless woman with 6 years in marriage said that, "I travel from Ogili to Palabek Kal to get treatment every month alone and a few times with my husband to meet the Doctor. I am attended too and given medicine and advised by the doctor and after return back to my home" (NA, Palabek Ogili).

Similarly, another childless woman aged 39 with 9 years in marriage stated that, "I go to the health centre every Thursday to visit the doctors and get treatment. This gives me hope and comfort because the doctors I meet and treat me know and understand what I go through and they care about me and have time for me" (AJ,Palabk Ogili).

In addition, a doctor from Palabek Kal health centre IV aged 40 said;

> It is a tough and uneasy for the childless women but they easily cope up when they come for medication and always advise them to follow the prescriptions, eat well, have some peace of mind and come along with their husbands for the routine medical checkups and medication. Every week I get 3 to 5 cases like this and surely there is one who had spent over 4 years of marriage without conceiving and she eventually conceived and she lives happily now (EO, Palabek Kal).

Furthermore, a 45-year-old doctor from Ogili health centre II, stated that, "It is better if both these parties sought for thorough check up so that they can get the right and proper treatment and be helped medically and in time. Though many times it is the woman that suffers, I recommend both couples to come together and investigate what it could be and how to carry on not just a partner" (BD, Palabek Ogili).

### 4.3.3 Traditional herbs and healing

Findings indicate that childless women resorted to taking herbs and concoctions from the traditional herbalists and visit them daily for other remedies like waist stretching and stomach massage as a process of having an opportunity to conceive and have children. A childless woman aged 40 married for 10 years, supported this saying that "I have been given and taken several herbs from my traditional doctor, I pay a visit once a month and twice when the herbs am given is finished" (LN, Palabek Gem).

A traditional doctor from Palabek Gem 57-year-old, proved this when she said that, "many women young and old have visited me for the past 10 years while depressed, scared about to

divorce and I have worked on them and they are happy because some have got children and are happy in their marriages" (MS, Palabek Gem).

In addition to the above, a 60-year-old traditional healer from Palabek Gem stated that;

> A number of 5 to 10 women come to me each day with the same problem of not having children and my herbs have worked for them. I have used and still use various methods and practices that increase the chances of conception and overcome infertility issues. I know and use local plants to create concoctions and remedies aimed at improving fertility and this is specifically with a specific need like of course children (LMY, Palabek Gem).

Furthermore, another traditional healer aged 60 supported this as she said that;

> I have my own remedy I give to my clients, they don't drink it for more than 3 months when it has not given them results of pregnancy and when they follow my instructions and I believe that my herbs can stimulate reproductive organs, balance hormones, and enhance overall reproductive health, which increases the chances of conception (MS, Palabek Kal).

### 4.3.4 Family support

Women described how their husbands supported them even when their family were against the support and others got support from all their family members that helped them live like other women, had sense of belonging and worth and as well felt loved and protected by their own people and especially family. A 39-year-old childless woman stated that;

> My husband support has made me strong and feel loved because he is there for me and now understands me more than anyone else, he reminds me to go to hospital with him and supports me with everything I need to be happy though I do not have a child yet with him (AS, Palabek Kal ).

Similarly, another childless woman aged 39 with 8 years of marriage stated that, "my own family supports me especially my sister, she goes with me to hospital and whenever they require payments she sometimes pays for me. She comforts me and she is always there for me in all hard times. I feel good and hopeful of being loved and having joy" (AS,Palabek Kal).

In addition, a doctor from Palabek kal health centre IV, 40 years old who has been in marriage for 11 years whose wife is childless said;

> I give her support and protect her from the community so that she lives freely and feel loved, the community does not know anything about her and can't say a thing because we have protected and stand in for her. She is happy and even when she will never have her own children she is loved and no one attacks her (EO, Palabek Kal).

A clan leader aged 57 stated that;

> I take the lead as a clan leader, protect and love the childless woman and don't judge them and send them back. We agree and the husband can marry another wife with her consent and she remains the first and overall wife of the house and the children. The second wife children are also hers and she is respected (LG, Palabek Kal).

Family support would also go further as the wife of the house who is childless would choose and bring a relative of her choice to bear children with her husband and these children would

definitely be hers. The wife would bring the sister or relative in her house close to her husband so that they could bond and bear children for her.

### 4.3.5 Guidance and counseling

Childless women in this study reported how they go and attend guidance and counselling from specific medical doctors at health centers that have helped them adapt to being childlessness.

A childless woman, 38-year-old with7 years in marriage stated and said that, "I go to hospital every month and I attend a counselling session with my doctor for 1 hour with my husband, and this has improved on our relationship and our marriage life as we try to get a child" (LJ, Palabek Kal).

Another childless woman age 36 in marriage for 6 years also narrated saying that, "I attend my counselling sessions every time I go for treatment from my doctors, this gives me hope and I am happy because there are people who help me manage my state of being childless" (NA, Palabek Ogili).

In the current study, doctors offered special days for one on one guidance and counselling sessions with the childless women and men. They believed that through this session the marrieds or childless women would get solutions to childlessness and adapt to being childless. Through these sessions the doctors confirmed the marrieds getting back together and understanding childlessness. A medical doctor from Palabek Kal health centre IV, 40 years said;

> I highly welcome, recommend and invite couples and individuals for counselling sessions because they need it, for the childless couples, they really need to be talked to

> not once or thrice because psychologically they are tortured and they go through a lot that they can't share with everyone and they are not helped (EO, Palabek Kal).

Therefore, through these counselling sessions many have understood and accepted their spouses and live happily with each other because they have in most cases agreed and guided on the way out and solution for the problem.

A traditional healer aged 47, also reported that.

> Before doing anything, I provide a safe space for the childless woman to express their emotions and challenges and understand them and that they offered guidance on how to cope, reduce stress and ways to maintain a positive mindset throughout the journey towards parenthood as a way and process of treatment (NL, Palabek Gem).

**4.3.6 Adoption.**

Although adoption is not allowed in the cultural setting and percepts of the Acholi, in my own opinion, adoption would be another coping mechanism for the childless. This is because the childless would have an option to adopt any of their relatives especially those that have many children and have failed to take care of them and would freely leave with them and parent them and this would not incur them any cost since they are related and most likely from the same lineage. Individuals find and express joy and peace through adoption for example even in the Bible, Pharaohs daughter was happy to find Moses who was abandoned by his mother and adopted him in Exodus 2:1-10, and Mordecai adopted Esther his cousin in Esther 2:7.

In conclusion, among the Acholi people childlessness is a great calamity in their families and generally affected the childless women negatively and their families. The perspectives of the Acholi people clearly show the main importance of children and the reason as to why customary

marriage emphasized and encouraged in Acholi with the purpose of bonding and producing children. Therefore, a childless woman has bitter experience for being childless and the effects leave the childless without choice rather than adapting to the coping mechanisms as the findings indicates above. These findings therefore clearly show the position of a childless woman among the Acholi people and society.

Gender discrepancies in this study included gender inequality that is women being blamed for childlessness and held accountable and responsible for it whereas men are walk away freely and are never considered responsible and blamed, even when the man is the problem, he is never pointed at for a man remains a man and he is covered up and supported.

Secondly, women suffered and suffer more than men in this study in such a way that they are violated and sexually harassed including being insulted, nicknamed by their families and community, disrespected, discriminated and abused which is not the case with the men as they remain respected and yet inflict pain on the women and wives and abuse them.

Poor medical care and support as these women were neglected and financial support withdrawn b their families and spouses and cannot access proper medications and access to any kind of medication and financially are not stable and cannot afford to support themselves.

Bias about childlessness was also encountered in this study. Childlessness is considered a calamity, an abomination and a curse and so these childless women suffer from negativity that comes through this biasness and are forced to live on their own isolated and abandoned because the community and their families hate them, do not support nor protect them and do not associate with them not even children.

### 4.4.0 Discussion of study findings

The discussions were based on the findings from the field. Therefore, according to the findings of the study that included the perspectives of childlessness, experience of childlessness among women of childlessness and coping mechanisms of childless women in customary marriages in Acholi Lamwo District, as written below.

### 4.4.1 Perceptions about childlessness in customary marital relationships

In the current study, childlessness was considered an abomination and being childless was a very serious problem. Parenting was highly valued and the main aim of marriage was to produce children. In the current study, childlessness was never expected from a woman neither was she welcome in a home nor liked by any man and was married. Ochieng (2020) concurs with Basden (1966, p.68), that "to be childless is the greatest calamity that can befall an African woman" and that the Luo childless women face a number of challenges such as alienation, stigmatization and ridicule and other. Whereas in the current study childless women were never sustained in marriage without children because children were highly valued and brought joy to the clan and community at large, I observed that those who stayed in their childless marriage also continuously suffered all kinds of insults from society, in laws and from the husband. Similarly, Inhorn & Curtin, (2012, p.25) urged that childless women in the Middle East face ridicule and social ostracism and that they may be accused of casting an 'evil eye' on other women's children due to envy. In the current study the childless women were regarded and called ''Lajok'' which means; the evil one and I observed that the childless women were always isolated and never interacted much in the community. Childless women never regarded themselves as evil but rather unfortunate women

Celebration of birth of children was dependent on approval by the elders that the child belonged to the husband and is theirs. Childlessness in the current study was not celebrated and considered a reality that is hard to accept. A woman was to be married after producing and when the child was born and confirmed to be for the husband, the child was celebrated and she was customarily married. Childlessness is not accepted in traditional African communities. Barrenness would make marriage unsuccessful and successful marriage is that in which children are born (Nwoye 2006). I observed that customary marriage is so important among the Acholi and cultural in that all cultural requirements for marriage were brought in place, dowry paid a day before marriage and after then, marriage would take place and the woman was officially handed over to the husband.

Furthermore, in the current study, traditionally a woman was to stay in the mother-in-law's house until she gives birth and after she was allowed to stay with her husband in their own house. In a previous study, Mbiti (1969, p.104) confirms that among Africans, marriage and procreation are issues of obligation that an individual had to undergo and that it is a sacred for every normal person to marry for procreation. Similarly, Obianuju (2009, p.1) also argued that marriage among the Igbo is indispensable and is meant for procreation and this is not only in Nigeria but in the whole world. The study findings revealed several practices done especially for a woman that is childless and stayed for long so as to try out the luck for reproduction.

In the current study, besides one getting pregnant which proves that she is capable of producing children before marriage, all women were expected to produce children and have conceived in the first six months of marriage otherwise questions would start coming up and complains. Moreover, having a child was considered an achievement and a woman was filled with joy together with her family and becomes evidently a real woman. Baloyi (2019, p.10) confirmed

this when he argued that, ''children are considered the crowning glory in African marriage - the more children conceived during marriage, the greater the glory" and Mariano (2008, p.1) submits that a woman who has not given birth is considered incomplete because she has not fulfilled all the life stages from childhood to adulthood.

Furthermore, the current study demonstrated that most of the value put on women was because of the children she had produced and gave life too. However, being childless disqualified her from being a mother and real woman and yet it was also considered a fulfillment of life and an achievement by a woman. In Acholi rituals like "Tye kony", a ritual where a childless woman's family and relatives gather to share stories and memories of her life, "Lapiny Kuc", a ritual where the childless woman's grave is decorated with special colors to honor her memory and "Moyo wak", a ritual where the childless woman's spirit is offered food and drink to ensure her safe passage to the afterlife Similarly, Mariano (2004, p.1) narrates how a woman who dies without giving birth is buried with many rituals and becomes a burden to the family and the community in which she lived.

In the current study, children were regarded as the future of the clan and therefore childlessness entirely failed and stunted the growth and continuity of clan and community. This meant that the reproduction of children and their presence is so important and meaningful because without them nothing prevailed and yet they are meant to be the future leaders and of the clan, community and the country at large. Mbiti (1999) supports this argument stating that lack of offspring distorts and disorients the very existence of an African and the entire community.

Furthermore, children made and built up a home and it was complete with them and considered incomplete without the children. Without children, there is no concept of the family in Africa

(Mbiti 1975, p. 115). Children brought honor and identity to their parents, families and homes and parents were called as *"min Okello, Min Atuk Min Kaka"* meaning mother to Okello, Atuk and Kaka and so on and this always made the parents happy and brought them joy. Mariano (2008, p.10) supported this argument when he observed that in Africa, a child is important since he/she plays an important role in the construction of the identity of the parents as a mother or father for example mother to Okello "min Okello". A real home among the Acholi people comprised of children.

Parents in the current study urged that children offer security, labor and are wealth. Fieldman (1994) reiterates that among the Bangante people of Cameroon, without children, women struggle to cultivate the land and cannot build their support system. At all ages but more especially at old age when the parents are weak and cannot defend and cultivate nor do heavy work in the fields and other places, children helped their parents in many things which mostly include gardening, settling disputes in the home and grooming other siblings. Hollos, Larsen, Obono, & Whitehouse, (2009) reports the same among the women of Nigeria, only sons secure a home for a woman in her old age since her right to reside in her deceased husband's home is possible only through her male offspring. In most cases a son or boy child secured the family with security even after the death of their parents and bring wealth home through what they do, marriage and so on. Blankson (1999, p.1) observes the same among the Yoruba who have a saying that a man's wealth is measured in part by the number of children he has and a woman's value to her husband is determined by her ability to bear children.

### 4.4.2 Experiences of being a childless woman in customary marital relationship

Childless women in the current study longed for and desired to have children of their own and have their own experience of motherhood, carry and nurture their children and have a feel of what it is like but could not change the reality that they cannot bear children of their own. Women in Acholi embraced motherhood and bearing children was their major responsibility. The findings indicated that some childless women had never conceived, neither had any miscarriage and really wanted to have a feel of being pregnant and bringing up a child.

In the current study, childless women were neglected and abused by their husbands, families and community. This mostly was mainly through withdrawing financial support. The childless women could not afford medical bills that are for checkup, assessment, scan and treatment. Many of their husbands and family members that were their support system failed and did not offer support to them. Rabia (2013) submitted that among the Muslims, childlessness is considered to be a woman's problem. Most of the childless women in the current study were blamed, accused, emotionally and psychologically tortured. This included sad feelings and experience of stress regarding their failure to bear children of their own and had unstable marriages.

Furthermore, the current study demonstrated that Childless women mostly encountered negative emotions such as depression, bitterness, rejection and desperation. Childless women face a number of challenges such as alienation, stigmatization and ridicule among others (Ochieng 2020). Childless woman and other participants argued that they are disrespected and despised in their families, by friends and the community and sarcastically reminded them that *''...Twon pa omeru peiomwojo''*, meaning what belongs to your brother or sister can never be yours. Similarly, Höglund (2023,p.1) stated that child-free individuals felt

undermined, disrespected and questioned by others and are stigmatized disliked growing up within a family. They repeatedly reported that they are not accorded respected by their in-laws and the community especially the people with children and their children as well.

The findings in the current study revealed that women involved had been rejected, abandoned by their in laws and other relatives and as well their husbands who had already married other women as their wives without their consent. Ram (2006) says the same on Indian women; they suffer most and are faced with divorce, separation, dissertation or disruption of marriage and even domestic violence from the husband and the in-laws. As a result, many were sent and others forced to leave their matrimonial home and go back to their homes frustrated and without any other options especially by the in laws specifically the sisters in laws. Mbiti (1999) concurs with the above argument that childlessness caused by sterility or barrenness on the part of the wife could cause divorce. He says that marriage is complete only with the birth of the first child. In the current study, many childless women expressed frustrations and almost decided to commit suicide because of their broken marriages and relationships. This is as well observed by Blackburn (2001), who reports that childlessness may make marriages to end and some women may contemplate suicide.

Childless women confirmed and acknowledged psychological, emotional, social, and financial and other challenges and problems associated with being childless that they went through and was inflicted on them by family members and none of their family members could help them.

The findings in the current study revealed that childless women were harassed and mistreated by their husbands and families. They revealed that the husbands abused them and had sex with them forcefully whenever they wanted without agreement and the family members insulted them

verbally and as a result this became continuous and this affected their life style and health. The childless women were emotionally and physically abused and harassed. These results are similar to (Fieldsend 2020) who urged that some men oppress and torture their wives emotionally when childlessness persists in their marriage as well as physically and verbally. The childless women in the current study also revealed how they are disrespected and shouted at by their families and made fun off.

The current study also revealed how husbands to the childless women resorted to having extra marital affairs outside their marriage and also childless women faced marital instability and were afraid of divorce by their husbands. Similarly, Deribe et al (2007,p.3) urged that some childlessness as a result of infertility in women could leads to marital instability. This leads to divorce which is supported by Mariano, (2004, p.1) who explains that the status of a married woman in a family identifies the root cause of the problem. ''She points to the stranger role of a newlywed woman in laws house. This woman must prove her usefulness as a woman, in order to contribute to the prosperity of her in laws'' family. Therefore, in this case of a childless woman, divorce is inevitable because there is no child birthed and there is high chance of getting infected with diseases like HIV AIDS especially with extra marital affairs.

The findings in the current study also revealed how the childless women were exploited sexually by their husbands and also especially by their in laws and other family members. The childless women also revealed how they are used to do all kinds of work home, work a lot in the fields and other places and they are never paid nor appreciated and since they have no children and all that they had and have is lost and they have no security over themselves and any assets of their own. The in laws took advantage of the childless women to dig for them, wash, nurse their babies and cook for them every day for free and without being appreciated. This shows how the voiceless

childless woman is exploited ad does not have a choice than doing as asked and needs not to complain or refuse.

The findings also revealed how the childless women were divorced, rejected, considered as outcasts and lost status in the community. The childless women also revealed how they are regarded to as witches and people with an evil eye in the community capable of causing illness and disaster to other people and never wished others well and good because they are childless. They also revealed how often they are disrespected by the community and physically abused by their family members and some community members. In this study, the childless women were rejected by their own families' husbands and friends that no one accepted to associate with them freely rather than using them and no value was attached to them in anyway. They were considered useless and time wasters hence rejection, not respected and being divorced.

In addition, the childless women also revealed how they are restricted from attending and participating in social gatherings, family engagements, and other meetings in the community and as well associating with people and from using clan, family and personal properties like land and houses. This is simply because they were considered to bring shame to the families and had nothing to contribute due to the fact that they had no children so no one wished to engage them in any public gathering.

### 4.4.3 Coping mechanisms of a childless woman in a customary marital relationship

There were various coping strategies mentioned which includes both negative and positive strategies. The findings revealed that the women resorted to prayer to have comfort, and hope for good in the future and most of the woman revealed that they were encouraged to pray and be hopeful which they did and are doing well and relieved. This is similar to what Aflakseir (2016)

stated that religious practices such as praying can help couples to cope with their stressful conditions. Difficult situations such as infertility make them seek God and pray so as God would see them through and make a way for them and have children of their own.

In the current study, childless women went for medical treatment according to their choices and decisions depending on the options available for them. This is similar to a study in Ghana which explored the coping strategies adopted by 615 women seeking infertility treatment in southern Ghana. They visited the doctors and consulted them to know what exactly is wrong and what they could do so as to able to bear their own children and have an experience of womanhood and being a mother. Asiimwe et al., (2022, p.1108) supported this stating that childless women had the capability of managing involuntary childlessness through finding out possible and accessible medical treatment. In addition, childless women had visited traditional healers in several places and a number of times who used and gave them a number of herbal medicine and remedies which would help them and increase their chances of conception. Asiimwe et al., (2022, p.1108) argued that in the present study, women reportedly used various medication choices; including visiting medicine men and physicians so that they could be helped.

Women in the current study shared that support from their families would be so important to them and this would give them confidence and feel valued rather than neglecting them. Asiimwe et al., (2022) stated that women with involuntary childlessness managed to get through confidently especially those whose spouses supported and families. Their household would assist them with medical and treatment bills, protect them from the community and help them to heal from communal, physical and emotional consequences of childlessness along with helping them financially. Some of the women would choose their relatives and bring them close to their husbands under same household so that they would bear for them children in their marriage.

The findings of the current study show that the women attended and received counseling and guidance from professional counselors, doctors from hospital and traditional healers. Hilevych (2023) stated that ''the childless gain some kind of release and confidence from discussing their conditions which guide couples in their journeys of coping with infertility''. This helped them cope and have positivity for who they are and what they are going through in their homes, families and community and yet no would help them and understand their pain and all they go through. Constant counseling of childless women and formation of mutual support groups and other studies indicate that involuntarily childless women only obtain assistance from their family because of circumstances surrounding them (Asiimwe et al., 2022). Though adoption would be one of the coping mechanisms, the Acholi people do not embrace and recommend adoption but rather prefer each individual to have their own biological children in their marriage and adoption is not encouraged nor a way forward for childlessness.

In conclusion, the findings were collected through having interviews with different individuals and conducting focus group discussions which comprised of mothers and fathers who were informed, right persons and knowledgeable about the study. It is surprising that there is a specific ritual (Abila) carried out to enable one bear children unfortunately until the root cause of being childless is revealed one can never have children. However, it is challenging that until now childlessness is traced back to only women and unfortunately the men who are impotent are not attended to neither talked about ad it is kept a secret but not for a childless woman. In my analysis the real reason of attributing childlessness to only women and why not men did not surface clearly. The next chapter therefore consists of summary, conclusion and recommendations.

# CHAPTER FIVE

## SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS.

This is chapter concludes the study and it revisits the objectives and findings. And in its structure it chapter provides a summary of the study, with objectives restated, findings from the study, it provides the conclusion basing on the findings of the study, limitations of the study and as well, the recommendations following the outcome of the study based on the study objectives as indicated in the next section.

### 5.1 Summary

The objectives of this study included;

i). To assess the cultural perceptions about childlessness in customary marriages in the Acholi region.

ii). To analyze the experiences of childlessness among women.

iii). To assess the coping mechanisms of childless women in customary marriages in Acholi, Lamwo district.

These objectives were achieved through choosing a suitable research design and approach, Identifying and selecting participants for the study and involving them by incorporating their views through interviews and focus group discussions with the community.

Furthermore, these objectives were also achieved through having clear research questions conceptualizing the key concepts and variables, combining multiple data sources/methods,

reviewing literature by analyzing existing research and theories and collaborating with other researchers.

These objectives were as well achieved through, expert consultation through collaborating with experts in relevant and diverse fields and among these included traditional healers, clan leaders, traditional religious leaders and professional doctors.

Finally, the objectives were also achieved through data analysis that involved examining stories and making meaning, acknowledging personal biases and validating findings from participants.

From the study, most respondents were found to be sad and had given up hope of having children. The reality in Acholi, one could not stay in marriage without a child of their own but rather she would advise the husband to bring a second wife to bear children. Secondly one is not allowed to adopt neither a relative nor any person especially by the clan because they are not their own and wouldn't be theirs at any one moment and as well there were rituals performed on a childless woman or barren woman with intentions of helping them have children. Men in Acholi would decide whether to stay in marriage with a barren woman or send them away but in favor of the clan leaders' decision. In this respect the barren men in Acholi to stay with or without a wife and their inability was kept a secret and it is believed that an Acholi man can never be childless unless the mother didn't nurse and nature him well while young. The current study indicated that even in other types of marriages childlessness was not entertained as well. However customary marriage was chosen for the current study because of the experience that the customarily married women go through and due to the fact that religion contributes a lot in helping these childless women in coping up with childlessness.

## 5.2 Conclusion

From the study findings, childlessness in Acholi especially in customary marriage is not only a family nor clan but also a public health concern and it is never a secret. Childless women in Acholi that is Palabek Kal, Gem and Ogili faced mostly negativity even when it's their partners with a problem. Following the specific objectives which included; To assess the cultural perceptions about childlessness in customary marriages in the Acholi region, to explore the experiences of childlessness among women in customary marriages in Acholi, Lamwo District and to assess the coping mechanisms of childless women in customary marriages in Acholi, Lamwo The women went through verbal assaults, violence, sorrow, oppression, quarantine, criticism, not supported, pressure and mental torture imposed by their household members. The childless were rejected, exploited, divorced and isolated and as well had challenges in their marriages and relationships. Childless women resorted to praying, seeking medical treatment, and assistance from traditional doctor's quarantine and seeking guidance and counseling themselves among others so as to cope with childlessness. Childless women lacked support from their partners and families and others failed to afford the treatment of their choices and recommendations from the doctors.

This indicates that there is need to support the childless women starting with their partners, family, and community and as well the government should intervene and make policies that guide and support the childless women in their marriages regarding their reproductive health. There is a need to advocate for better and empathetic treatment and investigations that would help the childless access good and advanced treatment and also provide care and counseling, providing ways and procedures for coping with childlessness.

Though childless women are described as failures, evil, witches, toilet feelers and so on, they do not describe themselves as such neither acknowledge the description but rather describe themselves as and believe that they are just unfortunate women.

### 5.3 Limitations of the Study

During the research, there were some limitations. These limitations included:

a) People not being open especially the identified childless women could not personalize the experience but rather during the interviews they were reporting as if it was someone else and not them and were not free discussing other information as far as the research was concerned. This was challenging because they would reserve some important and useful information that made it hard to achieve the objectives. However, this was mitigated through making rapport and probing questions while using the local language and re explaining the intention of the interview.

b) The traditional healers never willed to disclose the name of the herbs they use, some were rigid and reserved about specific information. This was because of the age difference as these traditional healers were elderly and old. However, this was mitigated through visiting these traditional healers with an elderly person whom they could trust and more free with. The findings of this study cannot be generalized to the whole country but considered and understood in the context of Lamwo district.

## 5.4 Recommendations

The study hereby recommends the following basing on the objectives, which are to assess the cultural perceptions about childlessness in customary marriages in the Acholi region, explore the experiences of childlessness among women in customary marriages in Acholi, Lamwo District and to assess the coping mechanisms of childless women in customary marriages in Acholi, Lamwo District.

The researcher recommends that there should be more sensitization about self-awareness, the meaning of childlessness, the causes, coping strategies and available treatments by government and women health advocate because women being childless increases chances of their rights being abused. This can be through the government and health advocates coming up with health programs and create awareness, remind and empower the society and at different levels. This is because the society was able to know exactly what childlessness is and how best it can be overcome and handled well without blaming the woman and having unrealistic and just perception about childlessness. Both men and women or marrieds take up the responsibility and be informed about the procedures of handling childlessness and way out.

In addition, there is also need for the government to come up with health programs that can be of support to the childless women for example health camps with free treatment and checkups. This also includes having health campaigns about reproduction and workshops. The researcher recommends that there should be more sensitization about childlessness and its experience. This is because they were able to know exactly what it is and how best it can be handled well without blaming either of the partners.

There is need for the government to build more health facilities and infrastructures and empower the society. This is because medication would be made available and easily to accessed by the society anytime necessary.

In addition, the society can receive treatment at a low cost and the problem addressed cheaply and earlier without having advanced complications and help the victims experience and cope easily with childlessness.

There is also need for policy makers in the country to pass laws that support, protect and overall in favor of childless women so that they are safe from any kind of abuse and violence. These policies will help the childless women to enjoy their rights, be valued and be safe from negative experiences and cultural and community perceptions.

Cultural leaders especially clan leaders who uphold culture can also come up with rules that protect the childless women from any form of abuse and intimidation and give them freedom to live freely and at peace. The clan should also support these childless women speak up for them and always sustain the childless women in their marriages than sending them away and also accord them same rights as other women and cope positively.

Religious institutions also need to plan for the childless women in their marriage by coming up with programs that support the childless women and promote peace in marriage and improves their wellbeing. These includes programs like guidance and counselling all those married, providing safe place and prayer programs and support them and encourage and give these childless women hope and making them better people with self-esteem which helps them through the experience of childlessness and help the cope with childlessness.

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## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX 1: OBSERVATION GUIDE

Researcher observes and participates in the following during the study

1. Reactions of participants especially victims
2. Attitude of participants and any other relevant issues noticed.

**Observation Checklist.**

**Research project:** The cultural perspectives about childlessness in customary marriages among the Acholi people: a case study of Acholi women, Lamwo district, Uganda.

**General objective:** To examine cultural perspectives towards childlessness in customary marriages and their effects to the childless female spouses in Acholi, Lamwo district.

| SN | Criteria | yes | No | COMMENT |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Understood the topic and questions. | | | |
| 2 | Interview was at the right place with participants. | | | |
| 3 | Right participants for the interview where involved and participated in the interview. | | | |
| 4 | Respondents actively participated | | | |
| 5 | Respondents were both male and female | | | |
| 6 | All respondents were interested in topic. | | | |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 7 | Proposed solutions to the problem regarding topic | | | |
| 8 | Appropriate answers were given regarding the topic | | | |
| 9 | Interview ended within the timeframe | | | |

**APENDIX: 2 INTEVIEW GUIDE**

Dear respondent, I am Aber Jackline, a student of Kyambogo University. I am conducting a research on the "cultural perspectives and childlessness in customary marriages in Lamwo district as part of the requirements for the award of a Master's Degree in Religious Studies. I am requesting you to participate in this study by answering the questions provided below. The information given was used for academic purpose only and with highest level of confidentiality

Date.....

Part A: Respondents Demographic Information.

1. Kindly describe your current residence?

(1) Urban ☐ (2) Rural ☐

2. Please tick your relationship status?

(1) Married ☐ (2) Single ☐

(3) Divorce ☐ (4) Separated ☐

3. Please tick your religion.

(1) Born again Christi ☐ (2) Muslim ☐ (3) Catholic ☐ (4) Protestant ☐ (5) others ☐ specify.....

4. What is your education level?

(1) Primary ☐ (2) Secondary ☐ (3) Tertiary ☐ (4) Uneducated ☐

5. From what type of family do you belong?

(1) Nuclear☐ (2) Monogamous☐ (3) Extended☐ (4) Polygamous☐

Part B:

1. Childless women

A) Perception of the community

1. When did you get married?
2. When you think about childlessness, what comes to your mind?
3. What were your expectations in marriage?
4. What does the community say about you?
5. Can you describe the perception of the community about you for the past 5years?

B) Experience of childless couple

1. What is your experience of having no children in the last 5years?
2. What challenges have you met in the community?
3. How have you been treated by your family and friends?
4. How have you lived in the community for the past 5yrs?

D) Coping mechanisms.

1. How have you managed to cope with childlessness for the last two years?
2. What were you recommended to do?
3. How have you managed to live positively in the community?
4. What do you think is the proper way and thing to do in your state?

## APPENDIX 3: KEY INFORMANTS INTERVIEW GUIDE

a) Perception of the community.

1. What do you think about childless women?
2. Would you recommend a friend or relative to marry a childless woman?
3. Do you think childless women are worth being married?
4. Of what value and importance are childless women in the community?
5. Would you allow your children to relate with a childless woman?

b) Experience of childless women.

1. How have you seen childlessness women experience childlessness?
2. How is the relationship of the childless women with the community like?
3. What do the childless women go through in the community?
4. How are the childless women treated in the community?
5. What is the experience of childless women like?
1. childless women?

c) Copying mechanism.

1. How have you helped the childless women in copying up with childlessness?
2. How can you help the childless women?
3. What have you done to help the childless women in the society?
4. What do you do to help the childless women?
5. What would you recommend the childless women to do?
6. What is the community doing /done to help the childless women?

**Appendix 3: B)**

1. What is your current position in the village?

2. Are you a representative of anybody or organization?

3. In your opinion, what do you say about childlessness?

4. In relation to your previous response. How have these childless women treated in the community?

5. How have you helped the childless women in the community?

## APPENDIX 4: FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Engagement questions to introducing participants and the topic.
2. Make participants comfortable with the topic of discussion.
3. Exploration questions: get to the peak of the discussion.
4. Exit question: check to see if anything was missed in the.
5. Discussion.

Questions

a) Community Perception about childlessness.

1. What do you think about childlessness?
2. Would you marry a childless woman?
3. What are your views about childlessness in the community?
4. How concerned is the community about childlessness?

b) Experience of childless women

1. Can you share about the experience of childless women in the community?
2. How does the community treat the childless women?
3. Are men responsible for being childless?
4. What have you seen childless women go through in the community?

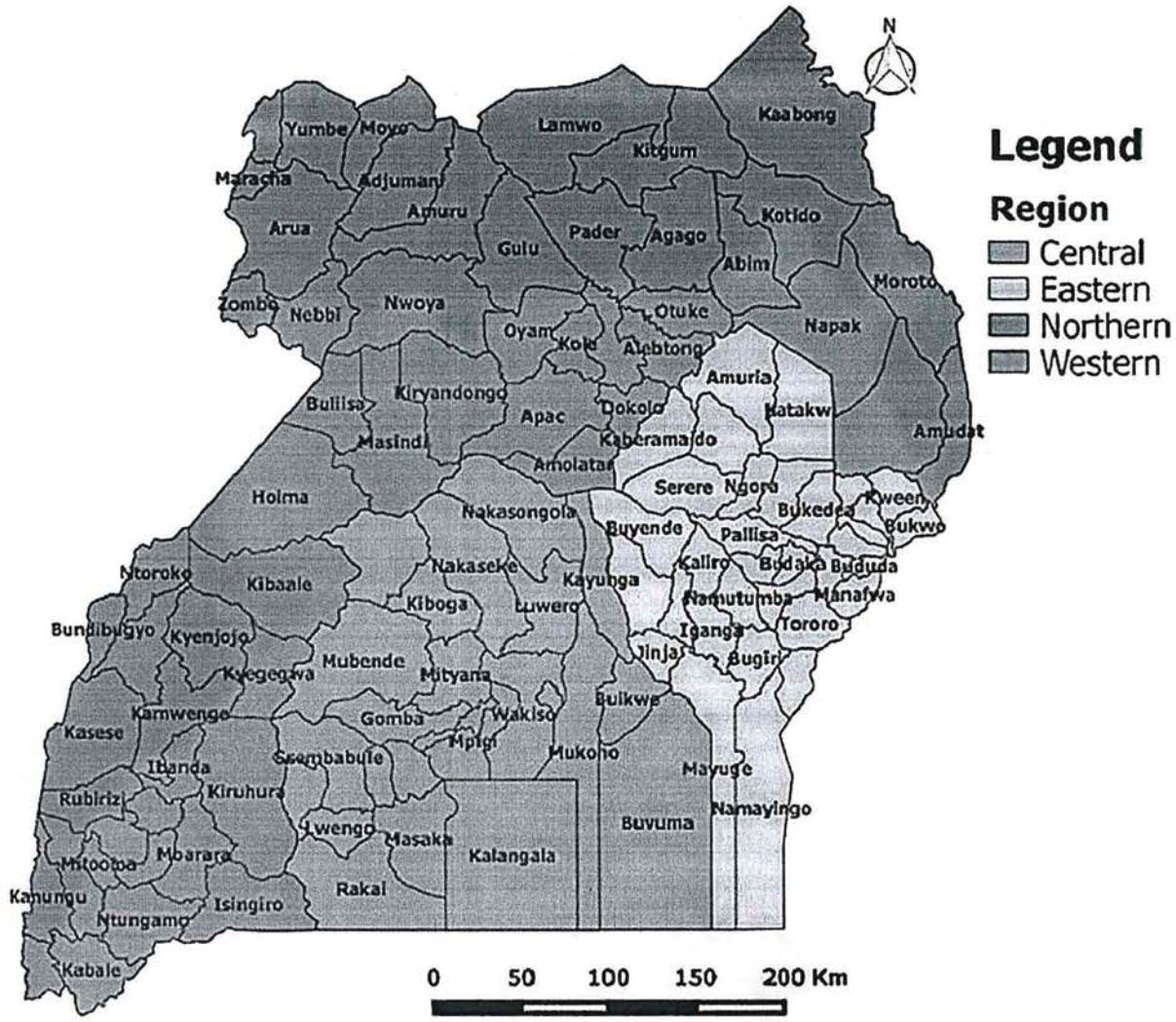
d) Coping mechanisms

1. How can you help the childless women in the community?

2. What do you think is the best way for a childless woman?

3. What would you advise a childless woman to do so as cope up with their status?

**APPENDIX 5: MAP OF UGANDA SHOWING LOCATION OF LAMWO DISTRICT IN NORTHERN REGION.**



## APPENDIX 6. MAP OF LAMWO DISTRICT

