

## Association of Childless Couples Of Ghana (ACCOG)

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### **Abstract**

The Association of Childless Couples of Ghana (ACCOG) is a Ghanaian non-faith based Non-Governmental Organization. ACCOG provides a platform for childless couples to find options for accessible infertility care. It provides counselling and other support services to childless couples to enable them to cope with their situation.

**Key words:** Accessible, childless, Ghana, infertility, NGO.

### **Introduction**

The traditional Ghanaian society is pro-natal (Nukunya, 2003), where the ultimate purpose of marriage is to produce children who will continue the name of the family (Gyekye, 1996). The joy of couples is to have children after marriage since 'voluntary childlessness' cannot be found in the dictionary of people in Ghana. Voluntary childlessness is very uncommon in Ghana, and married women with no live births are likely to be those with fertility problems. According to Larsen (2000) the primary infertility rate for women in Ghana is estimated to be 2%, the secondary infertility rate was 14%.

Information on male infertility in Ghana is very scanty except that in a reproductive health report to the World Health Organisation in the year 2003, the Ghana Health Service (GHS) reported that male infertility was emerging in the Upper East Region of the country.

In Ghana, a number of studies have reported psychological distress among infertile women. Infertility-related stress and stigma were found among women seeking infertility treatment in Southern Ghana (Donkor & Sandall, 2007;2009). The authors reported that 23% of the women experienced moderate stigma and 41% experienced severe infertility-related perceived stigma. Women who reported severe levels of perceived stigma had

the highest mean score for fertility-related stress. Furthermore, two recent studies in Ghana reported on the mental health effects of infertility among Ghanaian women (Fledderjohann, 2012; Naab et al., 2013). According to these studies infertile Ghanaian women experience many psychosocial consequences of childlessness such as social stigma, marital instability and mental health problems including worrying, crying for long periods, and insomnia (Fledderjohann, 2012). Similarly, 53% of women seeking treatment for fertility problems in Ghana were depressed (Naab et al., 2013). Some individuals facing infertility who cannot withstand the high stigma on childlessness in Ghana also end up taking their own life.

This confirms previous statements that the consequences of involuntary childlessness are usually more dramatic in developing countries when compared to Western societies, particularly for women (Dyer et al., 2004;2005; Ombelet et al., 2008; Van Balen & Bos, 2009).

### **Treatment seeking behaviour of childless couples in Ghana**

In Ghana, apart from biomedical causes of infertility, traditional or religious causes of infertility such as spiritual and witchcraft have been cited (Donkor & Sandall, 2012). Consequently, in the treatment of infertility, many women resort to traditional healing

and spiritual mediation (including churches) as well as orthodox biomedicine (Donkor & Sandall, 2012). Some women are deeply convinced of supernatural causes, and so they patronize the services of traditional and religious healers for spiritual redress. At present it is very common in Ghana to see some women testifying in churches to the fact that they have been able to conceive and given birth through prayers. Women therefore form the majority of attendants at prayer camps and other alternative health care sources in Ghana's pluralistic health context (Sackey, 1999).

Between August 2013 and October 2013, the Ghana Statistical Service (GSS) and the Judicial Service jointly compiled data on divorce in the High Courts of the Greater Accra Region. The data confirmed our feeling that people hide behind childlessness situations and come out with other reasons to seek for divorce since infertility is not a good ground for divorce in Ghana. Nevertheless, these data indirectly indicate that infertility and childlessness are probably the most important reasons for divorce in Ghana.

In the face of all these, a question that one can pose is "what support systems are there in place for childless persons, particularly women, in Ghana?" In the developed countries there are support groups, infertile couples receive professional information and counselling. However, in a strong pro-natal society like Ghana such support groups are non-existent. This situation can aggravate the situation of childless couples and individuals living with infertility in Africa.

In spite of the problems enumerated above, it is very disheartening that infertility and people living with infertility in Africa, including Ghana, do not have the needed support. Africa is said to be poor, overpopulated, with high fertility rates etc. Consequently it is difficult to get funding/support for infertility activities even though the lists of Reproductive Healthcare services include the "prevention and appropriate treatment for infertility".

Looking at the data from the GSS, one can safely conclude that if infertility was given the attention it deserves, it could lead to a reduction in the number/rate of divorces and its consequences on women in particular, a reduction in domestic violence and a reduction in sexually transmitted infections which include HIV/AIDS since a childless person who is desperately looking for a child would never think about protection.

### **ACCOG: The Association of Childless Couples of Ghana**

The Association of Childless Couples of Ghana (ACCOG) is a Ghanaian non-faith based Non-Governmental Organization established and registered in July 2012. ACCOG seeks to provide a platform for childless couples to enjoy the benefits of marriage while facilitating their access to other options of having children. ACCOG also provides counselling and other support services to those divorced as a result of childlessness to enable them to cope with their situation. The mission, objectives and activities of ACCOG are shown in Table I.

**Table I.** — ACCOG: The Association of Childless Couples of Ghana.

#### **MISSION**

To support members in their quest to have a happy family

#### **OBJECTIVES**

- To eliminate/decrease the stigma associated with childlessness.
- To build mutual understanding between couples for a life free of violence.
- To provide persons interested in Assisted Reproductive Technologies (ART) with counselling and /or assistance for the treatment.
- To empower members, especially women, economically and provide them with training and education (Adult Literacy Education).
- To encourage members to consider adoption as an alternative.

#### **ACTIVITIES**

ACCOG has four main areas/programmes:

- Advocacy and Public Education
- Counselling and Reproductive Healthcare Services
- Economic Empowerment
- Adult Literacy Education



**Fig. 1, 2.** — National Conference held on March 15, 2014 at the Pentecost Convention Centre in Gomoa Fetteh, Ghana



**Fig. 3.** — More than 1500 infertile couples attended the conference



**Fig. 4.** — Participants of the conference queuing up to have their questions answered

Up to now ACCOG has not been able to secure any funding for its activities with the exception of a onetime support it received for its National Conference held on March 15, 2014 at the Pentecost Convention Centre in Gomoa Fetteh, Ghana. The conference was unique and the first of his kind ever organized in the world. More than 1500 infertile couples attended the conference. The theme of this meeting was “Hope for childless couples in Ghana”. It was a co-organization of ACCOG and the Church of Pentecost (Fig. 1).

During this meeting different aspects of infertility and childlessness were discussed, including the consequences of childlessness namely marital instability, increase in sexually transmitted diseases and social insecurity as people give birth to more children for economic reasons.

The Chief Executive Officer of ACCOG, Nana Yaw Osei, stated that more than 60 per cent of Ghanaian women who were not able to have babies were the result of fallopian tube blockages.

The chairman of the Church of Pentecost, Apostle Dr Opoku Onyinah, who chaired the conference, advised childless couples “not to give up hope as they can have their own children or adopt legally”.

Apart from other keynote speakers, Willem Ombelet presented the Walking Egg Project (Fig. 2). This projects aims to make infertility care, including IVF, affordable and accessible for a much larger part of the world population (Ombelet 2013, 2014). Making use of a new simplified method of IVF culturing it might be possible to reduce the price for IVF by more than 80 %, it was said (Van Blerkom et al., 2014).

As a result of this meeting, negotiations started about the implementation of a Walking Egg Centre in Ghana.

So far, almost 400 childless couples and individuals have interacted with ACCOG. Only 4 couples had the budget needed for one IVF cycle and one couple had gone through the treatment twice which all failed. The big majority of infertile couples cannot afford even 50% of the existing cost for IVF. Even though ACCOG has signed an agreement with some fertility hospitals to get reduced prices of the treatments for its members and so a cumulative savings of about two thousand five hundred dollars (\$2,500) can be made, only one couple and three couples have started IVF and IUI treatments respectively. The Walking Egg project

therefore comes as a relief for the numerous couples waiting for help. We are therefore working seriously with the TWE team to get the first Centre in Ghana as soon as practicable to bring relief to persons facing infertility in Ghana and beyond.

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