

Infertility - An Emerging Issue in Reproductive Health in Nepal

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Reproductive health is always in limelight in public health. Although reproductive health is related to human reproduction it is focused on women's reproductive health probably due to both biological and socio-cultural reasons. In Nepal, for a certain period of time the focus on women's reproductive health narrowed down broader issue of health of women to reproduction and fertility. Today, despite that women's health is seen beyond the reproduction, reproductive health of women still remains in priority to address. Safe abortion as a right of women to end undesired pregnancy is not yet legally established in many parts of the world. As a historical achievement Nepal legalized safe abortion nearly two decades back. However, access to safe abortion service is a challenge in many parts of the country.

Amidst the discussions of safe fertility, infertility has been an emerging issue in reproductive health in Nepal. For a long time, infertility was not perceived as a problem of reproductive health and was pushed in shadow. It was rather considered as a social agenda and therefore was addressed differently. At present, infertility is perceived as a reproductive health problem, but it is not yet well recognized by the state policy. Infertility is widely perceived as problem of a women in the family and, in addition, stigma is attached with infertility in many societies. Perception of infertility as a reproductive health problem should not be interpreted that its multiple dimensions are well understood. They are rather blur and should draw serious attention of researchers for bringing clearer pictures of the problems in surface.

Purpose of this reflection of view is to highlight to some of the pertinent issues that need to be explored for the obvious reasons to initiate actions to address the problem of infertility in Nepal.

Problem magnitude

Problem of infertility is generally perceived both at the citizen and professional levels, but a real problem magnitude of infertility in the country is still not clear. It is generally assumed that infertility is a problem of urban population. This assumption cannot be validated without the evidences. Information about prevalence of infertility in the country and its distribution across the population and geographical regions is lacking. It is necessary to draw attention of researchers and research institutions towards this need of the country to generate relevant information as a basis of necessary policy development.

Marketization of infertility services

Infertility is not addressed in the national policy as a part of reproductive health and, therefore, infertility services are not provided by the public sector till date. This has created a wide gap between the rising needs and supply of the services. This gap of infertility services is naturally filled by the private corporate market. Since there is no effective regulation of state to health market, as in other health services, marketization of infertility services is resulted in serious consequences in Nepal.

Cost of infertility services

One of the implications of marketization is high financial burden to infertility service users. Due to uncontrolled market price infertility service users are compelled to pay high cost of the services. As a result of lacking of transparency in costing of the services in the market, total cost of services is unpredictable for the service users that lead to significant dropout in service. Many needy infertility service seekers are unable to access to the services because of the high cost beyond their capacity to pay.

Rational use of services

Structure, technology and human resources are available in the country. Use of technology in the market to address the problem of infertility is widespread. However, their safe and rational use for infertility services in the market is an agenda of serious concern. System and mechanism to assess the appropriateness of these services do not exist in the country. People are largely not aware to assess their own needs for the infertility services. This situation may be favorable for the market to promote infertility services in irrational way.

Quality of services

In addition to appropriateness, question of quality of infertility services is equally critical. In absence of system to monitor the service the indicators and parameters of service quality are not in place. The infertility service users themselves are not able to judge the quality of services they are using. Therefore the service users are paying high cost despite the uncertainty of outcome of the services.

The way out of infertility problem

There is no mathematical formula to solve the infertility problem. But, there are ways to respond problem. A true commitment of the state to address infertility as a problem is prerequisite for this.

The state policy should recognize infertility as a part of the reproductive health and access to infertility services as a right of citizen. These services should be reflected in the public health service and other sector programmes as the primary responsibility of the state. The role and engagement of private sector in providing infertility services should be clearly built in the government policy and strategy.

Infertility should be no longer a hidden problem of people. Pain and suffering of people from infertility problem on the ground of their inability to pay for services is unacceptable. There are challenges, but they can be overcome.

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