

Breaking the Silence: Unveiling the Stigma and Struggles of Women Undergoing Infertility Treatment in Chennai

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Abstract

Background: Infertility profoundly affects women, impacting their emotional, social, and psychological well-being. Women undergoing infertility treatment often face significant stigma, leading to feelings of inadequacy and isolation. Societal pressures to conceive exacerbate emotional distress and strain relationships. Additionally, the financial burden of treatment adds to these challenges.

Title: “Exploring the stigma and life challenges faced by women undergoing infertility treatment at selected Tertiary Care Centre in Chennai.”

Objective: To explore the stigma and life challenges faced by women undergoing infertility treatment at selected Tertiary Care Centre in Chennai.

Materials and Methods: The study adopted a phenomenological qualitative research design with 10 participants selected using purposive sampling. Data collection included socio-demographic data forms and semi-structured interviews.

Results: The findings revealed five key themes. The Emotional Impact theme highlighted a strong desire for motherhood, with treatment failures leading to sadness, hopelessness, and feelings of personal failure. Social Stigma involves societal expectations, hurtful comments, and exclusion. Relationship Dynamics revealed the marital strain, though some women found support from their husbands. Coping Strategies included avoiding triggering situations, reliance on spirituality, and emotional resilience. Financial and Physical Strain addressed the financial burden and physical exhaustion of treatment.

Conclusion: The study underscores the multifaceted challenges women face during infertility treatment, emphasizing the need for comprehensive support systems, including emotional and financial resources, to improve care delivery and enhance emotional well-being.

Keywords: Stigma, Life challenges, Infertility women, Tertiary Care Centre

Introduction

Infertility is a complex condition that significantly impacts women, causing emotional, psychological, and

social challenges. The World Health Organization defines infertility as the inability to conceive after 12 months of unprotected intercourse, affecting around 15% of couples worldwide. The stigma surrounding infertility, driven by societal expectations that equate womanhood with motherhood, intensifies the emotional burden. Women often face insensitive comments, contributing to feelings of inadequacy and shame, further isolating them.

Infertility also leads to lifestyle challenges, such as avoiding social events to escape conversations about childlessness, which can cause loneliness and increase mental health issues like anxiety and depression. Relationship strain is common, as infertility creates pressure and conflict in partnerships. Financially, the cost of treatments like IVF, often not covered by insurance, adds significant stress.

In addition, lifestyle adjustments such as healthier eating and regular exercise can be difficult amidst the stress of treatment. Balancing personal, work, and treatment demands can be overwhelming.

This study explores the stigma and lifestyle challenges faced by women undergoing infertility treatment, using qualitative methods to gain deeper insights into the emotional, social, and practical aspects of infertility. The goal is to highlight the need for comprehensive support systems to improve care and enhance emotional well-being for these women.

Background of the Study

Global Scenario: Infertility affects 15% of couples worldwide, with 186 million individuals experiencing the condition, according to WHO. Prevalence rates vary, ranging from 8% to 30%, especially in low-income countries where stigma and limited resources hinder access to treatments. In the U.S., 12.1% of women face fertility challenges, and one in six couples in Europe may also experience infertility.

National Scenario: In India, approximately 27.5 million couples are affected by infertility, with a prevalence rate of 10-15%. Societal pressure and cultural stigma lead to emotional distress for many women. The high cost of ART limits access, with over 60% of couples unable to afford treatment.

State Scenario: In Tamil Nadu, 10-14% of couples face infertility, with significant emotional and social repercussions. Despite better healthcare infrastructure, treatment access remains limited due to high costs and low awareness, though initiatives are underway to improve support.

Need for the study

Infertility is a significant global health issue, affecting around 15% of couples. The emotional, psychological, and social impacts of infertility require urgent attention. Women undergoing infertility treatment often face emotional distress, including feelings of sadness, hopelessness, and inadequacy, which can lead to higher rates of anxiety and depression. This underscores the need for robust mental health support to enhance their well-being. Additionally, societal stigma surrounding infertility often isolates women, contributing to feelings of shame and inadequacy. Addressing this stigma is crucial for fostering empathy and creating a supportive environment where women feel safe seeking help. Financial strain due to the high costs of fertility treatments is another challenge, adding significant stress and making treatment less accessible. This study will explore these financial barriers and advocate for more affordable options. Lifestyle changes recommended during treatment, such as dietary and exercise adjustments, can also be challenging to implement. Understanding these multifaceted issues is essential for healthcare providers to deliver compassionate, comprehensive care and improve the support available for women navigating infertility.

Statement of the Problem

“Exploring the stigma and life challenges faced by women undergoing infertility treatment at selected Tertiary Care Centre in Chennai”

Objectives

To explore the stigma and life challenges faced by women undergoing infertility treatment at selected Tertiary Care Centre in Chennai.

Research Tradition

The research tradition for this study employs a qualitative approach, focusing on participants' lived experiences and perceptions regarding infertility and its challenges.

Assumption

The assumption is that women undergoing infertility treatment experience significant stigma and life challenges, impacting their emotional well-being and treatment outcomes.

Research Question

What stigma and life challenges do women face while undergoing infertility treatment?

Delimitation

- Limited to infertility women only.
- The study period is limited to 4 weeks
- Limited size sample.
- The study is delimited to IOG only.

Methods & Materials

In this study, a qualitative research approach was adopted, utilizing a phenomenological design to explore the experiences of women undergoing infertility treatment. The study was conducted at the Institute of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, Egmore, in Chennai, a tertiary care centre. Data was collected through a combination of a demographic questionnaire (Section-A) and a one-on-one interview schedule (Section-B), with audio recordings of interviews lasting between 10-20 minutes. The sample comprised 10 women who were seeking infertility treatment at the center, meeting specific inclusion criteria and willing to participate during the study period. A non-probability purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants based on the research objectives. The inclusion criteria required participants to have been undergoing infertility treatment for more than two years, be able to communicate in Tamil or English and demonstrate cooperation. Exclusion criteria involved women with severe illness, those uninterested in the study, and those already participating in other studies. Content validity was established by experts in nursing and obstetrics, and the reliability of the tool was assessed using inter-rater reliability.

The data was obtained and analysed by **the NVivo qualitative analysis method.**

Ethical considerations

The study was ethically approved by the ethical committee and the Director of the Institute of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, following principles of beneficence, respect for human dignity, confidentiality, and informed consent. Participants were selected voluntarily, with confidentiality maintained and consent ob-

tained before participation.

Figure 1. Thematic Analysis



Results

The qualitative findings revealed five main themes: Emotional Impact, Social Stigma, Relationship Dynamics, Coping Strategies, and Financial and Physical Strain. Women undergoing infertility treatment experienced profound emotional challenges, including sadness, hopelessness, and feelings of failure, driven by the intense desire for motherhood and societal expectations. Social stigma emerged as a significant issue, with participants facing taunts, insensitivity, and social exclusion. Relationship dynamics were strained, particularly with spouses and in-laws, though some husbands were supportive. Coping strategies included avoidance, spirituality, and emotional resilience. Financial burdens and physical exhaustion from treatments, along with health complications, further compounded the challenges faced by these women.

Discussion

The thematic analysis highlights the multifaceted emotional, social, and physical challenges women face during infertility treatment. The stigma of involuntary childlessness exacerbates feelings of inadequacy and hopelessness, as noted by **Senim and Gül (2024)**, who found that societal perceptions significantly impact women's psychological well-being and lead to social isolation. Similarly, **Sharma et al. (2024)** identified themes of social pressure and psychological vulnerabilities in infertile women, emphasizing how stigma and emotional distress strain marital and social relationships. Financial burdens, emotional distress, and inadequate psychosocial support are further compounded by societal expectations, as seen in **Njogu et al. (2022)**, who explored coping strategies like religious practices and social withdrawal among women undergoing infertility treatment in Kenya. These findings collectively underscore the necessity for comprehensive interventions, including psychological support, public education, and partner involvement, to alleviate emotional distress, reduce stigma, and improve the overall well-being of women undergoing infertility treatment.

Summary

The study, conducted at IOG, Tertiary Care Centre, Chennai, used a qualitative phenomenological design to explore the stigma and life challenges faced by women undergoing infertility treatment. Five key themes emerged: intense Desire for Motherhood driven by personal and societal pressures; profound Sadness and

Hopelessness from prolonged infertility; feelings of inadequacy linked to the Experience of Failure; Social Stigma leading to exclusion and emotional distress; and Relationship Dynamics, highlighting marital strain and challenges with in-laws, though some found support from husbands. Coping strategies included Avoidance, Spirituality, and Emotional Resilience. Financial and Physical Strain added to their complex struggles.

Implications of the Study

This study provides practical insights into nursing education, practice, administration, and research.

Nursing Education

Train nurses on infertility causes, cultural sensitivity, and effective communication. Equip them to manage co-morbidities, provide emotional support, and promote lifestyle changes. Encourage advocacy, holistic care, and awareness of ethical considerations in reproductive health.

Nursing Administration

Develop policies for equitable access to reproductive health services. Implement staff training, interdisciplinary collaboration, and community outreach. Advocate resource allocation, monitor outcomes, and ensure evidence-based, ethical practices.

Nursing Practice

Assess reproductive health needs and provide individualized care. Offer counselling, educate on fertility-enhancing lifestyle changes, and facilitate specialist referrals. Maintain sensitivity, confidentiality, and evidence-based practices in patient care.

Nursing Research

Conduct studies on infertility's psychological impact, barriers to care, and interventions. Explore the efficacy of education, lifestyle changes, and nursing roles in infertility. Disseminate findings to advance practice and inform policies.

Recommendations

Investigate psychological effects, holistic approaches, and socio-economic impacts of infertility. Conduct comparative studies, explore cultural beliefs, and assess nursing interventions. Study technology's role, family dynamics, and lifestyle impacts on fertility.

Limitations

Small sample sizes and self-reported data limit generalizability. Short duration, geographic restriction, and qualitative focus reduce scope. Biases and emotional distress may affect data, with limited exploration of co-morbidities.

Conclusion

This study explored the experiences of women facing infertility and its implications for nursing practice. The findings reveal the emotional, social, and medical challenges women encounter, emphasizing the need for holistic care. Nurses play a crucial role in providing education, emotional support, and tailored

interventions to enhance patient care. The study highlights the importance of understanding individual circumstances and fostering interdisciplinary collaboration to ensure comprehensive support. It underscores the need for ongoing research to expand knowledge, improve evidence-based practices, and address diverse needs. Advancing nursing care in infertility can enhance outcomes and quality of life for affected women.

THEMES	SUBTHEMES
Theme 1: Emotional Impact	Desire for Motherhood
	Sadness and Hopelessness
	Experience of Failure
Theme 2: Social Stigma	Societal Expectations
	Taunting and Insensitivity
	Social Exclusion
Theme 3: Relationship Dynamics	Marital Strain
	Lack of Understanding from In-Laws
	Supportive Husbands
Theme 4: Coping Strategies	Avoidance
	Spirituality
	Emotional Resilience
Theme 5: Financial and Physical Strain	Financial Burden
	Physical Exhaustion
	Health Complications

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