

Effect of infertility on women in the occupied Palestinian territory: a pilot qualitative study

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Background Palestinian fertility is at the forefront of political, demographic, and social debates. However, little is known about the effect of infertility on women. Evidence suggests that 7–8% of Palestinian couples have difficulty conceiving, with causes attributable to half the women and half the men. The social, psychological, economic, and physical effects of infertility on women living in the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt) were assessed.

Methods In this pilot qualitative study, 34 women (mean age 30 years, range 19–42) attending four primary health-care clinics in the north and south West Bank were interviewed by four research assistants, including DH and LH, with a locally developed semistructured interview schedule, which was piloted and modified accordingly. Approval to undertake the study was obtained from the Institute of Community and Public Health, Birzeit University, Ramallah, West Bank, oPt. Participants provided verbal informed consent. Data were analysed by reading and rereading transcripts until themes and subthemes were identified.

Findings Women reported physical symptoms that they associated with infertility, including insomnia, fatigue, dizziness, palpitations, and breathing problems. Most reported feeling emotionally drained or overwhelmed, frustrated, and hopeless. Feelings of anxiety, sadness, and *hamm* (a combination of different feelings, including anger, distress, frustration, grief, incapacitation, worry, and sorrow) were common. Most women described a void in their lives, feeling incomplete, and unable to fulfil their role as mothers. Fear of ageing without children was common, and some women reported excessive crying at home. The social effect of infertility depended on the surrounding support. Some women reported that their in-laws were more supportive than were their own families. Other women reported cruel treatment by their in-laws, including blaming the woman for the couple's infertility. The effect of communal gossip was felt strongly, making women feel hurt and stigmatised. Almost all women noted a substantial economic burden in their struggle to conceive.

Interpretation Physical symptoms might be due to severe pressure on women because of their inability to fulfil their biological and social roles. Symptoms might also be due to treatments, especially hormonal therapy and surgery; the side-effects for these treatments include discomfort, irritability, physical pain, and mood changes. In Palestinian society, children provide social security in old age, making infertility a serious long-term issue related to the care of elderly family members. Efforts must be made to attend to the physical, social, psychological, and economic needs of women dealing with infertility.

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Contributors

All authors contributed to the conceptualisation of this study. DH and LH participated in the fieldwork. DH wrote the Abstract and the other authors read and provided comments.

Conflicts of interest

We declare that we have no conflicts of interest.

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