

# Views on Child Adoption among Omani Women with Infertility: A Qualitative Study

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## Abstract

Research on views about child adoption in the Islamic and Arabic countries is limited. This study explored perceptions of child adoption among Omani women with polycystic ovarian syndrome (PCOS) and infertility. Semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were conducted with 20 Omani women diagnosed with PCOS and infertility across two fertility clinics, in Muscat-Oman. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and analysed using the framework approach. The average age of women was 28 years old with an average of 4 years of infertility treatment. Participants shared that adoption is uncommon and not considered a societal norm in Oman and thus taking this step would affirm a couple's sterility. Participants perceived that adoption is prohibited in Islam and is socially rejected for reasons related to whom these children are or where they originate from. Despite this, participants appeared to be more open to the notion of adoption. However, they expressed concerns about lacking in affection due to them not being biological offspring. Women also felt that they would be responsible for exposing children to unfavourable situations especially in the future where they most often will be discriminated socially, due to negative cultural perceptions about adoption. Many women with infertility are willing to adopt children despite the many concerns related to the origin of these children and the emotional and social challenges of their upbringing. Efforts of community adoption advocates and Islamic scholars should be combined in an attempt to normalize the notion of adoption in the society.

**Keywords:** Polycystic Ovary Syndrome, Infertility, Adoption, Qualitative Research, Oman.

## Introduction

Infertility or childlessness is defined as the failure of a couple to achieve a clinical pregnancy after 12 or more months of regular unprotected sexual intercourse (Vander Borgh & Wyns, 2018). Infertility is a global health issue affecting between 50 and 80 million people, affecting 8% to 12% of couples (Nik Hussain Nik, Mohd Noor, Ismail Shaiful, & Nik Ahmad Nik Muhammad, 2022). Infertility in the Middle East is estimated to vary between 10-15% among married couples (Serour, 2008).

Islam is a religion that places emphasis on fertility and this is associated with the tolerance of polygamy in this religion. Moreover, in Islam marriage and thus procreation are linked to both mental and physical stability (Fido & Zahid, 2004). Therefore, child adoption (adoption) could be the only solution for couples who struggle with infertility.

Adoption is defined as the act of legally taking a child to take care of as one's own (Cadoret, 1995), and started as a way to preserve family lineage, secure inheritance, and forge alliances

but has evolved as a process for meeting the needs of adults who desire children of their own (Brodzinsky & Schechter, 1990). Adoption is an alternative to having children among infertile couples and is believed to bring them joy and fulfilment (Reitz & Watson, 1992).

In Western countries adoption is a well-known practice and many agencies exist to assist couples. However, studies conducted in African countries report cultural practices, stigmatization, financial implications, and high value placed on blood relation as barriers to adoption (Nachinab, Donkor, & Naab, 2019). Preference for having biological children was determined as one of the most important barriers to adoption in a study among infertile Iranian women (M. Bokaie, T. Farajkhoda, B. Enjezab, P. Heidari, & M. Karimi Zarchi, 2012). Adoption is not accepted among families in Eastern countries as motherhood is deemed an important role for females (Pinaki, Basu, & Bhadoria, 2011). Children, particularly boys, establish a woman's status as well as psychological security within patriarchal family unit structures (Sami & Saeed Ali, 2012). Research shows that in Asia, Africa and Latin America reasons for adoption are very different compared to Western countries. These include a preference for bearing a male, financial security, social status and links to child trafficking and organ harvesting (Agbo, 2014; Leinaweaver & Seligmann, 2009).

Islam is supportive of and advocates helping orphaned children. Among Arabic communities this is often achieved through financial support for these children, who are most often abandoned, whose parents are unknown and who are under the care of the country's government (Büchler, 2018). However, when it comes to adoption, Islam has its implications and different legal consequences related to giving the adopted child the family's name which has implications for inheritance compared to the West (Huda, 2019). In the West, the adopted child carries the family name, which is a step rejected by Islam (Mignot, 2019). Therefore, the Islamic rules that apply between non-related persons are still valid. For instance, adopted children

have no rights to inherit from adoptive parents and the child is permitted to marry any biological children the adoptive parents may have (Büchler, 2018). However foster and semi-familial relationships can be created if the adopted child was under two years of age and breast fed by the adoptive mother. This action creates a foster relation and therefore the adopted child is considered an unmarried person to the adoptive family and as such there is no need to cover up as a stranger in the presence of a direct adoptive family member of the opposite gender.

In Oman, childbirth is expected following marriage; and in laws often place pressure on women to conceive, where blame for infertility is placed on women and it is socially stigmatizing to refer childlessness to men (ALSumri, Szatkowski, Gibson, Fiaschi, & Bains, 2023). Not bearing a child exposes women to further societal pressures, to allow their husbands to remarry to be able to have children, which could create marital tensions between couples (ALSumri et al., 2023). Considering the views towards adoption within Omani culture, especially among infertile women, is thus warranted.

Therefore, the aim of this study was to understand views on adoption among Omani women with infertility and the role of societal and cultural beliefs.

## Materials and Methods

### Study setting, population, recruitment and sampling

This qualitative study was carried out in two fertility clinics; Sultan Qaboos University hospital (SQUH) and Royal Hospital (RH) located in the capital city of Oman-Muscat. Omani women diagnosed with primary or secondary infertility (have had a pregnancy before but with no living children) and following up in any of these two fertility clinics were identified from clinic lists. Since the study was carried out in female fertility clinics, infertility was attributed to women. First, the researcher obtained clinic lists for women

scheduled to attend the infertility centres between June 2018 to August 2018. Potential participants were identified based on a purposive sampling strategy to ensure women were recruited that represented different age groups, duration of infertility and duration of infertility treatment, to ensure brevity and depth. The researcher contacted eligible women via telephone and briefed them about the study and invited them to take part, prior to their hospital appointment. The study information sheet was emailed to individuals that expressed an interest in participating, while others were happy to read the study information sheet on the day of the interview prior to interview commencement.

#### Ethical approval

Ethical approval was obtained from the two hospitals. Approval for Sultan Qaboos University Hospital was obtained from Sultan Qaboos University Medical Ethics Committee for SQU hospital. Ethical approval to recruit from Royal Hospital was obtained from the Ministry of Health-Research and Ethical Review and Approve Committee-Directorate General for Planning and Studies.

#### Interview guide and procedure

A semi-structured interview guide was developed based on the literature review and study objectives. This was deemed appropriate to ensure interviews were participant-led, affording the opportunity to follow up aspects with individuals, accordingly, facilitating the collection of a rich and valid perspectives (422). Participants were given a consent form to sign before interviews commenced, were assured about data confidentiality and their right to withdraw. All interviews were conducted in a private, quiet room in the fertility clinic either before or after patients' appointments, were conducted in Arabic and were digitally audio-recorded.

#### Analysis

Audio recordings were translated and transcribed by a translating agent and then transcripts were checked by the researcher to ensure they were accurate and to ensure any

identifiable information was anonymised. Transcripts were analysed using the framework approach, which is a systematic method for managing qualitative data, where the generated codes along with the summarized data are charted to allow interpretation and synthesis (Gale, Heath, Cameron, Rashid, & Redwood, 2013). Transcripts were exported into NVivo 11 software to facilitate data management and analysis. Transcripts were read and reread to facilitate familiarization. Further readings led to initial codes being identified and assigned to extracts throughout the transcripts, which utilised an inductive approach. Initial codes were then developed to generate a working analytical framework. The identified codes were compared between the researchers and modified to include all viewpoints and further grouped into clearly defined categories or "Themes", which was applied to a subset of transcripts, deemed to offer both breadth and depth. The analytical framework was then applied to the remaining transcripts, where any new codes were also incorporated, accordingly. Finally, the data was charted into framework matrices, which involved charting summarized data for each theme and sub-themes from each transcript to facilitate data synthesis and reporting.

## Results

### Participants demographics

Twenty-three females were approached based on eligibility criteria, 3 of whom could not take part, due to time constraints (n=2) and transport related reasons (n=1). Interviews averaged 47 minutes (ranged from 29 minutes to 68 minutes). Most women were from the region of Muscat (n=7, 35%) and half were in employment and most had a high school education or a higher educational degree (n=17, 85%). The average number of years participants reported trying to conceive was 4 years, (range 1 to 12 years). These women reported receiving infertility treatment for the same length of time. Only 5 (25%) of the participants had conceived previously, but these ended in miscarriage.

### Qualitative findings

Two core themes were identified each with corresponding sub-themes (Table 1). Each is considered in turn below, with supportive

extracts throughout. Quotes are labelled with a participant code e.g. 21YRS\_3INF, where the initial number denotes participant's age, and (3INF) indicates the number of years the participant had been experiencing infertility.

Table (1): Themes and corresponding sub-themes

Core themes	Sub-themes	Frequency of sub-theme
<b>Societal and cultural views on adoption</b>	1.1 Adoption is forbidden in Islam	6
	1.2 Rejection of whom these children are	8
	1.3 Confirmation of couple's sterility	5
<b>Women's views on adoption</b>	2.1 Limitations in raising adopted children	6
	2.2 Lack of real compassion towards adopted children	8
	2.3 Exposing adopted children to unfavourable social situations	6

Discussions with the participants provided insights into their opinions on adoption within the context of living in Oman.

A notable group of women rejected the idea as they pointed out that adoption is uncommon and is not a norm within Omani culture. A couple of women reported never knowing/hearing about the possibility of adopting children and raising them as their own. While others never heard of any of their friends or relatives who had adopted before.

"This idea didn't come across my mind before; we didn't talk about it or discuss this issue before. I did not know that this is possible at all...All I know that you can only sponsor an orphan by sending money on a monthly basis to some bank accounts" (31 yrs. 10 INF)

Analysis found that women shared some of the common beliefs among the community, surrounding adoption, which resulted in several sub-themes

#### 1. Societal and cultural views on adoption

Results suggested that the community in general held negative views towards adoption and this was mainly attributed to reasons related to the common faulty religious beliefs of Islam forbidding adoption and reasons related to the origin of these children who are put for adoption. Further anticipated challenges of these children's upbringing were also reported by the interviewed women. These reasons are mentioned in more detail below:

##### 1.1 Adoption is forbidden in Islam

Many participants believed that Islam forbids adoption and therefore those who do adopt are considered to be disobeying Islamic rules and regulations, and therefore they are deemed to be sinful as a result. Participants mentioned that adopted children are considered strangers to the opposite gender of their adoptive parents especially when they mature, as they are not their biological offspring. As a result, participants discussed that adopted girls will have to cover up in the presence of her adoptive

father when she becomes a grown up woman. She will not be allowed to have close physical contact with her adoptive father such as, shake hands, hug or kiss him as biological daughters might do with their fathers. Participants reported that in Islam, adopted girls could get married to their adoptive father, as they are considered strangers to them. These beliefs appeared to serve as barriers to adoption for some participants:

“If the adopted kid is a girl, people will say how your husband will treat her in the future and if it is a boy they will ask you how you would treat him in the future??...so after raising him or her, I should take them out of the family which is not acceptable...so I don't think that I can raise a baby boy and when he gets older I would be told by Islamic scholars that I can't treat him like before and he is a stranger to me” (35 yrs\_10 INF)

### 1.2 Rejection of whom these children are

The second reason for the community's negative views about adoption related to where these children originated. Participants perceived that most of these children are believed to be foundlings, a result of sinful relationships (i.e. out of wedlock). They are considered to have been abandoned right after delivery due to the shame associated with them. Participants explained that children from such circumstances are often left at mosque doors or at hospital doorsteps to then be taken to orphanages. Participants admitted that it is difficult to accept children of unknown parents, as they believe they will be hugely discriminated and treated unfavourably in the community:

“My brought a little baby girl home, whose parents died in a car accident and she was abandoned by her extended family...so people didn't believe the story and said she must be a foundling child...and when she got married, a huge party was done for her and people said "why do you spend all this money on a foundling child?! She doesn't deserve all this, we don't even know where did she come from, we don't even know her family” (31 yrs\_10 INF)

Participants perceived it was more common and acceptable to raise an

orphaned child from family members instead, as these children are considered

family members and it is their responsibility to look after them e.g., following the loss of

their parents. A participant mentioned:

“In some cases when parents die and their children are left alone they will be raised by the family relatives which is ok and normal because they are considered from the family and everyone should be responsible for raising them and it happened before several times” (22 yrs\_7 INF)

### 1.3 Confirmation of a couple's sterility

Some participants indicated that adoption served to confirm a couple's sterility among their community. Adoption is seen as the last resort for couples that cannot conceive as it is considered a huge step and no one is expected to have the courage to do it in Omani society, unless they have been diagnosed with sterility or if couples are too old to have children of their own. Therefore, other couples would prefer to get divorced or remarry than adopt children for the sake of experiencing parenthood:

“If the couple are too old and waited for a very long time to conceive it's ok to embrace a child, but if it was for a couple who are still trying and young it's not an option to adopt or embrace a child, people might say that there must be something wrong with them and they must have been told they are sterile” (22 yrs\_2 INF)

### 2. Women's views on adoption

More than half of the women were seemingly open to the idea of adopting, but they still expressed concerns in taking this step. These included perceiving that there were limits to raising adopted children, feeling that they would lack real compassion towards them, and that they would be responsible for exposing them to societal discrimination; these sub-themes are discussed below;

## 2.1 Limitations in raising adopted children

A handful of participants thought it would be a challenge to raise adopted children. Concerns around how to discipline them were raised, where many thought it would not be appropriate to scold them or get angry at them, or maybe spank them if they did anything wrong as parents might normally do with their own children. They also discussed how doing this would be considered an abuse or a sin because they are not their biological children and they are expected to be merciful towards them:

“I can say that it is a big responsibility and not an easy one...I mean it is not like your own child...when it is your child you can punish if he does anything wrong, everyone will think this is your way to raise kids but when he is adopted it can be seen as an abuse and not an upbringing” (25 yrs\_2 INF)

Another woman mentioned

“... when you adopt a child, you can't feel that he is your child that has your

soul...the adoption is different; for example, if he has done something wrong

and you punished or hit him you will be considered as you have done a sin” (30 yrs\_4 INF)

## 2.2 Lack of real compassion towards adopted children

Women expressed an additional concern around feeling a lack of real love, compassion and emotion towards adopted children being non-biological to them as many felt that they would not be able to accept them after adoption and give them the love and care they needed, as they would perhaps give more naturally to their own biological children.

“One day I thought about it before but then I was afraid not to accept them after embracing them and treat them without feelings or compassion” (33 yrs\_3 INF)

An additional source of concern was that children in return would lose the love towards their adoptive parents after learning that they

were adopted. Women were worried that a strong familial tie cannot be created with adoptive children especially when they come to know about their adoption status. Many assumed adopted children would learn of this, when they are older, and thus how they would react would be unpredictable, which seemed to create fear among them. A 35-year-old woman with 10 years of infertility added:

“Whatever it is but there is no any real relationship between the parents and the child even if you raise him...I know a woman in my neighbourhood who have been raised by a couple but later I didn't feel that she was compassionate to her adoptive mother who raised her...I didn't feel that it was a real relationship...this is my opinion” (35 yrs\_10 INF)

## 2.3 Exposing adopted children to unfavourable social situations

Women were concerned about adopted children being mistreated by others, given that adoption is not an accepted practice nor the norm in the society for the shared reasons in theme 1. For instance, several participants were fearful that an adopted child would be rejection by other family members, and that this would cause the child suffering. Furthermore, they revealed how adopted children might themselves reject their adoptive parents in the future thinking they were adopted out of sympathy:

“My only concern is that when they grow up and understand that we are not their true parents...at that moment they will start thinking that we were sympathetic and brought them here to live with us etc...and when they start to be independent they will say that we raised them and spent money on them despite that they don't know us and to be honest, I don't like to be the reason for that mercy feeling that they might feel later on” (19 yrs\_1 INF)

A 28 years old woman with 3 years of infertility added:

“For me, why should I bring a child and let people treat him unfairly and make him feel that he is embraced and looks pathetic to others, because he is not living with his real

parents after all I will be the one responsible for him to have all these feelings and misery, as it wasn't his choice"(28yrs\_3 INF)

Another participant noted that even if adopted children were accepted by the community initially, no one would accept them for marriage as they are of unknown origin, and family lineage is considered to be very important in marriage, in Omani society:

"It is going to be easier when they are children but when they are older it is going to have many problems .... for instance, If you raise a girl who was a foundling child, and one of your family members falls in love with her and want to marry her it is going to be a big problem....in our culture people will not accept them as part of their families" (30 yrs\_4 INF)

## Discussion

Whilst some women in this study were open and willing to consider adoption, they described barriers around it. Many women either did not hear about couples who have adopted or did not have enough knowledge about the possibility of taking up this action in Oman. Adopting –sponsoring- orphans financially is a common social practice but not raising them at their homes. This means that a couple will bear the living costs of a selected orphan in the orphanage without raising him/her as their own at home. Adoption might be thought of by Western societies as a reasonable available solution for infertile couples to overcome the negative consequences of infertility and its treatment failure (Bowie, 2004). However, given the religious and cultural background in Oman and the surrounding regions, adoption is generally not viewed as favourably. Participants shared that within their community and culture more broadly, adoption was not widely accepted, due to reasons such as not knowing anything about the child's biological parents. A study in Ghana showed that there is a high premium on biological parenting as family is defined by how members are related by blood or marriage (Wanitzek, 2013). A similar attitude was found in Nigeria where an adopted child is never

considered a family member for similar reasons related to blood connection (Onayemi & Aderinto, 2019). An additional barrier to adoption was found to be the common belief around the origin of these children to be a result of a sinful relationship outside the context of marriage and therefore abandoned by their biological parents rather than being offered legally for adoption as the case in Western societies. Thus, they are considered as a source of stigma and shame in the society.

Another reason for adoption to be refused culturally is the common misconception around the Islamic teachings of adoption. A commonly held belief is that Islam has restrictions and prohibitions around adoption. However, the common religious perception around adoption in the society that it is strictly prohibited is not truer, as Islam fully supports taking care of orphaned children and Islamic scholars do allow adoption following certain conditions (Huda, 2019), such as the adopted child not being given the family name. Giving the adopted child the family name is a step that is not allowed in Islam as it will have implications towards their eligibility for inheritance. The right to inherit can only be granted if there is a kinship or blood relationship and through marriage, therefore, an adopted child is not one of the legal heirs and is not entitled to the inheritance of the adoptive parents (Tanawijaya2, 2021). In addition, adoptive mothers can breast feed her adopted children if they were below two years of age to create a foster relationship and thus remove the restrictions between the parents and the adoptive children of the opposite gender after maturity (Huda, 2019). These facts were not known among the study sample and this reflects the low knowledge and awareness around this topic in the community.

Many of the participants in this study added that adoption is culturally considered a confirmation of a couple's sterility. Similarly, infertile women in India stated adoption would only be considered as a last resort for infertility, as there are negative familial attitude towards adoption (Ali & Sami, 2007). Rejection of adoption was also a common finding in neighbouring countries such as Kuwait (Fido,

2004), Turkey (Karaca & Unsal, 2015) and Nigeria (Upkong & Orji, 2006), that are believed to share the same religious and cultural backgrounds with Oman. Despite this, and due to the instinctive desire among women to practice motherhood, the majority of the interviewed women in this study reported adoption as a possible option but only if bearing a child of their own becomes medically impossible, though the point at which this would happen was unclear. Moreover, they shared a number of concerns to take this step: fearful that they would lack compassion towards these children after adoption and that they perceived limits in using the traditional ways in raising them like beating or scolding as this might be seen as an abusive behaviour, not being their biological children. In addition, women expressed their concerns from being rejected by their adoptive children when they know about their adoption and to have religious restrictions dealing with the ones of the opposite gender when they grow up into adulthood as they will be considered strangers. Moreover, many women shared their concern to be the ones responsible to expose these children to society's discrimination and rejection. These barriers are related to religious misconceptions and to anticipated emotional fears that could be tackled and corrected if the topic of adoption is more widely discussed by adoption advocates and religious figures in the society. A study on barriers to adoption among 240 Iranian couples with infertility reported the unwillingness of 82% of them to adopt (Mahshid Bokaie, Tahmineh Farajkhoda, Behnaz Enjezab, Pooran Heidari, & Mojgan Karimi Zarchi, 2012). Similar barriers to that shared by participants in our study were found among Iranian couples such as social stigmatization, willingness to self-motherhood and fear not to love them as real parents (Mahshid Bokaie et al., 2012). Iran is an Islamic country and share the same Islamic teachings to that practised in Oman.

### Strengths and limitations

This study is the first to utilize a qualitative method to understand perceptions of child

adoption from a total of 20 women with infertility due to PCOS from different age groups and years of infertility across two urban tertiary fertility centres in Oman. However, these perceptions are of the women alone who were the reason behind infertility in this study. Therefore, results cannot be generalized to those with male factor or mutual causes of infertility. Moreover, the perceptions around adoption were not captured from the husbands nor from women who attend fertility centres in the rural cities who might have different views and beliefs on the phenomenon under study.

### Conclusion and recommendations

The study findings indicate that adoption is still not considered a cultural norm in Oman. Lack of the proper understanding around the Islamic teachings of adoption and the wide cultural misconceptions together with the perceived barriers related to these children's upbringing make child adoption a challenge to women with long standing infertility. More initiatives should be undertaken to raise public awareness about infertility and its psychosocial consequences and correcting the religious and cultural misconceptions around the notion of child adoption in the Omani society. This will help overcome the current stigma socially associated with child adoption and help couples with infertility get better supported both religiously and socially with their decision of child adoption.

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