

Infertility experiences of women living in Baa Atoll, Maldives

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Background

The main objective of this study was to understand the experiences of infertile women in Baa Atoll, Maldives.

Research questions:

1. What are the experiences of infertile women in Baa atoll, Maldives?
2. What are the treatment and support-related experiences of infertile women in Baa atoll, Maldives?

Infertility is a growing public health problem around the world. Statistics show that approximately 10% of the world's female population experiences issues related to infertility (WHO, 2021). The issue of infertility is also present in Maldives, but only limited data is publicly available on the issue. Infertile women suffer stigmatization and discrimination due to the condition of infertility in many societies of the world (Hodin, 2017). Hence, many affected individuals and couples opt for fertility treatment to satisfy their desires to have a child and to fit in the societies that they live in. Meanwhile, the data on infertility in Maldives is limited and there are no publicly available studies that explore the issue of infertility in Maldives. For these reasons, it is important to explore this issue further starting from the community level in Maldives. Infertility is a growing public health problem around the world. Statistics show that approximately 10% of the world's female population experiences issues related to infertility (WHO, 2021). The issue of infertility is also present in

Maldives, but only limited data is publicly available on the issue. Infertile women suffer stigmatization and discrimination due to the condition of infertility in many societies of the world (Hodin, 2017). Hence, many affected individuals and couples opt for fertility treatment to satisfy their desires to have a child and to fit in the societies that they live in. Meanwhile, the data on infertility in Maldives is limited and there are no publicly available studies that explore the issue of infertility in Maldives. For these reasons, it is important to explore this issue further starting from the community level in Maldives.

Methodology

The main purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of infertile women living in Baa Atoll, Maldives. Hence, a descriptive case study approach was used for this study to explore the issue in Baa Atoll. The sampling techniques used in this study were purposive sampling and exponential non-discriminative snowball sampling. The above two methods were used because there is no infertility register available and the infertility is an extremely sensitive issue that is not loudly spoken within the Maldivian community. Face to face in-depth interviews were used to collect data for the study. A total of 13 participants from different islands of Baa Atoll were interviewed to get a deep understanding of the issue and to reach the data saturation.

Results/Findings & Implications

The findings of this study offered a deep insight of the experiences of infertile women in Baa Atoll, Maldives. Infertility affects the mental and emotional experiences of these women very deeply. The sorrow, pain, and anguish of these women cannot be imagined by many people. Failed attempts in getting pregnant, as well as repetitive negative results, makes infertile women lose hope about life. Difficulty to control anger, mood changes, guilt, and negative body image towards fertility were identified among these participants. The study also revealed that to deal with stress many of them use their own stress management strategies. Infertility at some point affects the sexual and intimate relationship with the partner as well, resulting in conflicts between the couple. Meanwhile, stigmatization, humiliation, and labeling were identified in some societies.

This study revealed that participants sought various types of treatments for infertility. The results also show that they faced a number of barriers that made it difficult for them to access those treatments. For instance, time-consuming, high cost, limited options under Aasandha (National Health Insurance Scheme), and last but not least, the lockdown caused by the pandemic of COVID-19 were the barriers identified. Moreover, participants have highlighted that the attitude of some of the doctors, limited fertility information, and financial barriers made them feel disappointed. Along with this, it was observed that infertility affected the mental health of the participants negatively, even though, there were only limited counseling services available in Baa Atoll to address the issue.

This study shows that there are unmet needs of infertile women in Baa Atoll. Hence, it is recommended to incorporate more infertility care in reproductive

services as well as future policy and planning to make the service more comprehensive. Since there is no available infertility registry in Maldives, it is also recommended to conduct a quantitative study to identify the prevalence of infertility in Maldives.

Almost all the participants experienced treatment barriers because of limited fertility care services at the Atoll level. Therefore, it is suggested to introduce some amount of fertility services at the Atoll level. It is also recommended to provide related training to all the health staff in Baa Atoll to initiate patient-centered care for infertile couples and to provide regular fertility-related information. Meanwhile, most infertility care is not covered under Aasandha insurance scheme and it was one of the biggest barriers to treatment faced by the participants in this study. Therefore, it is recommended that the government of Maldives provide full coverage for fertility treatment including psychosocial care. Furthermore, available psychological services in the islands or in the Atoll are limited. Therefore, it is suggested that the introduction of counseling services is essential to mitigate the mental health issues faced by infertile women in Baa Atoll.

Conclusion

Overall, most of the participants of this study experienced mental, social and emotional health issues, partner and family related issues, treatment related barriers, stigmatization and negative support experiences from community. Therefore, it is vital to address those areas of these infertile women in Baa Atoll.