

Abstract

The present study focused on understanding the experiences of involuntary childlessness among men and women in the urban middle class of a cosmopolitan city Baroda, Gujarat state. It aimed at a gendered analysis of individuals' experiences of childlessness, with specific reference to ideas about parenthood, the importance of children, the treatment seeking experience, the coping strategies adopted and the psychosocial implications on self, marital relationships, family and the society. Doctors' perceptions in terms of their experiences with individuals seeking treatment are also included. The participant group comprised (i) women and men from middle/upper-middle class who were seeking treatment for infertility, either for self or spouse (n=40), (ii) women and men who had discontinued with the treatment, and (iii) gynecologists and urologists providing infertility treatment. In-depth individual interviews were carried out. The results were analyzed qualitatively and are displayed in the form of matrices and diagrams. The findings suggest that children hold an important position in the society for one's sense of self, hence childlessness results in feelings of loss. Coping begins with the process of seeking treatment. Treatment experiences involves the medical aspects, but reflect minimal attention to information giving and counseling for social and environmental causes. Women described the doctors to be sensitive and understanding, but also "mechanical" in their approach with lack of adequate time. 'Doctor shopping' thus emerged as a common experience. Gender differences are evident in each domain and are presented in the form of a gender analysis framework, which helps to cull out the intricacies of gender nuances, prevalent in subtle forms in the society. The findings have implications on the health system and their role in providing information and upholding the clients' right to informed choice and decision-making.