

# The experience of adoptive mothers in Saudi Arabia with the child adoption and induced lactation programs: A qualitative study with a focus group

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## RESEARCH

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### Aim

### ABSTRACT

To explore the mothers' experience, motivation, challenges, and recommendations regarding the child adoption and induced lactation programs in February 2022.

### Method

This qualitative exploratory study used a focus group with purposively recruited adoptive mothers. The data were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using thematic analysis within the Grounded Theory approach.

### Result

Ten women benefited from the adoption and induced-lactation program. Three main themes emanated from the analysis: The current perceptions regarding child adoption, experience, and practices, the child adoption process, facilitators, and challenges as well as the adoption with the induced lactation process, awareness, and challenges. In general, the mothers had a positive experience with the child adoption and induced lactation programs. They did highlight the need to review the adoption process, the facilitators, how to overcome challenges, and raise the awareness of child adoption by induced lactation.

### Conclusion

This study explored the adoptive mother's experience, facilitators, and challenges with a child adoption and induced lactation. It could increase the awareness of

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### Key Words

Child Adoption Induced Lactation, Experience, Challenges, Qualitative, Saudi Arabia.

### List of Abbreviations

IRB: Institutional Review Board, KAIMRC: King Abdullah International Medical Research Center.

### Background

Adoption is defined as becoming the non-biological parent of someone, and the families are called adopted families<sup>1</sup>. Adoption is a legal and long-term social structure shaped over time by religious, cultural values and interests<sup>2</sup>. In the Islamic religion, having a child is a blessing. An adoption is a management option for infertile couples or couples wishing to expand their family. Islamic families tend to adopt a child if they do not have biological children or want God's rewards (Ajr), as supported by the prophetic tradition<sup>3,4</sup>. In Saudi Arabia, adoption occurs mainly through non-profit or governmental organizations (Ministry of Social Affairs). The pre-adoption orphan care includes careful parent selection, continuous adoptive parent follow-up, education, and community outreach<sup>5</sup>. These agencies embrace lactation as a central component of a child-centered adoptive care process to ensure a strong connection with the family.

In the past, wet nursing has been practiced. Recently, induced lactation (the process of enabling the mother to produce milk without going through pregnancy or lactation) has been used as a method for the adopted mother to breastfeed the adoptee. The mother follows a treatment protocol by Dr. Newman to induce her milk<sup>6</sup>. In Saudi Arabia, the program of induced lactation was introduced five years ago and is a prerequisite for adoption<sup>5</sup>.

For the adoptive mother, a child can be a child by adoption if the mother breastfeeds five full feeds before two years of

age. An adoptive mother and her adoptee are considered to have a legal Mahram relationship, "Mahramiyah". The adoptive parents and breastfed siblings were declared as "Maharam" or persons prohibited from intermarrying and Hijab between siblings and other men in the family who were nursed or had a blood relation with the same mother or the adoptive father. This is essential to establish a familial relationship from the Islamic perspective<sup>7,8</sup>.

Studies reported that adoption has many advantages for the child, family, and the community; it provides better nutritional, physical, and psychological development and strengthens the bond with the adoptive parents<sup>9</sup>. In addition to the advantages, challenges facing adoptive families include the process itself, the need to breastfeed the child by one of the mother or father's relatives, the new child's sleeping, feeding, and calming routine, in addition to acceptance by the family and community<sup>10</sup>. In Saudi Arabia, a study in 2020 interviewed 50 orphanages and residential staff about the status of orphan care, the child-carer relationship, and the challenges of providing emotional and physical support to the orphans in everyday practice. It highlighted the association between individuals and social factors<sup>11</sup>. It was the only publication we could find that gives a qualitative insight into orphan care issues in Saudi Arabia. Many of the challenges mentioned can be overcome by implementing an adoption-by-induced lactation program where each child receives care from two loving parents. There is an urgent need for more studies regarding the issues of orphans in Saudi Arabia. Sochos and Al-Jasas suggested in 2020 that there are too few studies related to the subject in the country<sup>11</sup>.

To the researcher's knowledge, there are no studies exploring child adoption or induced lactation programs. The experience of Saudi mothers with adoption is an area that needs exploration.

## **Aim**

This study explored mothers' perceptions, experiences, motivation, and challenges with the adoption and milk induction process and their recommendations. It also explored the effects of local religion, culture, and legislature on the experiences.

## **Method**

### **Study design**

The qualitative exploratory study included a focus group with adoptive mothers and used thematic analysis within the grounded theory approach for the analysis.

### **Setting and participants**

This study was conducted through zoom. The mothers were interviewed via a WhatsApp (mobile application) group

created by one of the mothers for mothers who went through the adoption and the milk induction process throughout Saudi Arabia.

### **Sampling**

The participants were purposively recruited. The inclusion criteria were mothers who successfully adopted and went through the milk induction process.

### **Data collection and analysis**

Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of King Abdullah International Medical Research Centre (KAIMRC) with reference number NRJ21J/069/03. Ethical principles were maintained throughout the study.

A google form was sent to the adoptive mothers through the WhatsApp mobile application for the initial recruitment. A zoom link was sent to the mothers who met the inclusion criteria. The focus group interview was conducted in Arabic. The questions in the guide (appendix 1) were open-ended questions that encouraged elaboration and allowed diversion from the topic. The data were recorded and transcribed from the audio recording. Qualitative analyses were conducted with Arabic scripts, and the results were translated into English. Defining emerging themes from the qualitative thematic analysis was informed by literature findings. Words or phrases indicative of a theme category were coded, and their frequency of occurrence was counted.

## **Results**

### **Demographic background**

Ten women benefited from the adoption and induced-lactation program. Six were employed, and four housewives. All the adoptive mothers were in the reproductive age group and married for more than five years. Seven participants did not have a biological child, and three had children. The average age of the adoptee was between one month and one year. Most women adopted children as a management option for infertility; one mother adopted a boy because she had only girls. Another one wanted to expand the family and as remuneration from God. Two adoptive mothers adopted their children through the Ministry of Social Affairs, and eight through charity. Each mother was given a number only known to the author, and quotes from the participants were identified using these numbers. All the data were kept confidential.

Three main themes emerged during the analysis (Figure 1). The main themes were the perceptions, experience, and practices of the child adoption, the child adoption process, facilitators, and challenges, the adoption by induced lactation process, awareness, and the challenges experienced. After further exploration of the main themes, two principal concepts were developed

1. The need to review of the adoption process, facilitators, and strategies to overcome the challenges.
2. Mothers need more awareness regarding child adoption by induced lactation.

## Themes

### Current child adoption perceptions, experience, and practices.

**Perceptions about adoption:** Most mothers thought that child adoption was a good idea and introduced joy to the home. The mothers have been considering adopting for a long time but could not decide. Only three mothers did not have any previous background in adoption. The adoption could be a blessing and gift of God to the families. One of the mothers described the resolution of her marital issues and some family business after the adoption. A second mother described a sick child who was healed after adopting a child in the family.

### Reason for adoption/emergence of the adoption idea

The mothers had different reasons for adopting a child. For most, the cause was a management option for delayed pregnancy; some wanted to increase the family size or for remuneration and social appearance. The emergence of the idea is mainly related to the media, family, and friends.

"I regret the time before I applied for the adoption,"

### Feelings related to adoption and the presence of an adopted child.

Mothers had mixed feelings before the adoption. Some were very happy and had a wonderful experience, and others were worried about the acceptance by the family and community. After the adoption, most mothers had a positive experience and felt content. They described their children as gifts, blessings, the light of the home, and as connected as their real biological children.

They describe their adopted children as polite, brilliant, and incredible. "I did not think for a moment that he is not our child."

For most of the mothers in this study, adoption was their first experience, and they were confused and worried. One mother described not feeling stressed as she had a member in the family who would breastfeed the child. "The adoption of an orphan is like a school, and all of us learned something from the adoption," one mother said. Mothers mentioned the challenge and fears in the first few days after the adoption when the children are usually stressed and crying all the time.

### Acceptance and support

The mothers thought that the husband's acceptance and support were a cornerstone that empowered the mothers and later facilitated the family's acceptance. Most of the

participants' families accepted the presence of an adopted child and expressed their acceptance through parties and presents, while some felt it was awkward and strange. Giving the mother's milk and the presence of an adopted child in the family and time passage made the acceptance easier.

Acceptance by other biological siblings was easy if the adoptee was young and they were involved in the adoption process from the beginning.

*"My husband welcomed the idea from the beginning"*

*"You cannot imagine the love she got in the family, as she is the only born kid"*

Regarding community acceptance, the mothers describe that the community accepted the presence of an adoptive child with the families, unlike in the past when acceptance was difficult.

They found the community and friends' support had a positive reflection and empowered the parents. The mothers indicated that family support reflected positively on the community support. Most mothers did not find support in the work environment as there was no policy for such support or maternity leave. One mother said she had maternity leave after an internal arrangement with her friends.

*"In the new generation, there is more acceptance than the older ones".*

### The child adoption process, facilitators, and challenges

**Duration/speed of the adoption process:** Although charities and the Ministry of Social Affairs in the different regions of the Kingdom have the same process, the speed of the process differs. It was most challenging in Jeddah and Riyadh. The time it took for the adoption also varied, ranging from one month to two years. The time depends on many factors, such as the availability of the child, the parents, and the completion of documents. The mothers described the speed of the adoption as long and longer with the charities because they go through a sophisticated process. Healthy children were adopted from these charities, which can prolong the process, compared with the Ministry, which usually offers children with health conditions. All the mothers agreed that waiting is the most challenging aspect for the adoptive families.

"We were emotionally exhausted"

The time between each adoption and the next is six years. The mothers agreed that this is a long time, and it is better for the adoptee to have other siblings before that, to grow together. They agreed that three years would be a reasonable time.

### Requirement for the adoption process

Families must complete the governmental adoption forms, which the mothers found complex.

Feeding breast milk to the adoptee from the father's side or mother's milk is a prerequisite for adoption by the charities for "Mahramiyah," especially for girls. Still, in the Ministry, it is not, especially if the child has a health-related condition. Another prerequisite for the approval process is the agreement of two persons from both sides of the adoptive families, which can delay the process. A mother said, "bringing the other siblings to receive the child was another requirement" though it was acceptable to the group.

#### **Challenges with the adoption process**

Adoption through the Ministry had many challenges, for example, the unorganized process, and loss of documents and medical reports. In addition, the unknown age of the adopted child can increase stress and the unknown time when they will receive the child. They also agreed that the process of adoption and subsequent steps were not transparent, and they described it as a surprise. No information about any following action was disclosed.

"I just started the process. I did not know what is next"

One of the challenges the mother faces with the adoption is the requirement that someone from the parent's side can breastfeed the child at the time of adoption. The adoptive mother feeds the adoptee herself, which is initially not easy. All mothers agreed that issuing the feeding certificate, civil registry, and state deed are complicated, especially if it involves changing the child's name. Another perceived challenge was the absence of a policy that supports any kind of leave or support for the adoptive mothers.

"I got my child in the morning, gave him to my family, and went to work; I did not even memorize his face; it was painful".

They mentioned that a biological mother has nine months to prepare for motherhood, but adoptive parents have no time at all. Regarding community services, such as hospital visits and travel, the mother agreed that there is no unified process and that each staff member followed their path. Some were understanding and helpful, while others made it difficult. The group highlighted that the monthly financial support from the government was essential to secure their future, and it should not be stopped for any reason.

#### **The adoption by induced lactation process, awareness, and challenges.**

**Opinion about the adoption by induced lactation:** The mothers described the adoption by induced lactation as a lovely experience and mercy from God and the ease of Islamic religion. Especially when the adoptee is a girl, where "Mahramiyah" is needed, or if nobody in the family can breastfeed or refuse to give their milk. Mothers thought this program was good, especially when there was a plan to adopt more than one child, so they could all be sisters and brothers. A few mothers and their families were unaware of

the program and thought it awkward. Many websites and mothers were approached as a source for information. The absence of awareness and knowledge about adoption by breastfeeding can delay the process, as described by one mother. They described approaching many doctors in different places with different backgrounds as stressful.

"I swore to God. I did not hear about such a program".

#### **Feelings related to experience with the induced lactation**

Feeding the child the mother's milk has many advantages as described by the mothers, including immunity and bonding with the mother and the other siblings in the home. In addition, the feeling of success, achievement, and acceptance by the surroundings. "After giving her my milk, I felt I was the one who gave birth."

Mothers felt disappointed when a woman in the family decided not to give her milk at the last moment. Others felt sensitive when talking about this issue. The word worried was mentioned many times and is mainly related to the fear about the "Mahramiyah" when she is a girl, the fear of the inability to complete the feed, the absence of a trustful resource, and the lack of hope.

"I want to feel secure,"

#### **Challenges with the induced lactation program**

Most mothers had a positive experience with the program. One participant described it as exhausting and could not continue. Mothers felt they were under stress as well as psychological and time pressure. They were also worried that the induced lactation program would not succeed, or the production of an insufficient amount of milk, or not able to complete the feeding before the child was two years of age. Another challenge described is the absence of maternity or infant care leave, increasing the adoptive mothers' stress and health-related issues, such as disturbed menstruation and increased weight.

#### **The mother's recommendations**

The adoptive mothers appreciated the discussion and thought it an opportunity to highlight and increase people's awareness of this topic. They are willing to share their experiences and develop ideas to help new adoptive mothers. The group thought that adoption is not only for families with no children, but it should also be a part of capable families' responsibility toward the community. There should be no child in charity, and these children deserve a good life and future. They indicated that it is not too late to establish a program that can benefit the adopted children and integrate them into society. They thought there is a need for rehabilitation and training of mothers before receiving the child, increase the awareness about child adoption by induced lactation, religious views on the topic, and the appropriate communication channels.

The government needs to establish a policy for maternity leave and child care for adoptive mothers and children. They need to educate and increase the awareness of the different sectors about the right of these children, especially in the hospitals and airports. Lastly, the establishment of a communication channel with the various governmental and non-governmental sectors will facilitate the process.

## Discussion

The Saudi experience with child adoption and induced lactation was compared and contrasted with the literature. This study found that mothers are open to child adoption if they experience delayed pregnancy. This is similar to a study conducted in Niger that showed that families tend to adopt a child if the period of infertility exceeds five years or there is no living child in the family<sup>12</sup>. Another study with Saudi patients undergoing IVF treatment reported a 60% acceptance rate of adoption as an option for management<sup>13,14</sup>.

This study found that the mothers gathered information on the Islamic perspectives of breastfeeding and child adoption laws from social media, friends, and families, similar to findings from other studies<sup>14</sup>. The primary source of information about adoption is from the family and media. The same study showed that cultural acceptance, family support, and duration of infertility were the main reasons for the decision. The mothers described the importance of the husband, family, and community support. In addition to siblings, they can shape the experience, feelings, and relationships with other family members. This is also true in adoptive families, where it could be a positive or negative experience depending on how the other siblings feel<sup>15</sup>.

The mothers reported many challenges during the adoption process, including the long duration of adoption, the lack of communication between the different sectors, and the absence of precise guidance. These findings concur with an Iranian study that concluded some of the challenges facing adoptive families, including a lack of answers at each decision-making stage and the lack of a clear legal and administrative structure<sup>16</sup>. Another study demonstrated that knowledge of the Government adoption laws and the process was generally below average (49.2%) among the study participants<sup>17</sup>. Another challenge was stress-related sleep and feeding. Qualitative studies in the USA showed that parents could face challenges such as sleep, feeding, and calming<sup>10</sup>. The mothers mentioned some facilitators increasing the success of the adoption process, such as financial support, more awareness, a unified approach, and guidance with such a program, as supported in the literature<sup>18</sup>.

In terms of induced lactation, many women found feeding the child her milk made them feel like real mothers. They felt a strong bond with the adoptee, and the majority of the group had a positive experience with the amount of milk produced through induced lactation, as also reported by Auerbech<sup>19,20</sup>.

## Recommendation

The recommendations included reviewing the present situation using the local and international experience of government monitoring and control, improving the standard of services, establishing a close correlation between infertility treatment centres and child adoption centres, and developing consultation services for families before and after the adoption.

## Implications for Practice and Research

This study can serve as a baseline for future studies to review, evaluate and implement a simplified child adoption process within the context of Muslim families. Though the mothers acknowledge the recent experience, they recommend a better and more transparent adoption process. In addition, it raises the awareness of decision-makers about the current deficits in the practice and highlights the need for a national policy that unifies the adoption and induced lactation process in Saudi Arabia.

## Limitation of the Study

This study was conducted through an online meeting in which the participants' facial expressions could not be seen, affecting the feelings and emotions that came through the discussion. Another limitation is that data were collected in Arabic, and some textures were expressed in Arabic, making an exact translation problematic. This study was conducted with mothers within the Islamic context, affecting the generalizability of the results.

## Conclusion

This study explored the adoptive mother's experience, facilitators, and challenges with a child adoption and induced lactation. The adoptive mothers had a positive experience in general. However, there is a need to review the adoption process, facilitators, and challenges to develop a unified approach for all governmental and non-governmental sectors. There is also a need to increase the awareness of adoption by induced lactation in mothers, families, and communities.

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### Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of King Abdullah International Medical Research Center with a reference number NRJ21J/069/03. Ethical principles were maintained throughout the research process. All the participants signed an electronic informed consent, and confidentiality and anonymity were assured as no personal identifiers were used. All data were stored on workplace computers with access to study personnel only.

### Consent to Publish

Written informed consent for publication was obtained.

### Availability of Data and Materials

All data generated or analyzed during this study are included in this manuscript.

### Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

Figure 1: The main themes arose during the analysis

