

# Women's Disclosure of Fertility Challenges at Work and Desired Accommodations: A Qualitative Exploration

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## INTRODUCTION

- Fertility challenges are a **common experience** and often under-discussed due to their perception of being taboo, especially within the workplace<sup>1</sup>.
- Many individuals must manage their career and workplace alongside fertility challenges, often with **little organizational support**<sup>2</sup>.
- Experiencing fertility challenges impacts personal and professional domains of life, resulting in **decreased employee well-being, work performance, and work-related attitudes**<sup>3</sup>.
- Women may make career decisions which prioritize fertility and work at different points in time<sup>4</sup>.

## OBJECTIVE

- Understand the experiences of women navigating the intersection of reproductive health and work, including:
  - *How their workplace impacts their fertility journey.*
  - *How their fertility challenges impact their relationship to the organization.*
- Explore specific ways organizations can accommodate women during their fertility journeys.

## METHOD

- Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used to recruit participants:
  - Recruitment from fertility-related Reddit forums.
  - Through personal networks via social media.
- Semi-structured interviews were held on Zoom between March-August 2022.
- Sample of 33 women:
  - Age: M = 34.82, SD = 4.55
  - United States (n = 26)
  - Canada (n = 7)

## INCLUSION CRITERIA

- Canadian and American women.
- Work full-time.
- Current or previous experience with fertility challenges.

## INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

- 1 Interview transcriptions read and edited for accuracy and clarity.
- 2 Initial read: comments added to reflect researchers' thoughts, preliminary interpretations, similarities, differences, and contradictions.
- 3 Second read: emerging themes documented and discussion of preliminary reflections.
- 4 Coding scheme developed and applied.
- 5 Narratives written of each participant: extent, motivation, and consequences of disclosure.

## RESULTS

- Examination and discussion of transcripts revealed three profiles of women in terms of how they disclosed (or not) at work:

### Sharers

- Voluntary disclosure of fertility challenges at work.
- Desire to share with close coworkers.
- Expectation of positive response to disclosure and receipt of both emotional social support and negative responses.

**"I couldn't keep it to myself. It was like eating me up gradually... like I was unable to tell anybody for years, I had to just open up and tell them, come clean." (P16)**

### Explainers

- Feelings of obligation to disclose to receive instrumental support or explain changes in performance/presence.
- Often disclosure to supervisor.
- Attempts at management of others' perceptions.
- Receipt of emotional and instrumental social support.

**"After that first egg retrieval I went ahead, and I told him, 'Hey, this is what we had done. It's looking like I'm going to have more in the future, just as FYI.'" (P33)**

### Concealers

- Decision not to disclose their fertility challenges at work.
- Perception that disclosure is inappropriate in a professional context.
- Anticipating negative or uncomfortable reactions.
- General discomfort in sharing private health information.

**"I take a lot of pride in my work. I feel really committed to it, and I also value and am protective of other people's perceptions of me." (P21)**

## RESULTS

- **Desired accommodations across all participants were found within four categories:**

### Time

- Ability to manage one's own time.
- Organization respects your time.
- Flexible schedule and work from home.

### Finances

- Fertility-related benefits.
- Easily accessible coverage.
- Mental health coverage.

### Resources

- Space to process grief.
- Support groups.
- Healthcare advocates.

### Culture

- Organization demonstrates care for employees.
- Family-oriented organization.
- Making fertility-related supports are a "non-issue".

## CONCLUSION

- This project highlights the nuanced disclosure experiences of women navigating fertility-challenges at work, while underscoring the accommodations women desire during their fertility journey.
- Results of this study add to the dearth of literature on fertility and work, while also emphasizing the important role of organizations in supporting women through the various stages of their fertility.
- Future research could include the perspectives of managers in women's disclosure and support-seeking.

## REFERENCES

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