[**Cultural challenges of adoption**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1760479/cultural-challenges-of-adoption)

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IN recent years, child adoption has increased across all sections of society. However, the practice often remains concealed, and couples are compelled to live with a web of lies. The adoption journey typically commences due to infertility, which holds significant cultural and social implications. In our society, women are often considered incomplete if they are unable to conceive. The ability to give birth is deemed an essential aspect of being a complete person. Consequently, individuals grappling with infertility not only face personal and relational struggles but also endure intrusive and insensitive questioning that is often masked as well-intentioned concern.

Unless someone has personally experienced the emotional turmoil of infertility, it is challenging to comprehend the depth of the pain it inflicts. Regrettably, the burden of blame usually falls on women, with men being encouraged to remarry in order to have children. Even when the root cause of infertility lies with the man, it is seldom discussed openly. I recall an encounter I had 21 years ago when I met a man from Balochistan who had three wives. These wives, unable to communicate in Urdu, accompanied him to an infertility clinic in Karachi. To his surprise, after medical investigation, he discovered that the issue rested with him, not the women. This realisation left him feeling ashamed for subjecting his wives to undue blame and distress.

Women undergoing countless cycles of IVF and enduring invasive and painful procedures often experience the anguish of repeated failure. Unfortunately, counselling is scarce, and the genuine option of adoption is rarely discussed or encouraged. Adoption has touched my life in various capacities, both personally and professionally. I have interacted with adoptive parents, counselled adopted children, and assisted individuals through the emotional and legal aspects of the adoption process. Throughout this journey, one recurring theme has emerged — the desperate need for answers to the questions that arise and the need to dispel misconceptions.

Cultural and social acceptance plays a pivotal role in adoption. When individuals choose to become parents through adoption, they make a commitment to protect and support their child, regardless of the circumstances. Yet, unwarranted beliefs persist that adopted children are more troublesome and a source of distress. But do biological children not cause parental worries, or refrain from abandoning their parents, indulging in drugs, or engaging in other behaviour that could cause pain? Such concerns apply to all children, irrespective of their biological or adoptive status.

Adoption is a beautiful journey even if it is one which, like any other, presents its own obstacles.

The fear of bonding with an adopted child often emerges as a question. It is worth noting that parents who choose adoption have usually endured immense suffering and possess an intense longing for a child. In my experience with over 100 adoption cases, I have never witnessed a lack of bonding between parents and adopted children; however, there can, of course, be challenges. On the other hand, the possibility of postpartum depression and the subsequent rejection of biological children rarely surfaces as a concern during pregnancy. The fear that one may not bond with their child is not a valid reason to dismiss the option of adoption.

Managing intrusive questions becomes a necessary skill for adoptive parents. Setting personal boundaries is crucial, as there are aspects of a child’s story that are not to be shared with everyone. Those who have undergone the adoption process should become advocates, sensitising others and fostering a more accepting society for our children. To illustrate the kind of questions adoptive parents encounter, let me share an example. Once, someone asked me about my child’s ‘real parents’. I responded with a smile, saying, “I am”. However, the person persisted, questioning the authenticity of my role as a parent. I gently took her hand and asked her to touch me, emphasising that I, too, am real. We must learn to assert ourselves and prevent undue intrusion into our lives, as allowing others to treat us poorly is often a reflection of how we permit it.

Addressing the trauma associated with abandonment is another crucial aspect of adoption. Should adoptive parents disclose the truth about their child’s adoption? Secrecy surrounding adoption raises ethical concerns. Children should be informed from an early age, gradually incorporating the truth into their daily lives. It is not a single event to be scheduled but an ongoing dialogue based on trust, love and a sense of security. Parents who withhold the truth from their children deny them the opportunity to experience true security. I firmly believe in the resilience of children and the positive impact of being honest with them.

Another issue that plagues adoption is the demonisation of birth parents, particularly birth mothers. We must move away from stigmatising birth parents, and instead, recognise the immense courage and selflessness involved in making an adoption decision. By doing so, we create an environment that promotes understanding and compassion.

Regarding the legal process in Pakistan, guardianship laws exist, but there is no provision for the termination of parental rights. Couples seeking adoption should approach reputable adoption organisations and submit their applications. Once selected, they will be granted guardianship by the courts, allowing them to proceed with obtaining all necessary identity documents for the child. Recent policy changes have enabled guardians to obtain official documentation for adopted children, even allowing single women to adopt without marriage.

To all those facing the challenges of infertility, adoption is a viable option. For those considering adoption and seeking answers there are organisations that facilitate and answer your queries. Ado­ption is a beautiful journey even if it is one which, like any other, presents its own set of obstacles.

Every child is born with a unique destiny. By adopting, we are not saving lives or seeking a path to heaven, instead, it is the children who save us, giving us purpose and a reason to live.

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