

First Time Mother's Perceptions and Lactation Experiences: A Qualitative Study

Revathy Vinayagam¹, Sumathi Chandran²,
Shankar Shanmugam Rajendran³, Vanitha Narayanasamy⁴,
Dhanalakshmi Poongavanam⁵, Kavitha Mani Mohan⁶, Latha Krishnan⁷

^{1,5,6,7}Post Graduate Students, College of Nursing, Madras Medical College, Chennai-03. (Affiliated to the Tamil Nadu Dr.MGR Medical University, Chennai).

²Director, Institute of Obstetrics and Gynecology, Government Hospital for Women and Children, Egmore.

³Principal, College of Nursing, Madras Medical College, Chennai-03 (Affiliated to the Tamil Nadu Dr.MGR Medical University, Chennai).

⁴Lecturer, College of Nursing, Madras Medical College, Chennai-03. (Affiliated to the Tamil Nadu Dr.MGR Medical University, Chennai).

ABSTRACT:

Exclusive breastfeeding (EBF) for the first six months is a vital practice that promotes optimal infant growth, immunity and maternal health. Endorsed by WHO and UNICEF, EBF significantly reduces neonatal morbidity and mortality. However, global adherence remains suboptimal, especially among primipara mothers who are more susceptible to discontinuation due to emotional, physiological and social factors. Understanding first-time mothers lived experiences can offer valuable insights into improving breastfeeding support strategies.

Aims:

- 1 To explore primiparous mothers' perceptions and experiences with exclusive breastfeeding
- 2 To identify the challenges, support systems and influencing factors in the decision to practice exclusive breast feeding

Materials and Methods: This qualitative study employed a phenomenological design and was conducted over one week at the Well Baby Clinic, Institute of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, Egmore, Chennai. Seven primipara mothers meeting the inclusion criteria were selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected using a sociodemographic questionnaire and unstructured interviews guided by open-ended questions. Audio-recorded interviews were transcribed and analysed using thematic content analysis. A pilot study was conducted to refine tools and procedures.

Results: Four major themes emerged from the analysis: Attachment and Emotions and Feeding and Support. Mothers shared deep emotional bonds with their infants and experienced both joy and overwhelm. Feeding challenges and public stigma were commonly reported. Family support, particularly from spouses, played a crucial role in sustaining EBF.

Conclusions: The findings highlight the emotional depth, challenges, and resilience of primipara mothers in their breastfeeding journey. Supportive, empathetic nursing care and informed policy interventions are essential to empower mothers and promote sustained exclusive breastfeeding.

Keywords: Exclusive breastfeeding, primipara mothers, maternal perception, qualitative study, family support.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Exclusive breastfeeding (EBF), the practice of feeding infants solely with breast milk for the first six months of life without any additional food or liquid, is widely recognized as a critical determinant of neonatal health and maternal well-being. It is endorsed by the World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF as a global public health imperative due to its protective effects against infectious diseases, enhancement of cognitive development, and long-term benefits in preventing non-communicable diseases (**World Health Organization, 2021**). Despite this global consensus, the practice of exclusive breastfeeding remains suboptimal in many regions. According to recent WHO estimates, only 44% of infants under six months of age were exclusively breastfed globally in 2023, well below the target of 70% recommended by 2030 (**UNICEF, 2023**).

NEED FOR THE STUDY.

Exclusive breastfeeding (EBF) for the first six months of life remains critically underutilized despite progress in global health priorities. According to the 2024 Global Breastfeeding Scorecard by WHO and UNICEF, the global EBF rate for infants under six months has increased by 10 percentage points over the past decade—rising from approximately 38% in 2014 to 48% in 2024—but still falls short of the 50% target set for 2025 (**UNICEF/WHO, 2025**). The World Health Assembly has established an even more ambitious goal of 70% EBF by 2030, yet current projections suggest significant shortfalls remain (**World Health Assembly, 2017**). This continued global gap highlights the urgent need to understand factors influencing breastfeeding outcomes, particularly among vulnerable populations like primipara mothers.

1.2. STATEMENT OF PROBLEM:

“Explore the maternal perception and lactational experience on exclusive breast feeding among primipara mother”

RESEARCH QUESTION:

What are primiparous mothers' perceptions, challenges, and lactational experiences regarding exclusive breastfeeding and how do support systems and healthcare influence their breastfeeding practices and satisfaction?

1.3. AIMS OF THE STUDY

1. Explore primiparous mothers' perceptions and experiences with exclusive breastfeeding.
2. Identify the challenges, support systems and factors influencing the decision to practice exclusive breastfeeding.



DELIMITATION:

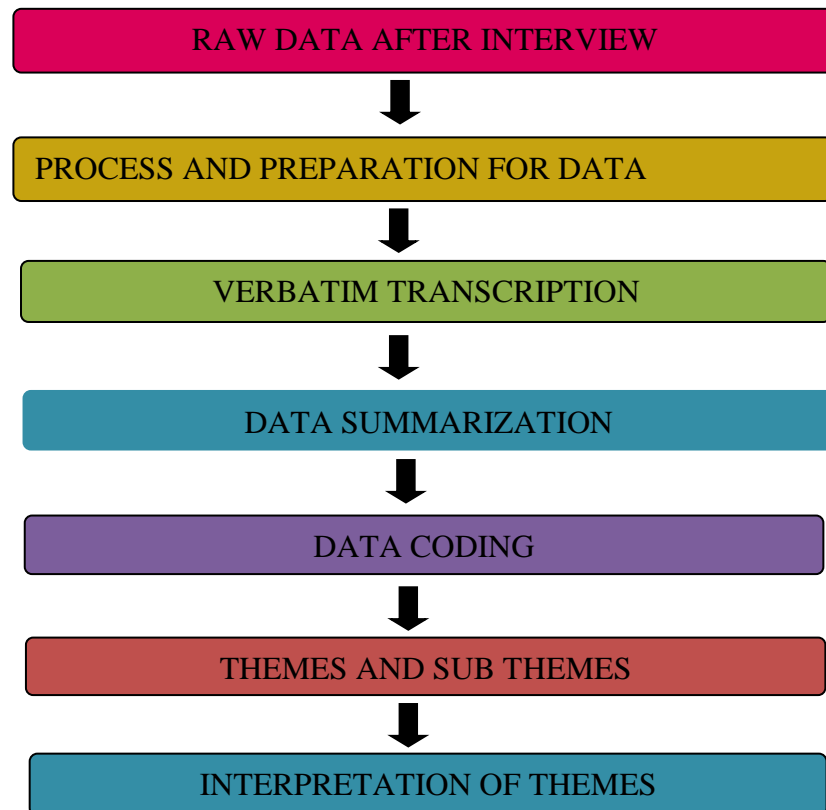
1. The study is conducted only on primiparous mothers
2. Data collection is conducted only in single setting. i.e. IOG, Chennai
3. The sample is include mothers who are currently practicing exclusive breastfeeding
4. Only qualitative methods (interviews or focus groups) is used

Materials and Methods:

This qualitative study employed a phenomenological design and was conducted over one week at the Well Baby Clinic, Institute of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, Egmore, Chennai. Seven primipara mothers meeting the inclusion criteria were selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected using a sociodemographic questionnaire and unstructured interviews guided by open-ended questions. Audio-recorded interviews were transcribed and analysed using thematic content analysis. A pilot study was conducted to refine tools and procedures.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATION:

Approval was obtained from the Institutional Ethics Committee, Madras Medical College, Chennai-0, ensuring the study complied with ethical standards. Additionally, permission was granted by the Director of the Institute of Obstetrics and Gynaecology (IOG), Chennai-08. Informed consent was obtained from all participants after clearly explaining the purpose, procedures, and their rights, including the right to withdraw at any time without consequences. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by conducting interviews in a private setting and securely handling all data. Participants were treated with respect, ensuring their dignity and autonomy were upheld at all times.

THEMATIC CONTENT ANALYSIS PRESENTATION**DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION:**

Data analysis and interpretation are crucial in research for extracting meaningful insights from raw data. Analysis involves organizing, transforming, and summarizing data using statistical methods to uncover patterns, trends, and relationships. Interpretation contextualizes these findings within the research framework, enabling informed conclusions and recommendations. Effective interpretation ensures that statistical outcomes align with research objectives and real-world implications. Both quantitative and qualitative approaches are often used to enhance reliability and depth. This systematic process strengthens the validity of research findings and aids decision-making in academic and applied settings (Creswell, J. W., 2014)

ORGANISATION OF DATA:**SECTION I:**

It deals with the sociodemographic variables of the primiparous postnatal mothers.

SECTION II:

It deals with the maternal perception and lactational experience on exclusive breastfeeding among primiparous mothers.

PRESENTATION OF DATA:

Table 4.1. SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES OF THE STUDY PARTICIPANTS

| Partici pants | A g e | Educa tional Level | Emplo yment Status | Fa mil y Inc om e (in rup ees) | Resi denc e | Hous ehold Mem bers | Reli gion | Soci al Sup port | Mo de of Deli very | Inf ant' s Birt h Wei ght |
|----------------|--------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------------------|-------------|---------------------|------------|------------------|--------------------|---------------------------|
| Partici pant 1 | 21 yrs | B.A | Homema ker | Rs. 15000 | Urban | 2 | Hindu | husba nd | Norma l | 2.6kg |
| Partici pant 2 | 23y rs | BSc | Private | Rs.10 000 | Rural | 2 | Hindu | husba nd | Norma l | 2.5kg |
| Partici pant 3 | 30y rs | 10 th | Homema ker | Rs. 15000 | Urban | 2 | Musli m | husba nd | LSCS | 3kg |
| Partici pant 4 | 28y rs | 10 th | Homema ker | Rs. 12000 | Rural | 3 | Christi an | husba nd | Norma l | 2.5kg |
| Partici pant 5 | 22y rs | B.A | Private | Rs. 10000 | Urban | 4 | Hindu | husba nd | Norma l | 2.5kg |
| Partici pant 6 | 21y rs | BCom | Homema ker | Rs.12 000 | Rural | 2 | Musli m | husba nd | Norma l | 2.8kg |
| Partici pant 7 | 29y rs | 12 th | Business | Rs.12 000 | Urban | 3 | Christi an | husba nd | LSCS | 3kg |

SECTION II: It deals with the maternal perception and locational experience on exclusive. Breastfeeding among primiparous mothers.

Table 4.2: THEMES, SUBTHEMES AND NARRATIONS:

| No. | THEMES | SUBTHEMES | NARRATIONS |
|-----|---------|---------------------|---|
| 1 | Feeding | Problems in feeding | Despite facing health, family, or mental challenges, most mothers enjoy breastfeeding and develop a strong affection for their babies. The emotional bond and satisfaction from feeding outweigh any difficulties, with only a few reporting minor issues during the feeding process. |

| | | | |
|---|------------|---------------------|--|
| | | Public feeding | Breastfeeding is vital, yet public breastfeeding remains taboo in India due to societal norms and the male gaze. Marginalized women struggle without proper facilities, prioritizing their child’s health despite discomfort and lack of privacy in public spaces. |
| 2 | Attachment | Bond | A mother and child share a deep bond formed after birth, nurtured by love, affection, and hormonal changes. Despite cultural differences, early years reflect. Similar care-driven connections, as infants rely completely on their mothers for warmth and nurturing. |
| | | Feeling presence | A child’s dependence on the mother, especially for nourishment, deepens their bond. Mothers feel joy and fulfilment when satisfying their baby’s hunger and thirst, cherishing the emotional connection and the sense of being needed by their new-born. |
| 3 | Emotion | Feeling happy | Feeling happy Most of the respondents said that they are happy about taking care of the baby and feeding the baby. They care about the child more than an obligation to society, even though some people find it difficult to accomplish this. They are hippies when they meet the child’s wants. As previously stated, the connection brings them closer to the infant. |
| | | Feeling overwhelmed | Post-birth hormonal changes can cause mood swings, emotional instability, or postpartum depression. Despite feeling overwhelmed, mothers often describe an indescribable emotion while caring for their child. The joy they feel when the baby seeks them creates a powerful emotional connection. |
| 4 | Support | Family support | Family support is crucial from pregnancy to motherhood, offering emotional and physical care. First-time mothers often face uncertainty, but encouragement from loved one’s boosts confidence. Most respondents praised their kin for consistently providing unwavering help and reassurance during this journey. |
| | | | |

DISCUSSION:

The discussion section interprets findings, explains their relevance, and situates them within existing knowledge. It highlights main results, explores implications, evaluates strengths and weaknesses, and suggests future research directions. This section is vital for conveying how results advance understanding in a field and should maintain clarity, objectivity, and contextual depth (Ghasemi et al., 2019).

5.1. MAJOR FINDINGS OF THE STUDY:

5.1.1. Findings based on the sociodemographic variables of the primipara mothers the study included seven female participants aged 21 to 30 years. Educational qualifications varied from 10th grade to Bachelor's degrees, with most having completed secondary education or higher. Employment status showed a mix of homemakers (n=4), private sector employees (n=2), and one business owner. Monthly family incomes ranged from Rs. 10,000 to Rs. 15,000. Residency was evenly split between urban and rural settings. Household sizes varied from two to four members. In terms of religion, participants identified as Hindu.

(n=3), Muslim (n=2), and Christian (n=2). All participants reported their husbands as their primary source of social support. Mode of delivery included both normal vaginal delivery (n=5) and lower segment caesarean section (LSCS; n=2). Infant birth weights ranged from 2.5 kg to 3 kg, with most new-borns weighing around 2.5 kg.

5.2. FINDINGS BASED ON THE OBJECTIVES:**OBJECTIVE 1:**

Explore primiparous mother's perceptions and experiences with exclusive breastfeeding. The present study explored emotional experiences and maternal connections through two main themes: Attachment and Emotions. Under Attachment, two subthemes emerged Bond and Feeling presence. Mothers described forming a deep, loving bond with their new-borns shortly after birth, influenced by affection and hormonal shifts. This bond appeared universally strong across cultural contexts, as infants are entirely dependent on their mothers for warmth, comfort, and nurturing.

The subtheme Feeling presence captured the emotional depth mothers experienced when meeting their baby's needs. They reported a strong sense of joy and fulfilment in nourishing their children, cherishing the closeness, and feeling valued through the baby's dependence. The Emotions theme included Feeling happy and feeling overwhelmed.

Most mothers expressed genuine happiness in caring for and feeding their infants, viewing it as an act of love rather than societal duty. Conversely, feeling overwhelmed acknowledged the emotional toll of hormonal changes, including mood swings and possible postpartum depression.

Despite these challenges, mothers still described profound emotional connections when their babies sought them, deepening their sense of attachment. These findings were supported by Cath Jackson et al. (2025) conducted a qualitative study on the Barriers and drivers to exclusive breastfeeding in Kyrgyzstan” using in-depth interviews with 20 mothers and 10 focus group discussions with 40 primary care workers across urban and rural settings.

The study explored exclusive breastfeeding practices within the first six months using the COM-B model. Similar to the present findings, mothers in Kyrgyzstan expressed emotional satisfaction in breastfeeding despite physical challenges and lack of privacy. However, misperceptions about breast milk sufficiency and societal pressure led many to supplement with formula or other fluids. Similarly, Elizabeth Braithwaite et al. (2025) analysed qualitative data from a mixed-methods survey on the Maternal-reported experiences of breastfeeding difficulties and mental health, which included responses from 2,010 first-time mothers. The qualitative component revealed mothers often felt both emotionally fulfilled and overwhelmed—a duality consistent with the current findings under the “Feeling happy” and “Feeling overwhelmed” subthemes.

Participants in both studies described deep emotional connections but also highlighted struggles with postpartum mood swings and anxiety. Mental health impact was more explicitly detailed in Braithwaite’s study, underlining the need for integrated psychosocial support during breastfeeding.

Similarly, Xiaoqing Zhang et al. (2025), in a qualitative study on the Exploring postpartum women’s experiences, perspectives, and expectations in maternal health care at a Chinese maternity care centre, interviewed 16 women using semi-structured interviews. This study revealed how emotional bonding, personalized support, and cultural practices influenced the maternal experience.

It echoed the present study’s findings that emotional connection and a sense of being needed strengthened the bond between mother and child. Unlike the current study, where family was the dominant support source, Zhang’s participants emphasized institutional and professional care as equally vital, suggesting cultural and systemic differences in caregiving expectations.

The present study aligns with existing literature in highlighting strong emotional bonds and maternal joy in exclusive breastfeeding. Disparities mainly arise from sociocultural contexts, especially regarding the role of institutional vs. familial support and public breastfeeding norms.

OBJECTIVE 2:

Identify the challenges, support systems, and factors influencing the decision to practice exclusive breastfeeding. The current study explored maternal experiences under the themes of Feeding and Support, with key subthemes offering insight into their journey. Under Feeding, two subthemes emerged: Problems in Feeding and Public Feeding.

Despite challenges such as health issues or emotional stress, most mothers reported a deep emotional satisfaction with breastfeeding, viewing it as a bonding experience. Only a few encountered minor difficulties. Public Feeding revealed the discomfort mothers face due to societal taboos and lack of

privacy in India, especially among marginalized groups. Yet, mothers prioritized their infants, needs despite social discomfort. The theme Support, focused on Family Support.

Emotional and physical support from family, especially during the transition to motherhood, was deemed essential. First-time mothers in particular relied on reassurance from their loved ones. Most respondents expressed gratitude for the continuous and comforting presence of their family throughout pregnancy and early parenting.

These findings were supported by Rafati Thyroidal. (2024) conducted a qualitative ethnographic study on exclusive breastfeeding: an exploratory thematic analysis of the perspectives of breastfeeding mothers and significant others in the Tamale metropolis of Northern Ghana. Using three focus group discussions, the study explored knowledge, attitudes, and sociocultural influences on exclusive breastfeeding. Thematic analysis identified cultural myths, such as beliefs that hot climates or spiritual needs necessitate supplements, as significant. Barriers, paralleling the current study's findings on societal discomfort and feeding challenges.

Similarly, Akumaa Bih Mambo et al. (2024) explored breastfeeding practices in Exclusive Breastfeeding Practices, Knowledge and Challenges amongst Mothers with Children 0-6 Months in the Bam Enda II Municipality of the Northwest Region of Cameroon. This qualitative study employed structured interviews with 100 mothers. Despite 83% having good knowledge, only 43% practiced exclusive breastfeeding. Factors such as marital status, urban residency, and difficulties (e.g., latching, fatigue) significantly reduced adherence. This aligns with the present findings where public feeding discomfort and health-related issues influenced mothers; feeding decisions, which supports this study finding.

Likewise, Irmayani et al. (2024) conducted a mixed-method study on the Analysis of factors influencing exclusive breastfeeding at the Sei Bero bang Labuhanbatu Health Centre Insights were gathered through interviews and community engagement. Among 70 mothers, family support was identified as a statistically significant factor influencing exclusive breastfeeding. Mothers with stronger family involvement were more likely to overcome breastfeeding difficulties. This mirrors the current study's emphasis on emotional and physical support from family, particularly during early motherhood which supports this study finding.

Together, these studies reinforce the multifaceted nature of exclusive breastfeeding practices. They validate the current study's identification of emotional, societal, and familial influences, while also showing how cultural, marital, and systemic factors shape maternal decisions in different global settings.

NURSING IMPLICATION:

NURSING PRACTICE:

- Nurses should educate primipara mothers on the importance of exclusive breastfeeding and address common misconceptions about milk insufficiency.
- Nursing staff must create a supportive environment that encourages open discussions about emotional and physical challenges related to breastfeeding.

- Counselling should include discussions on public breastfeeding, offering tips to manage discomfort and promote confidence.
- Nurses must engage family members, especially husbands, to strengthen the mother's support system at home.
- Continued training and awareness among nurses are essential to improve communication skills and provide compassionate, individualized care.

NURSING EDUCATION:

- ✓ Nursing education should include comprehensive training on exclusive breastfeeding, its benefits, and usual challenges faced by first-time mothers.
- ✓ Nursing programs must include role-playing and simulation exercises to build communication skills for counselling new mothers effectively.
- ✓ Students should be educated on how to advocate for breastfeeding-friendly environments in healthcare and community settings.
- ✓ Nursing education should incorporate case studies and qualitative findings to enhance understanding of lived maternal experiences.
- ✓ Training should prepare students to offer non-judgmental support, respecting individual choices and cultural values related to infant feeding.

NURSING MANAGEMENT:

- ❖ Policies should be implemented to promote family-centred care, encouraging involvement of partners and families in breastfeeding education.
- ❖ Administrators should allocate private, comfortable spaces within healthcare settings for mothers to breastfeed or express milk.
- ❖ Adequate nurse-patient ratios must be maintained to allow sufficient time for individualized breastfeeding counselling and support.
- ❖ Monitoring and evaluation systems should be established to assess the quality and effectiveness of breastfeeding support provided by nurses.
- ❖ Resource materials such as educational leaflets, posters, and videos should be made available for staff and patients.

NURSING RESEARCH:

- Further qualitative studies are needed to understand the lived experiences of mothers from diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds.
- Studies should evaluate the effectiveness of family-centred education programs in improving exclusive breastfeeding rates.
- Nursing research can investigate the impact of workplace policies and social norms on breastfeeding practices and maternal well-being.
- Comparative studies can help identify best practices in different hospital and community settings for promoting exclusive breastfeeding.

- Research should assess the role of digital tools, such as apps and online support groups, in enhancing breastfeeding support.

6.4. RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Conduct larger-scale qualitative studies to explore diverse perspectives of primipara mothers across different regions and cultures.
- Develop and evaluate targeted educational programs to address perceived milk insufficiency among first-time mothers.
- Promote studies on the effectiveness of community-based peer support groups in sustaining exclusive breastfeeding.
- Explore the influence of digital platforms and social media in shaping maternal beliefs and practices around breastfeeding.
- Include mixed-method research approaches to combine statistical trends with in-depth personal experiences.
- Examine the role of healthcare provider attitudes and communication styles in influencing maternal breastfeeding confidence.

6.5. LIMITATIONS:

- ❖ The study was limited to a small sample size of seven participants.
- ❖ Participants were selected from a single healthcare setting i.e. well baby clinic.
- ❖ The study included only mothers who were exclusively breastfeeding.
- ❖ Data collection was limited to one week.
- ❖ Responses may have been influenced by social desirability.
- ❖ Language barriers might have affected the depth of expression.

CONCLUSION:

The study provided valuable insights into the perceptions and experiences of primipara mothers regarding exclusive breastfeeding. Despite emotional and physical challenges, most mothers expressed a strong sense of attachment, fulfilment, and commitment to exclusively breastfeeding their infants. Key influences included personal motivation, family support, and societal pressures, with public breastfeeding and perceived milk insufficiency emerging as notable concerns. The findings emphasize the need for empathetic, culturally sensitive nursing care and supportive environments that empower mothers. By understanding these lived experiences, healthcare providers can design more effective interventions and policies that align with mothers' needs, ultimately improving exclusive breastfeeding practices and outcomes.



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