

The Influence of Postpartum Stay on Maternal Nutrition, Relationships, and the Overall Experience of Childbirth in Rawalpindi, Pakistan



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Abstract

Background: The postpartum period is critically important for women, involving complex adjustments. Understanding their diverse experiences is essential for optimal postpartum care. This qualitative study aimed to explore postpartum experiences among women attending primary care facilities in Rawalpindi/Islamabad, Pakistan.

Methodology: Using a qualitative approach, we conducted in-depth interviews with 20 women who had given birth within the past six months. Participants were purposively selected from family medicine clinics in Rawalpindi. An unstructured interview guide explored maternal nutrition, rest, bonding, newborn care, healthcare access, and cultural norms. Thematic analysis identified recurring patterns in the narratives.

Results: Six themes emerged, revealing complex interactions between cultural norms, familial dynamics, and modern expectations. Maternal nutrition unveiled cultural influences on dietary choices. Rest highlighted tensions between tradition and responsibilities. Bonding emphasized familial support, while newborn care showcased family-guided practices. Healthcare access underlined the need for personalized services, and cultural traditions illuminated the balancing act between tradition and well-being.

Conclusion: This study offers a comprehensive insight into postpartum experiences in Pakistan's context. Cultural sensitivity in postpartum care is crucial, integrating tradition with evidence-based practices. Postpartum period is crucial for mothers, neonates, families and society as a whole as it can have long-term effects on all the lives involved.

Keywords: Postpartum care; maternal and new-born care; Pakistan

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Introduction

Childbirth is a major life event that can have a substantial impact on a woman's physical and emotional health (1). In the weeks and months following childbirth, women need to focus on recovery and on providing care to new-born especially in postpartum period (2). The rituals and traditional practices during the postpartum period have existed for centuries in many cultures around the world (3). The practice also known as confinement or "Chilla" in local context that involves a woman staying at home for a period after childbirth (Forty days) (4, 5). During this time, the woman is typically provided care to; by her immediate family, which provides an opportunity for family members to come together to support the new mother during her recovery. This period nurtures a sense of unity and bonding among family members as they jointly care for the mother and the

newborn. She is also given a special diet that is designed to help her recover and to provide her with the much-needed nutrients needed during breastfeeding (6).

This period also highlights the importance of the elder generation in providing guidance and support to the new mother (7). Experienced female relatives, such as the mother or mother-in-law, play a crucial role in passing down traditional practices related to postnatal care such as dietary advice (ghee, milk, dry fruits, lentils, and herbal drinks, high iron diet, calcium, and other nutrients) to help the mother recover and produce more breast milk for infant. They are also often advised to avoid foods that are considered to be "cold" or "heavy," such as dairy products and eggs (8, 9).

The emphasis on traditional practices during postpartum stay sometime creates a dependency on older family members for decision-making and

caregiving, potentially undermining the mother's autonomy and independence (10).

Physical and mental care during postpartum stay is very important for the new mother's well-being (11). Feeling loved, understood, and supported by family members can help reduce stress and anxiety during the challenging postpartum period (12). Women who are participating in postpartum stay are typically advised to stay in bed for most of the day and to avoid vigorous activity. This is seen as a way to allow the body to heal and to prevent complications. However, this stay sometime comes at the cost of social isolation which may lead to feelings of loneliness or disconnect from the outside world (13). Postpartum stay can have a positive impact on maternal nutrition as women who participated in postpartum stay were more likely to breastfeed for a longer period of time and were less likely to experience anaemia and postpartum depression (14).

This study is motivated by the need to comprehensively explore postpartum stay, a traditional practice with historical and cultural significance, and its implications for maternal health, infant care, and family dynamics. The postpartum period, marked by physical recovery and new-born care, is a critical phase in a woman's life. It is, characterized by rest, dietary practices, and familial support, is a customary practice observed in many cultures, including Pakistan. While it offers potential benefits, its influence on maternal autonomy, emotional well-being, and physical health remains relatively unexplored. By investigating the interplay between tradition and modernity within the context of the postpartum stay, this study aims to provide insights into the complex dynamics that shape women's experiences during this transformative period. The findings hold the potential to inform culturally sensitive interventions that enhance maternal well-being, newborn care, and the preservation of cultural traditions.

Methodology

The study employed a qualitative research design to delve into the nuanced experiences of women during the postpartum period in Pakistan. A purposive sampling technique was utilized to select 20 women who had given birth within the preceding 6 months. The participants were recruited from three family medicine clinics in Rawalpindi, and the data collection spanned from January to March 2023.

Among the participants, 7 had undergone cesarean sections, and intriguingly, 3 of them opted to stay at their husbands' homes during the postpartum period, while the remaining 4 chose to reside at their parental homes. The remaining 13 participants had experienced a vaginal delivery, with 12 of them spending the postpartum period in their maternal homes and 1 choosing to stay at her husband's home.

In-depth interviews served as the primary data collection method, facilitated by an unstructured interview guide comprising 19 open-ended questions. The questions covered a spectrum of topics including maternal nutrition, rest, bonding, relationships, and the assistance received for newborn care. The flexibility of the unstructured format allowed for a comprehensive exploration of each participant's unique experience.

The interviews, lasting between 30 to 45 minutes each, were conducted with utmost sensitivity and empathy. To ensure the accuracy and richness of the data, the interviews were audio-recorded and supplemented with detailed note-taking. This dual approach aimed to capture both the verbal and non-verbal elements of the participants' narratives.

To facilitate rigorous analysis, verbatim transcriptions of the audio recordings were meticulously prepared within 48 hours of each interview. This timely transcription not only ensured the fidelity of the data but also allowed for an immediate immersion of the research team into the details of each participant's story. The comprehensive dataset generated through these interviews will serve as the foundation for a thorough and insightful analysis of the postpartum experiences of women in the cultural context of Pakistan.

Written informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring their voluntary participation. Confidentiality was maintained, and participants' identities were kept anonymous in any reports or publications. The study received ethical and technical approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Al-Shifa Trust Rawalpindi.

Qualitative thematic analysis was used to analyze the data, identifying recurring patterns and themes within the participants' experiences related to the postpartum stay. The study's findings are limited by the small sample size and the specific context of women visiting family medicine clinics in Rawalpindi. The experiences of women in other settings or regions may vary.

This qualitative study provided valuable insights into the experiences of women during the postpartum period in Pakistan. Through in-depth interviews, the study shed light on how the postpartum stay influences maternal nutrition, relationships, and the overall childbirth experience from the participants' perspectives. Ethical considerations ensured the protection and confidentiality of participants' information, contributing to the robustness of the research.

Results

The qualitative approach adopted in this study provided a nuanced probe into the experiences of women during the postpartum period in Rawalpindi, Pakistan. Through in-

depth interviews conducted with 20 women who had given birth within the last 6 months, the study delved into various dimensions of the postpartum stay, uncovering the multifaceted nature of this critical phase of motherhood.

The emerging themes shed light on the intricate interplay between maternal nutrition, rest/recovery, bonding/relationships, newborn care support, healthcare access and information, as well as cultural traditions and societal expectations. Each theme captures diverse aspects of the postpartum experience, contributing to an all-inclusive understanding of the challenges, diminuendos, and cultural effects that shape women's journeys during this tenure.

The following section presents an exploration of these themes through first-person narratives and explanatory text, offering a holistic perspective on the lived experiences of women in the context of postpartum care. The summary of our key thematic areas has been provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Main findings from the Key Themes

Key Themes	Salient Points
Maternal Nutrition & Dietary Practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Traditional postpartum foods (Panjeeri) believed to aid healing and milk production. Dietary restrictions include avoiding cold water and citrus fruits. Mixed feelings about adhering to dietary customs.
Rest & Recovery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Importance of rest during postpartum stay. Conflicting expectations: rest vs. household tasks. Psychological and physical implications of rest on overall recovery.
Bonding & Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supportive family environment aids confidence as a new mother. Spousal relationships and dynamics during the postpartum period. Impact of postpartum environment on mother Infant attachment.
Newborn Care Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Family members, especially mothers and sisters, provide guidance on newborn care. Impact of support on mother's confidence and competence. Different experiences when relying of mothers in law for guidance
Healthcare Access & Information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Challenges in seeking personalized guidance from healthcare providers. Reliance on traditional therapies and family advice. Desire for more information from healthcare professionals about postpartum care.
Cultural Traditions & Societal Expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Balancing traditional customs with personal wellbeing Feeling conflicted between family expectations and individual health. Navigating uncomfortable or unreasonable cultural rituals during the postpartum stay.

Maternal Nutrition and Dietary Practices:

This theme delves into the dietary patterns followed by women during the postpartum period and how cultural beliefs and customs shape their dietary choices. It aims to recognize the types of foods consumed, any dietary limitations imposed, and the apparent impact of these dietary practices on maternal well-being and infant health.

"During my postpartum stay, I was served a variety of customary foods (Panjeeri) that were believed to encourage healing and milk production. I was told to avoid certain diets like cold water and citrus fruits, as they were thought to be 'harmful' for the baby. This made me feel cared for, but at times, I wished I could have a glass of cold water." [P1]

Another participant told us that

"My family insisted on giving me herbal drinks and particular foods to 'warm' my body after childbirth. While I valued their concern, I found it challenging to follow these dietary restrictions and missed having my regular meals." [P3]

Rest and Recovery:

This theme focuses on the significance of rest and convalescence in the postpartum phase. It explores the extent to which women are able to rest, factors that enable or hamper their recovery, and the psychological and physical insinuations of adequate or inadequate rest. It sheds light on the balance between traditional anticipations of rest and the modern demands placed on women during this period.

"I was expected to entirely rest during my postpartum stay at my mother's house. While it was nice to have help, I sometimes felt remorseful about not being able to contribute or take care of my baby as much as I desired." [P2]

"At my husband's home, there were certain expectations and household tasks even during the postpartum period. I struggled to find time for myself and adequate rest, which influenced my overall recovery." [P5]

Bonding and Relationships:

This theme discusses the complex relationships that women steer through during their postpartum stay. It explores the quality of interactions with family members, including the emotional support received from the extended family and the dynamics within spousal relationships. The theme also examines the establishment of a bond with the newborn, considering the influence of the postpartum environment on mother-infant attachment.

"Being surrounded by my mother and sisters during my postpartum stay created a warm and supportive environment. I felt more confident in my role as a new mother, and their advice was invaluable." [P6]

"Staying at my husband's home meant I had less time with my family. While my in-laws were caring, I missed the comfort and familiarity of my own family during such an important time." [P6]

Newborn Care Support:

This theme explores the accessibility and nature of support systems in place for women as they care for their newborns during the post-delivery period. It examines the role of family members, principally mothers and mothers-in-law, in guiding and assisting women in newborn care practices. The theme also examines the impact of this support on the mother's confidence and competence in taking care of her baby.

"My mother and sisters directed me through every step of newborn care during my postpartum stay. Their experience and support made me feel more at ease, especially as a first-time mother." [P12]

"At my husband's home, I had to rely on my mother-in-law for guidance on newborn care. While it was a different experience, I appreciated her efforts to help me learn." [P7]

Healthcare Access and Information:

This theme identifies the access to healthcare services and knowledge that women have during the postpartum period. It investigates factors such as availability of medical care, sentience about postpartum health, and the role of healthcare professionals in providing guidance and support. The challenges and opportunities women encounter when seeking healthcare services and information during the postpartum period. It also discussed their interactions with healthcare providers, utilization of clinics or hospitals, and the extent to which they are informed about postpartum care practices.

"I had quite a few questions about my recovery and newborn care, but I felt uncertain to ask the doctors at the clinic. I wish there was more personalized guidance and information available." [P13]

"My family and I relied on traditional therapies and advice from older family members for postpartum care. It would have been useful to have more information from healthcare professionals about what is best for both me and my baby." [P20]

Cultural Traditions and Societal Expectations:

This theme delves into the influence of social customs and expectations on women's postpartum experiences. It explores the role of cultural norms, rituals, and expectations placed on women during this period and how they impact their physical and emotional well-being. The interplay between cultural traditions, societal norms, and women's experiences in the postpartum phase has a major influence

on maternal and child outcomes. We intended to understand the extent to which cultural practices and expectations shape women's behaviors, decision-making, and overall postpartum journey. The insights into the complex dynamics between tradition, societal pressure, and individual agency, have been explored in this theme.

"I felt opposed between following traditional customs and prioritizing my own well-being. Corresponding the expectations of my family and the broader community was challenging." [P13]

"Certain cultural rituals were expected to be followed during my postpartum stay, even though they felt uncomfortable or unreasonable. It's important to find a balance between cultural practices and what's best for the health of both the mother and baby." [P18]

Discussion

The outcomes derived from this qualitative investigation serve as an invaluable repository of knowledge, unraveling the intricate and multidimensional landscape of practices and experiences characterizing the postpartum period among women in Pakistan. Employing a meticulous approach involving in-depth interviews with a diverse cohort of women who recently underwent the childbirth experience, the study discerned and delineated six pivotal themes. These themes, namely maternal nutrition and dietary practices, rest and recovery, bonding and relationships, newborn care support, healthcare access and information, and cultural traditions and societal expectations, collectively illuminate the multifaceted dimensions inherent in the postpartum sojourn. Each theme, akin to a thread in a rich tapestry, contributes to our understanding of the diverse factors that converge to shape the postpartum encounter for women in the context of Pakistani societal dynamics. The richness and diversity of these insights underscore the profound need for nuanced and culturally sensitive interventions in maternal care, grounded in a holistic comprehension of both traditional practices and contemporary healthcare paradigms.

The theme of maternal nutrition and dietary practices highlights the impact of cultural beliefs and traditions on women's dietary choices during the postpartum period. The narratives revealed a gentle balance between obeying to traditional dietary norms aimed at promoting healing and milk production, and the desire for personal likings and comfort. Women expressed gratefulness for the care extended through specific foods and practices, yet also discussed challenges in observing prescribed diets that may conflict with modern dietary norms. This highlights the need for an inclusive approach to postpartum nutrition that acknowledges cultural practices while also considering nutritional appropriateness and

individual preferences. According to a recently published systematic review from various countries, it was found out that maternal nutrition during postpartum period influences not only maternal mental and physical health, but also neonate health as well (15).

Rest and recovery emerged as a central theme, reflecting the tension between traditional outlooks of rest and the demands of modern responsibilities. While women recognized the importance of rest for their well-being and recovery, societal compulsions and roles often posed challenges in achieving suitable rest. This dynamic underscore the need for a supportive setting that accepts the significance of rest during the postpartum period and promotes a balanced approach to recovery. When the occurrence of post-partum symptoms was compared with bed rest it was discovered that regular rest and time for recovery helps women get back on their feet, earlier after childbirth (16).

The theme of bonding and relationships revealed the crucial role of familial support in shaping women's postpartum experiences. Women who stayed with their maternal families described a nurturing environment that provided emotional and practical support, promoting a positive sense of maternal identity. In contrast, those who stayed with their husband's families navigated adjustments within spousal and extended family dynamics. The findings emphasize the importance of considering familial dynamics and support structures when designing postpartum care interventions. According to a recent study, conducted in Canada it was observed that family support and care are inversely proportional to adverse postpartum outcomes (17).

Newborn care support highlighted the reliance on family members, particularly mothers and mothers-in-law, for guidance and assistance in caring for newborns. The narratives underscored the value of experienced family members in imparting knowledge and enhancing maternal confidence. However, variations in advice and practices also revealed the need for evidence-based information and guidance from healthcare professionals to complement traditional wisdom. A rapid evidence systematic review from 2019, highlighted the gaps in newborn care and suggested a robust role of midwifery training which will have a positive trickledown effect on the families and other social support networks at during and after childbirth (18).

The themes of healthcare access and information, as well as cultural traditions and societal expectations, reflect the contextual factors that influence women's postpartum experiences. The narratives revealed a desire for more personalized and accessible healthcare services, as well as the challenge of balancing cultural expectations with individual well-being. A new study from Zimbabwe also exhibits findings that highlight the importance of culturally sensitive healthcare services that provide accurate

information and support to women during the postpartum period (19).

In light of these themes, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of the study, including the small sample size and the specific context of women attending family medicine clinics in Rawalpindi. The experiences of women in other settings or regions may differ based on diverse sociocultural contexts. Nevertheless, the qualitative exploration of these themes provides a rich understanding of the lived experiences of women during the postpartum period, contributing to the broader discourse on maternal health and well-being.

This study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on postpartum care by providing an in-depth exploration of women's experiences in Pakistan. The themes that emerged highlight the intricate interplay between cultural norms, familial dynamics, and modern expectations, underscoring the need for holistic and culturally sensitive approaches to postpartum care. The insights gained from this study can inform the development of targeted interventions that promote the physical, emotional, and social well-being of women during the crucial postpartum period.

Conclusion

In summation, this qualitative inquiry systematically scrutinized the nuanced experiences of women during the postpartum phase in the Pakistani context. The investigation, delineated through the examination of six salient themes, elucidated the intricate interplay between cultural traditions, familial dynamics, and the contemporary challenges emanating from evolving societal expectations. The narratives extracted provided a comprehensive panorama of insights, delineating the pivotal roles of maternal nutrition, recuperation, interpersonal bonds, neonatal care provision, healthcare accessibility, and cultural norms in shaping the trajectories of women during the postpartum period. These discernments accentuate the imperative for tailored and culturally attuned methodologies in postpartum care, which inherently accommodate and amalgamate both traditional wisdom and evidence-derived practices.

Based on the study's findings, several recommendations emerge to enhance postpartum care for women in Pakistan.

- Healthcare providers should prioritize culturally sensitive communication to bridge the gap between traditional beliefs and modern healthcare practices.
- Healthcare facilities and policymakers should consider initiatives that provide accessible and personalized postpartum care, accommodating the diverse needs of women (postpartum support groups, postpartum education)
- Encouraging open dialogues within families and

communities about postpartum care practices can help reduce the potential conflicts arising from differing cultural expectations.

Ethical Approval:

This study was approved by Institutional Review Board of Al-Shifa School of Public Health, Al-Shifa Trust, Rawalpindi Ref. No. Fac-IRB/12 Date: 19-12-2022

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Authors' Contribution:

MAA: – Idea conception, Tool adaptation and development, Data Management, Manuscript writing and review

KNA: Manuscript writing and review

NYS: – Data collection, Field logistics, data analysis and transcription, Result writing, Review

ABK: Data review, manuscript writing and review

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