



REVIEW

WHY ARE MOTHERS HESITANT ABOUT BREASTFEEDING?

In many parts of the world, breastfeeding is still not widely practiced. A study by CUAMM in Sierra Leone identified some of the reasons why – such as women’s fear of not producing enough breast milk and a lack of support by family members – as well as possible interventions.

TEXT BY / ADRIANO CATTANEO / TRIESTE-BASED EPIDEMIOLOGIST

A study published in the *International Breastfeeding Journal*¹ shows how rates of exclusive breastfeeding in the first 6 months of a baby’s life continue to fall far short of what is recommended by the WHO. Conducted in Sierra Leone’s Pujehun District, the study involved a random sample of 194 mothers (average age 25; 43% with no formal education; 56% farmers or small traders) and sought to discover the factors underlying inadequate breastfeeding to devise effective ways of countering the phenomenon.

The mothers included in the sample were selected during routine visits for their children to health posts in the Pujehun District’s five chiefdoms. 113 had children under 6 months of age and 81 had children aged 6-23 months. After providing their informed consent, the women were asked to respond to a questionnaire in their local language. In parallel, 20 mothers selected based on their breastfeeding practices were asked to respond to an in-depth semi-structured interview on the factors influencing their decision-making. Six health care workers were also selected from each of the 5 facilities for in-depth interviews about their and the health system’s roles in promoting and supporting breastfeeding. Finally, to get further details, the researchers organized 7 focus group discussions: 2 each with mothers, fathers and community members and 1 with health care workers.

All but 2 of the mothers surveyed had delivered their babies in a health center or hospital, and all of them had breastfed their child at least once. Seventy-two percent had initiated breastfeeding within an hour of delivery and 22 (11%) had experienced difficulties, including 18 (9%) with nipple pain. Of the 113 mothers with children under 6 months of age, 63% reported having fed them breast milk alone in the previous 24 hours: 74% in the 0- to 1-month group, 66% in the 2- to 3-month group, and 33% in the 4- to 5-month group. The in-depth interviews and focus groups enabled the researchers to identify the factors facilitating breastfeeding, i.e. receiving information on its benefits during pregnancy, being assisted by nurses after delivery and in the postnatal period, receiving support from husbands, and knowing about the breastfeeding practices of family members and friends. The research found that the main barriers to breastfeeding were lack of encouragement by women’s husbands, their perception that their infants’ stools were abnormal, and their belief that they were not producing enough breast milk.

The study helped the researchers to identify interventions to be included in future breastfeeding promotion programs. The most

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International Breastfeeding Journal

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Determinants of breastfeeding practice in Pujehun district, southern Sierra Leone: a mixed-method study

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Abstract

Background: It is well established that exclusive breastfeeding can play a critical role in reducing child morbidity and mortality. Limited research has been done thus far on the practice and perceptions of breastfeeding in Sierra Leone, where more than 10 % of children die before the age of five. This study aimed to gain understanding into and explore both matters in order to develop recommendations for effective strategies to promote breastfeeding practice in Pujehun District, Southern Sierra Leone.

Methods: This exploratory mixed-method study included a cross-sectional survey of 194 mothers, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Logistic regression analysis was used calculated odds ratios of factors associated with primarily breastfeeding practice, defined as ‘Children under six months of age who are fed with breast milk only and children older than six months of age that were exclusively breastfed up to six months’, based on recall from birth. Exclusive breastfeeding rate was based on breastfeeding practice 24 h prior to the survey. Qualitative data was analysed through a deductive approach, using a pre-determined framework on determinants of breastfeeding.

Results: This study revealed an exclusive breastfeeding rate of 62.8% (95% CI 53.9, 71.7); dropping from 74% in the 0–1-month age group to 33% in the 4–5 months group. Triangulation of qualitative and quantitative data revealed enabling factors for primarily breastfeeding practice included mothers receiving support during their first breastfeed, pregnant women being provided with information on the benefits of the practice, counselling by nurses, support from husbands, and women’s awareness of how their friends and family members fed their own babies. The main barriers were a lack of encouragement by husbands, women’s perception that their infants’ stools were abnormal or that they were not producing enough breast milk.

Conclusions: Although the exclusive breastfeeding may have risen over recent years, a gap remains compared to World Health Organization recommendations. According to the breastfeeding determinants identified in this study, promotion of counselling by a nurse, encouragement of husbands’ support, and improve knowledge of mothers on breastfeeding are recommended to be incorporated in the design of future health programs.

Keywords: Breastfeeding, Determinants, Sierra Leone, Child health, Mix-method

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important seem to be improving nurses’ breastfeeding awareness and counseling skills, encouraging husbands to take part in child-feeding practices, and raising future mothers’ awareness about breastfeeding to debunk false beliefs.

NOTES

¹ Van Breevoort D. et al., *Determinants of breastfeeding practice in Pujehun district, Southern Sierra Leone: a mixed-method study*, in *International Breastfeeding Journal*, May 2021