A study published in the *International Breastfeeding Journal* 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 0-1 month group, 66% in the 2-3 month group, and 33% in the 4-5 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 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**