

Journey Through Motherhood: Navigating Perinatal and Postpartum Experiences of Indian Women Amidst the Covid-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The present research explored the perinatal and postpartum experiences of women during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on the physical, psychological, and social aspects of pregnancy and childbirth. Eight women who gave birth during the pandemic participated in in-depth semi-structured interviews. Thematic network analysis identified three key themes: changes in social support networks, the impact on health, and the pros and cons experienced by pregnant women as a result of the Covid 19 pandemic. The findings emphasize the effects of the pandemic on pregnant and postpartum women, providing valuable insights for healthcare professionals and policymakers to tailor support during global health crises. In light of the heightened vulnerabilities faced by women during global health crises, this study underscores the imperative for tailored attention to their unique experiences. As frontline caregivers, policymakers must prioritize the multifaceted needs of pregnant and postpartum women, ensuring comprehensive support amidst unprecedented challenges.

Keywords: *Pregnancy, Perinatal & Postnatal Experiences, COVID-19, Psychosocial Impact, Thematic Network Analysis, Maternal Health*

Pregnancy, a pivotal period in a woman's life, encompasses many physiological, psychological, and social changes. Amidst the intrinsic challenges of pregnancy, the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic introduced unprecedented stressors for expectant and postpartum women. This study comprehensively explores the psychosocial dimensions of perinatal experiences during the COVID-19 era, addressing a research gap in understanding the effects on pregnant and postpartum women.

The literature highlights the multifaceted nature of pregnancy, emphasizing the intricate interplay of emotional, physiological, and social factors. Studies have consistently demonstrated that the psychological well-being of pregnant women is a crucial determinant of both maternal and fetal health outcomes (Smith et al., 2017; Jones & Brown, 2019). Additionally, the belief that emotional and environmental factors may influence fetal development is widely acknowledged across diverse cultures (Arlberg et al., 1995).

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In recent years, investigations into the psychological impact of pregnancy have focused on antenatal and postnatal depression, anxiety, and the quality of life experienced by expectant mothers (Louma et al., 2001; O'Connor et al., 2002; Lagadec et al., 2018). These studies highlight the enduring effects of maternal mental health on the cognitive and emotional development of the child, underscoring the importance of addressing psychological distress during the perinatal period.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic created a novel context for perinatal experiences. Quarantine measures, fear of infection, and disruptions in healthcare access added layers of complexity to the psychosocial landscape for pregnant and postpartum women (Brooks et al., 2020). Existing literature on the psychological implications of quarantine and stressors during pandemics provides a theoretical framework for understanding the unique challenges faced by expectant mothers in times of global health crisis.

This research, employing in-depth semi-structured interviews and thematic network analysis, delves into the psychosocial dimensions of perinatal experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. By building upon the existing literature, this study aims to elucidate the intricate interplay of stressors and support systems that shape the perinatal journey amidst the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic (Huang et al., 2021).

The thematic networks identified include changes in social support structures, the profound impact on maternal health, and the dichotomy of positive and negative aspects experienced by pregnant women. The findings of this study provide valuable insights for healthcare professionals and policymakers to tailor interventions and support systems for pregnant and postpartum women navigating the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

METHODOLOGY

The present study adopts a qualitative research design to explore the prepartum and postpartum experiences of women who delivered during the COVID-19 pandemic. This research aims to delve into the physical, psychological, and social aspects of pregnancy and childbirth amidst the challenges posed by the pandemic.

Objectives:

1. To explore the perinatal experiences of women delivering their first or second child during the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. To investigate the postpartum experiences of women delivering their first or second child during the COVID-19 pandemic.
3. To understand the physical, psychological, and social changes experienced by women during pregnancy in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.
4. Advocating for Specialized Support for Vulnerable Maternal Populations

Research Design:

A qualitative research design is employed to provide an in-depth understanding of the social reality of individuals during the perinatal and postpartum periods amid the COVID-19 pandemic. This approach focuses on the "how" and "why" of phenomena, emphasizing a humanistic and exploratory perspective.

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Tools:

Semi-structured interviews serve as the primary data collection method. The interview schedule, structured to gather open-ended responses, facilitates the exploration of participants' thoughts, feelings, and beliefs. This method allows a comprehensive understanding of the physical, psychological, and social experiences of women during childbirth in the COVID-19 era.

Participants:

The sample size comprises eight women who delivered during the COVID-19 pandemic, including both first-time and second-time mothers. The inclusion criteria encompassed women delivering during the first or second wave of the pandemic, with a specific focus on those with less than a 5-year age difference between their children. The inclusion criteria aimed at capturing diverse experiences within the pandemic context.

Ethical Guidelines:

Participants were provided with an ethical consent form, and informed consent was obtained before the study. The purpose of the study was explained, and confidentiality was assured. Participants were made aware of their voluntary participation, with the option to withdraw without consequences. Additionally, participants were allowed to review their transcripts for validation.

Procedure:

Semi-structured interviews were conducted via the online platform Google Meet for the convenience of participants. Each interview, lasting approximately 45-60 minutes, was recorded with participant consent and later transcribed for analysis.

Method of Analysis:

Thematic Network Analysis, as proposed by Attride-Sterling (2001), was employed to analyze the semi-structured interviews conducted with eight women who had delivered either their first or their second child during the Covid-19 pandemic. The analytic process began with transcribing the interviews verbatim. The transcripts were read multiple times to ensure familiarity with the data.

Initial codes were generated using an inductive approach, where segments of the data were labeled with descriptive codes. These codes were then grouped into basic themes based on similarities and patterns observed. These basic themes were further categorized into organizing themes that encapsulated broader patterns in the data. Finally, the organizing themes were synthesized into global themes, providing a comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences.

For instance, the theme "Impact on Mental Health" emerged from basic themes such as "anxiety about infection," "isolation from support systems," and "fear for baby's health." These were then organized under the broader category of "Psychological Impact," which formed part of the global theme "Health and Well-being."

Analysis:

The analysis of the interviews revealed three primary themes that encapsulate the experiences of Indian women navigating perinatal and postpartum periods during the Covid-19 pandemic: changes in social support, health impacts, and the pros and cons of pandemic

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pregnancies. A significant theme was the drastic changes in social support. Participants reported feeling a profound sense of isolation as traditional support systems were disrupted. One participant poignantly expressed, "Before the pandemic, my family and friends were always around to help. But during Covid, I felt very isolated and had to manage everything on my own" (Participant 3). This sense of isolation was compounded by the inability to access physical support from family and friends, who would typically provide essential emotional and practical assistance during such critical times.

The second theme, health impacts, highlighted the substantial psychological and physical challenges faced by these women. The pervasive anxiety and stress associated with the fear of contracting the virus and its potential effects on their babies were recurrent concerns. One mother recounted her constant worry, stating, "I was constantly worried about contracting the virus and what it might mean for my baby. The stress was overwhelming" (Participant 5). Additionally, the disruption of regular prenatal care exacerbated these anxieties. With hospitals being perceived as high-risk environments, several participants avoided necessary medical checkups. Another participant revealed, "I missed several prenatal appointments because I was scared to go to the hospital" (Participant 2). This avoidance not only increased stress but also deprived them of the reassurance and medical oversight crucial during pregnancy.

Finally, the theme of pros and cons of pandemic pregnancies presented a nuanced view of the participants' experiences. While many challenges were noted, some unexpected benefits also emerged. For instance, the lockdown measures meant that partners who were working from home could participate more actively in the pregnancy and early childcare. One participant shared, "The lockdown meant my partner was working from home, so he was more involved in the pregnancy and early days of our baby's life than he might have been otherwise" (Participant 7). This increased involvement was seen as a silver lining, fostering stronger family bonds and shared responsibilities. However, this theme also underscored the emotional toll of limited social interactions. The inability to celebrate milestones and share the journey with extended family and friends led to feelings of sadness and disconnection. Another participant reflected on this, stating, "It was heartbreaking not being able to share this experience with my extended family and friends" (Participant 4).

These interconnected themes paint a comprehensive picture of the multifaceted impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on perinatal and postpartum experiences. The findings underscore the critical role of social support in maternal health and the profound effects of its absence. Moreover, the heightened anxiety and disrupted healthcare access reveal significant areas where healthcare systems need to adapt to better support pregnant women in times of crisis. The insights into the pros and cons of pandemic pregnancies highlight the complex interplay between increased familial bonding and the emotional costs of social isolation. Together, these themes call for a nuanced understanding of maternal experiences during the pandemic, advocating for more resilient support systems and adaptive healthcare practices to mitigate such unprecedented challenges.

RESULT & DISCUSSION

This study delved into the unique prepartum and postpartum experiences of women during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on health, social support, and the overall impact of these experiences. Thematic network analysis unearthed three global themes: Health, Social Support, and Pros & Cons of Covid-19 Experiences.

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The health theme revealed a profound impact on both the physical and mental aspects of pregnant women, echoing existing literature on the psychological stressors affecting obstetric outcomes (Chung et al., 2001; Weisberg and Paquette, 2002). Anxiety, fear of infection, and concerns about the fetus were common, while some reported positive emotions, emphasizing the increased time spent with infants due to reduced commuting and remote work, aligning with the importance of maternal-infant bonding for child development (Klaus and Kennell, 1982). Participants expressed heightened anxiety and stress.

Interestingly, differences emerged between first-time and second-time mothers during the pandemic, emphasizing pandemic-induced changes rather than typical pregnancy-related experiences. Reduced social support, heightened anxiety, and altered health behaviours characterized the experiences of second-time mothers.

Social support played a critical role in mitigating stress, with supportive partners and immediate family members providing essential comfort amidst restrictions on extended family and friend interactions. Dissatisfaction with clinicians' responses highlighted the need for clearer communication and accessible information from healthcare providers, especially during public health crises.

A significant finding was the alteration of birth plans, leading to disruptions, loss of control, and changes in after-birth activities. This underscores the impact of the pandemic on the transition to parenthood, emphasizing the importance of choice and control during childbirth (Cook, 2012).

The study also illuminated pandemic-induced learnings, including increased gratitude, resilience, and a heightened focus on health. While many challenges were noted, some participants also mentioned unexpected benefits. One participant shared, "The lockdown meant my partner was working from home, so he was more involved in the pregnancy and early days of our baby's life than he might have been otherwise" (Participant 7). These findings align with the literature suggesting that individuals can develop resilience and find positives during challenging times (Walsh, 2020). Comparatively, the study resonates with existing literature on the psychological impact of infectious diseases on pregnant individuals (Corbett et al., 2020). It contributes to understanding pandemic-induced changes in perinatal experiences, emphasizing the interconnectedness of physical and mental health during pregnancy.

Further analysis of the findings revealed that the pandemic-induced changes in social support, health impacts, and the mixed experiences of pregnancy during COVID-19 reflect broader societal shifts. For example, the increased involvement of partners due to remote work highlights a shift in traditional gender roles and the potential for more equitable sharing of childcare responsibilities. This aligns with contemporary research which suggests that remote work can enhance paternal involvement in childcare and support maternal well-being (Smith et al., 2021).

However, the lack of access to routine medical care and the resultant anxiety underscore the need for more robust telehealth solutions and better communication from healthcare providers during crises. Research by Johnson et al. (2020) indicates that telehealth can be an effective alternative to in-person appointments, reducing anxiety by ensuring continuous medical support. The heightened levels of anxiety and stress among pregnant women during

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the pandemic are consistent with findings from recent studies, which show increased rates of anxiety and depression in this demographic (Davenport et al., 2020).

These insights emphasize the importance of tailored healthcare responses, clear communication, and increased support for pregnant and postpartum women during public health crises. By understanding the nuanced experiences of these women, healthcare professionals and policymakers can develop targeted interventions to enhance maternal well-being during such challenging times. Future research should explore the long-term effects of these pandemic-induced changes on maternal mental health and child development, as well as the effectiveness of various support systems implemented during the pandemic (Thapa et al., 2021; Uscher-Pines et al., 2020).

In discussing the implications, the study underscores the need for tailored healthcare responses, clear communication, and increased support during pandemics. Understanding the nuanced experiences of pregnant women informs the development of targeted interventions and support systems to enhance maternal well-being during public health crises.

While acknowledging the study's limitations, such as a small sample size and potential biases from self-reporting, future research could explore the long-term effects of pandemic-induced changes on child development and maternal mental health. Additionally, investigating the perspectives of healthcare providers and the effectiveness of support systems during pandemics would further enrich our understanding of perinatal experiences.

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted the perinatal and postpartum experiences of women, introducing challenges and complexities during pregnancy and childbirth. Mental health difficulties, anxious and depressive symptoms, and heightened parenting stress have emerged as notable consequences during the postpartum period (Davenport et al., 2020; Coyne et al., 2020). This study, conducted through qualitative research employing semi-structured interviews and thematic network analysis, delved into the physical, psychological, and social dimensions of pregnancy and childbirth during these unprecedented times.

The findings underscore the multifaceted impact of the pandemic on the mental and physical health of pregnant women throughout their perinatal and postpartum journeys. Notably, the experiences of having babies during the pandemic were characterized by both positive and negative aspects, unveiling the Pros and Cons associated with Pandemic Babies. Social support, though diminished due to pandemic restrictions, remained a crucial source of help, comfort, and resilience for women.

However, the study is not without limitations. The small sample size of eight participants restricts the generalizability of the findings. Moreover, the broad inclusion criteria encompassing diverse backgrounds may have overlooked nuanced circumstances unique to each family. The study acknowledges the need for more personalized and in-depth analyses. Future research directions should address these limitations by expanding the sample size and focusing on more specific demographic criteria. Exploring the experiences of women from low socioeconomic status and rural settings is essential for a comprehensive understanding

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of the diverse impacts of the pandemic. Additionally, research could delve into the long-term effects on child development and maternal mental health.

The methodological choice of thematic network analysis provided rich and detailed insights into the varied perspectives of participants. While acknowledging the flexibility of thematic analysis, the study recommends careful consideration to avoid inconsistencies and lack of coherence in theme development.

Implications of the study call for special emphasis on the needs of pregnant women during global health crises. Authorities should establish concrete and considerate rules, provide specific information to pregnant women, and create safe spaces for outdoor activities. Gynaecologists and clinics should bridge knowledge gaps and disseminate accurate information to ensure better health outcomes. Mental health professionals, social workers, and policymakers must be alert to the emotional and psychological distress faced by pregnant women, necessitating appropriate interventions.

In conclusion, this research contributes valuable insights for healthcare professionals, policymakers, and mental health practitioners. Understanding the unique challenges faced by pregnant women during the COVID-19 pandemic can guide the development of targeted interventions, support systems, and well-being programs. This knowledge is crucial not only for the current health crisis but also for informing future responses to global challenges affecting maternal and child health.

In advocating for specialized support for vulnerable maternal populations, it is crucial to acknowledge the broader context of global health crises, akin to the challenges encountered during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study's insights illuminate the enduring significance of tailored interventions to address the diverse needs and experiences of pregnant women amidst various unforeseen circumstances.

To effectively support vulnerable maternal populations, healthcare professionals and policymakers must prioritize adaptable strategies that remain relevant in times of crisis. Implementing proactive measures such as establishing community-based support networks and virtual counseling services can offer pregnant women consistent access to vital resources and emotional support, irrespective of the prevailing challenges.

Moreover, advocating for comprehensive maternal health education remains paramount, emphasizing preventive measures, and promoting well-being practices that transcend specific crises. By equipping pregnant women with knowledge and resources to navigate uncertain circumstances, we empower them to make informed decisions about their health and seek necessary support when needed.

Collaborative efforts between healthcare providers, community organizations, and policymakers are essential in fostering resilient maternal populations. Through coordinated initiatives aimed at enhancing access to prenatal care, mental health services, and social support networks, we can build robust systems capable of addressing the multifaceted needs of pregnant women, even in the face of unprecedented challenges.

By advocating for specialized support tailored to the needs of vulnerable maternal populations in times of crisis, we reaffirm our commitment to promoting maternal well-

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being and resilience in the face of adversity. This research underscores the enduring relevance of addressing the unique challenges faced by pregnant women, ensuring equitable access to care and support, regardless of the prevailing circumstances.

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Conflict of Interest

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