MINH
MALAHAYATI INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF NURSING AND HEALTH SCIENCE
ISSN 2620-9152 (Print)
ISSN 2621-4083 (Online)
DOI: 10.33024
Nomor: 79/E/KPT/2023

ARTICLE INFORMATION
Received: May, 3, 2025
Revised: June, 25, 2025
Available online: June, 27, 2025
at : https://e-jurnal.iphorr.com/index.php/minh

Fathers' involvement in their wives'/partners' breastfeeding: A qualitative study

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Background: Increasing the coverage of breastfeeding can improve survival and protect children from chronic diseases. However, the low coverage of exclusive breastfeeding is a problem caused by internal and external factors. One of the external factors is the lack of support from the husband.
Purpose: To explore the involvement of husbands in the process of mothers providing exclusive breastfeeding to their babies.
Method: Qualitative research with a generic qualitative approach. Participants in this study were breastfeeding mothers who had babies over six months old and had passed the period of exclusive breastfeeding. The number of breastfeeding mothers was 8 people with the principle of data saturation. The researcher was the main instrument in the study. Other instruments used were interview guidelines, field notes, and audio recorders. The interview results were analyzed thematically.
Results: Frequency distribution data were obtained from unemployed mothers as many as 75% with the majority of high school education with an age range of 25-34 years. The results of the study showed that mothers' acceptance of husbands' involvement in the process of providing exclusive breastfeeding included emotional involvement and physical involvement.
Conclusion: Mothers believe that husband's involvement is very important in the process of exclusive breastfeeding. The involvement received by mothers can be in the form of emotional involvement in the form of attention and informative advice and physical involvement as a form of practical support in the process of exclusive breastfeeding. Husbands who have sufficient information about exclusive breastfeeding and are aware of the importance of the health and development of babies will decide to be actively involved in the process of exclusive breastfeeding.

Keywords: Emotional Involvement; Exclusive Breastfeeding; Husband's Support; Physical Involvement.

INTRODUCTION

Breast milk (ASI) is an important source of nutrition for babies secreted by the mammary glands. Babies aged 0-6 months are only given breast milk to meet their nutritional needs or called exclusive breastfeeding (World Health Organization, 2022). Globally, the percentage of babies under six months who receive exclusive breastfeeding has reached 48%, approaching the World Health Assembly 2025 target of 50%. The 2023 Indonesian Health Survey shows that the coverage of exclusive breastfeeding in Indonesia currently reaches 55%. The coverage of exclusive breastfeeding in Central Java reached 64.4% and in Pekalongan Regency the coverage of exclusive breastfeeding was recorded at 64.61%.

The coverage of exclusive breastfeeding in Indonesia which is not yet optimal is not in line with the rules set by the government regarding exclusive breastfeeding in health laws and government regulations. Exclusive breastfeeding is a must for mothers who give birth to babies and babies have the right to receive exclusive breastfeeding from birth to six months of age except for medical indications (Ministry of Health of the Republic of Indonesia,

DOI: https://doi.org/10.33024/minh.v8i4.912

2012). Based on this, every mother should ideally be able to support and implement government regulations to increase the coverage of exclusive breastfeeding.

Increasing the coverage of breastfeeding can save more than 820,000 children under the age of 5 each year, the majority (87%) are under 6 months old. In addition to improving survival and protecting children from chronic diseases, breastfeeding can also improve children's growth and development optimally from an early age and even support brain development and is related to children's intelligence. Breastfeeding is not only beneficial for babies but also for mothers, it can prevent postpartum hemorrhage, postpartum depression, ovarian and breast cancer, heart disease, and type 2 diabetes.

Increasing the number of breastfeeding in infants is estimated to prevent an additional 20,000 maternal deaths from breast cancer. This shows that breastfeeding in infants is the most effective way to protect maternal and child health and improve optimal child growth and development (Doan, Binns, Pham, Zhao, Dinh, Bui, & Lee, 2020; United Nations Children'd Fund, 2018). However, there are still several problems faced by mothers in providing breast milk to their babies and providing exclusive breastfeeding.

Problems faced by mothers in increasing exclusive breastfeeding are low or stopped breast milk production, lack of knowledge, physical condition of the mother, behavior, psychology of the mother, support from health workers, lack of husband support, food security, poverty, cultural beliefs and practices, and government involvement (Kusuma & Khofiyah, 2022; Kusuma & Sukmasary, 2023; Mufdlilah, Kusuma, & Suryaningsih, 2023). These problems must be addressed immediately in a comprehensive manner by involving all relevant parties.

Forms of involvement include increasing knowledge and support for mothers. One of the efforts that can be made to overcome the problem of exclusive breastfeeding is to increase maternal knowledge through health education and counseling, provide support, and establish policies that encourage the success of exclusive breastfeeding (Abdulahi, Fretheim, Argaw, & Magnus, 2021; Agrina, Afandi, Suyanto, Erika, Dewi, Helina, & Safira, 2022; Burns, Duursma, & Triandafilidis, 2020). Support can be obtained from husbands, families (mothers, mothers-in-law), health workers, the community, and the government. This support can reduce the problems faced by breastfeeding mothers, including overcoming the lack of information for mothers and increasing self-confidence in the mother's ability to breastfeed her baby (Botha, Helminen, Kaunonen, Lubbe, & Joronen, 2020; Monteiro, Guimarães, Melo, & Bonelli, 2020).

Previous studies have shown that appropriate and specific husband support for breastfeeding mothers can influence the mother's decision to start and continue breastfeeding in the early postpartum period. Verbal support for mothers from husbands is the most common form of support given to improve breastfeeding behavior. Other support comes from actions that support breastfeeding behavior, including husbands' sensitivity to the needs of breastfeeding mothers, assistance in preventing and overcoming breastfeeding difficulties, and helping with housework and childcare.

In line with the World Health Organization's recommendation that mothers need practical support to be able to start and establish breastfeeding and overcome difficulties faced in breastfeeding their babies (World Health Organization, 2017). Support in the form of husband involvement is needed to maximize the achievement of exclusive breastfeeding (Kusuma, Kristiyanti, & Khanifah, 2023; Pambuko, Setiyo, Praja, Setiawan, Yuliastuti, Muliawanti, & Dewi, 2023; Mufdlilah, Ernawati, & Ambarwati, 2022; Nepali & Shakya, 2019; Renata & Agus, 2021). The results of preliminary studies show that there are still husbands who think that breastfeeding is only the wife's job. Until now, there has been no specific program to support the provision of breast milk in this region.

RESEARCH METHOD

Qualitative research with a generic approach. The sample in this study were breastfeeding mothers who had babies over six months old and had passed the period of exclusive breastfeeding in the Pekalongan Regency Health Center work area. The sample determination used a purposive sampling technique, namely the determination of samples oriented to research objectives that were deliberately selected according to the participant criteria

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previously determined by the researcher (Gibbs, 2018). So that there were 8 mothers who were the objects of this study, referred to as P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, and P8.

The criteria used in this study were breastfeeding mothers who had babies over 6 months old, mothers and husbands who could communicate verbally fluently, and were domiciled in the Pekalongan Regency Health Center area who were willing to become participants. The exclusion criteria in this study were mothers who could not be met 3 times at different times.

The researcher is the main instrument in the study. In addition, other instruments used are interview guidelines, field notes, and audio recorders. The study was conducted using in-depth interview techniques accompanied by observations during the interview process. This technique is used so that participants are able to express their experiences, namely information about the mother's experience of her husband's involvement in the success of exclusive breastfeeding.

If the mother understands and is willing to participate, she is given a written consent form that must be signed as a form of willingness to become a respondent. The participant recruitment process was assisted by village midwives and local cadres. This is also an effort by researchers to establish initial closeness with participants before conducting research (Longworth, Furber, & Kirk, 2021). Interviews are supplemented with field notes to identify situations and non-verbal responses during the interview process. Researchers write down these non-verbal responses in interview transcripts to make it easier for researchers to analyze the data. Researchers use good quality audio recorders to record conversations during interviews.

This research has received approval from the health research ethics committee of Universitas Muhammadiyah Pekajangan Pekalongan with the number KEPK/UMP/28/II/2025.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Table 1. Characteristics of Participant (N=8)

Participant	Age	Employment Status	Education	Types of Childbirth	Number of children	Breastfeeding
P1	30 years	Teacher	Undergraduate	Normal	3	Exclusive
P2	32 Years	housewife	Elementary School	C-section	2	Exclusive
P3	25 years	housewife	Senior High School	C-section	1	Exclusive
P4	34 Years	housewife	Senior High School	Normal	2	Exclusive
P5	28 Years	housewife	Senior High School	C-section	2	Exclusive
P6	25 years	housewife	Senior High School	C-section	1	Exclusive
P7	31 Years	housewife	Undergraduate	C-section	2	Exclusive
P8	30 years	Administrative staff	Undergraduate	Normal	1	Exclusive

Table 1 shows the frequency distribution data of participants with an age range of 25-34 years. The highest level of education is high school with 6 participants (75%), but most mothers do not work with 6 participants (75%). Type Of Child Birth participants show the majority of C-Section with 5 participants (62.5%) and an average of having 2 children with 4 participants (50%).

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Table 2. Results of Participant Interview Analysis

Variables	Results
Emotional Engagement The emotional involvement of the husband that the mother feels includes giving praise, motivation, attention, providing a sense of comfort, and keeping the mother away from conditions that cause stress.	"The husband gives attention, number one must be attentive so that she is not restless. …. reminding her to drink" P5 "If you want to eat something at night.. I will buy it for you") P1 "…. instead he said, come on mom, buy lots of snacks he said (imitating the husband's words), because if mom is happy, her breast milk will definitely be abundant." P3 "…the important thing is to eat a lot so that her breast milk flows smoothly" P4 "…. Alhamdulillah, I am happy to be able to breastfeed (mother imitating her husband's words praising her) P1
Physical Involvement The involvement of the husband felt by the mother is also in the form of physical involvement or the involvement of the husband that is done directly by the husband by helping to take care of the baby by carrying, calming, and changing the baby's diaper. The husband is also involved in meeting the mother's nutritional needs, taking her for a walk so she doesn't get bored, accompanying her at night when the baby wakes up to breastfeed, helping to warm breast milk and give it to the baby, and even giving the mother a massage.	*"…my husband buys vegetables , …., tries to take care of the baby even when he's tired even after coming home from work . " P5* *"….in the morning we take turns looking after the children, ….if you want to eat something at night… yes, I will buy it for you") P1* *" At the beginning, I helped with housework, supported her by looking for supplies to make her breast milk better quality…" P8* *" If you stay up late, stay up late, they say it will prevent baby blues" P2* *"….sometimes I get an oxytocin massage, and I often take her out, so she doesn't get bored, so her mind stays happy so she has lots of breast milk, I buy her snacks like that" P7* *"...sometimes when my little brother wakes up, sometimes he doesn't wake me up, my husband is the one who bothers me about his breast milk ,... Often I also change diapers when I'm still sleeping, I don't wake me up..." P6* *"…..because his father tried to prevent him from getting formula milk….." P8* *"….yes, giving support, we try to make sure that exclusive breastfeeding doesn't reach my formula milk, which I consume for breast milk boosters, he'eh, nuts, I buy almonds and milk…" P8*

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Table 2 shows the results of interviews with participants in this study, namely P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, and P8. There are two variables in the analysis of the interviews conducted, namely emotional involvement and physical involvement. The results of the analysis of emotional involvement show that P1, P3, P4, and P5 have good husband support in the form of attention, one of which is the fulfillment of food desired by breastfeeding mothers. In addition, Table 2 also shows the results of physical involvement in the form of husband involvement carried out directly by the husband by helping to take care of the baby as informed by participants P1, P2, P5, P6, P7, and P8.

DISCUSSION

The results of the study showed that the frequency distribution data of participants in this study. Table 1 shows the frequency distribution data of participants showing mean and SD values of 29.375 ± 3.204 with an age range of 25-34. The highest level of education was high school with 6 participants (75%), but most of the mothers did not work with 6 participants (75%). Types of labor participants showed the majority of Sc with 5 participants (62.5%) and an average of having 2 children with 4 participants (50%).

Breastfeeding is an essential part of newborn care and provides long-term health benefits for both infants and mothers (Fan, Wong, Fong, Lok, & Tarrant, 2019; Rosa, Rohana, & Ulfa, 2022; Wallenborn, Levine, Carreira Dos Santos, Grisi, Brentani, & Frink, 2021). Breastfeeding provides valuable nutrients needed for the growth and development of the nervous system and brain, as well as providing immunity against various diseases and building a strong emotional bond between mother and infant (Nuzzi, Trambusti, Di Cicco, & Peroni, 2021; Rosa et al., 2022).

Breastfeeding mothers need their husband's support in carrying out their practices in order to successfully provide exclusive breastfeeding for six months. Husband's support in physical and emotional forms increases the mother's success in providing exclusive breastfeeding (Kusuma & Khofiyah, 2022; Pratiwi, Kartini, Jati, & Sriatmi, 2023). Mothers feel warmth, harmony, and attention so that they avoid anxiety and stress while breastfeeding (Mardiyaningsih, Widyawati, & Hapsari, 2024; Pratiwi et al., 2023). Support is everything that someone does to another person in the form of moral and material support to increase motivation. Support can influence someone to make decisions and behave towards an object (Chesti, Adriansyah, Ibad, & Herdiani, 2022). Support in breastfeeding by mothers is very much needed and even continues from pregnancy to postpartum. This form of support includes physical presence in the form of physical contact, communication, and attention (Beggs, Koshy, & Neiterman, 2021).

In line with the study, the involvement of the husband is felt as one form of support felt by the mother during the breastfeeding process. The mother said that the involvement of the husband can be in the form of giving attention, helping with housework and taking care of the baby, giving praise, providing time and energy to accompany breastfeeding at night, providing encouragement to eat nutritious food, providing nutritious food, and facilitating the mother in obtaining the nutrition she needs so that breast milk comes out smoothly and abundantly.

Praise and appreciation from husbands to breastfeeding mothers will increase mothers' confidence to continue breastfeeding their babies (Pakilaran, Rasni, Nur, & Wijaya, 2022; Rosa et al., 2022). Previous studies have shown that husbands provide support to mothers to breastfeed exclusively because they want their babies to get good nutrition so they try to meet the mother's needs in the breastfeeding process, encourage mothers to continue breastfeeding, pay attention to the mother's diet, and remind mothers to breastfeed their babies (Stang, Abdullah, & Marwang, 2021). In addition to mothers feeling happy to receive support from their husbands, mothers also feel responsible for meeting the baby's nutritional needs through exclusive breastfeeding.

Other studies state that husband's support is not only limited to recommendations for exclusive breastfeeding, but also requires the husband's understanding of the importance of exclusive breastfeeding, involvement in baby care, empathy for the mother's struggle in breastfeeding, and direct practical support for the mother (Koksal, Acikgoz, & Cakirli, 2022; Kusuma & Khofiyah, 2022; Kusuma et al., 2023; Pambuko et al., 2023). The form of practical support is the husband's involvement in

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baby care such as changing the baby's diaper and helping to maintain the stability of the nutritional status of breastfeeding mothers (Chesti et al., 2022; Setyowati, Rohaya, & Rahmawati, 2023).

Husbands who are involved in the exclusive breastfeeding process can reduce maternal stress. Previous research shows that the stress level of breastfeeding mothers decreases with support from their husbands (Natalia, Yuliana, & Nulhakim, 2022). Previous research also shows that husbands who are involved in managing physical discomfort can improve their psychological well-being (Srisopa & Lucas, 2021). Mothers feel comfortable because they get attention from their husbands and feel confident because they are loved (Yuliana, Murdiningsih, & Indriani, 2022). Mothers who are free from stress and have good psychological well-being in the breastfeeding process will find it easier because breast milk production is smoother and more abundant (Wulandari & Nurlaela, 2021).

This study also states that husbands provide oxytocin massage so that mothers feel comfortable and their breast milk increases. In line with previous studies that providing oxytocin massage, especially by husbands, can increase the mother's response to breastfeeding and can increase breast milk production (Sari, Herawati, & Rubaya, 2021; Zakiyah, Azriliyani, Afriani, Rahmawati, & Muadi, 2024). The involvement of husbands through providing oxytocin massage to mothers also provides great benefits for breastfeeding mothers.

CONCLUSION

Mothers who exclusively breastfed in this study perceived their husbands' involvement in the breastfeeding process as a form of support from their husbands. This involvement is in the form of emotional and physical involvement that supports the exclusive breastfeeding process. Husbands' involvement is important for the success of exclusive breastfeeding, even in simple forms according to the husband's ability, such as providing motivation, informative advice and attention, to direct involvement in maternal and infant health care during the exclusive breastfeeding process. Husbands who have sufficient information about exclusive breastfeeding and are aware of the importance of infant health and development will decide to be actively involved in the exclusive breastfeeding process.

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