

## EXPLORING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF POSTPARTUM MOTHERS: A QUALITATIVE INQUIRY INTO THEIR TRADITIONAL POSTPARTUM PRACTICES

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### ABSTRACT

The traditional postpartum practices continue to shape maternal health behaviors in many Filipino communities despite the growing accessibility of modern medical care. This study explored the lived experiences of postpartum mothers in Bambang, Nueva Vizcaya, Philippines, focusing on their adherence to culturally inherited postpartum traditions. The objective was to examine both the perceived benefits and challenges of these practices and to propose an educational strategy, using Information, Education, and Communication (IEC) materials, that supports culturally sensitive healthcare. The research employed a qualitative-descriptive design, utilizing semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis based on Clarke and Braun's framework. Findings revealed that practices such as *tanggap* (postpartum resting), herbal baths, dietary restrictions, and maternal guidance from elders were prevalent among respondents. While these traditions were often followed out of obligation or fear of consequences, such as "binat", participants also reported emotional and physical relief. The integration of medical and traditional postpartum care was also evident, with healthcare providers showing respect for cultural beliefs. The study concludes that traditional practices offer both benefits and challenges and recommends the development of culturally tailored IEC materials. These findings have implications for nursing practice, particularly in promoting holistic, culturally competent postpartum care that balances traditional wisdom with evidence-based medicine.

*Keywords:* Adaptation, cultural beliefs, healing rituals, maternal care, postnatal recovery

### INTRODUCTION

Traditional postpartum practices significantly shape maternal health behaviors in many Filipino communities, enduring despite increased access to modern medical care. These deeply rooted beliefs, passed down through generations, often lead expectant mothers to rely on customs that may lack scientific validation, potentially placing them at risk of complications. Cultural and traditional elements are central to understanding a community's social fabric: culture is defined as shared values, beliefs, norms, and practices, while tradition emphasizes the continuity of these elements over time, providing identity and stability. In the Asian context, including the Philippines, traditional norms, religious beliefs, and family expectations profoundly influence intrapartum practices. Many women, particularly in rural areas, adhere to traditional methods, as they perceive them as safer or more respectful of cultural identity, even as modernization introduces new healthcare options. This persistence is largely due to the Philippines' rich cultural diversity, which, as of 2010, included approximately 17 million Indigenous Peoples from 110 ethnolinguistic groups. The postpartum period, typically lasting six to eight weeks for a mother's body to return to its non-pregnant state, involves significant physiological and emotional recovery. The first month after birth poses the highest risk for maternal and infant mortality. In the Philippines, this period is deeply influenced by a range of traditional beliefs and rituals involving both the mother and the infant, underscoring the importance of understanding these cultural dimensions for effective maternal health programs.

Common Ilocano traditional postpartum practice includes "panawen" (postpartum confinement), a period of extensive rest usually lasting 20 to 40 days to aid physical recovery. Specific dietary consumption, such as "dinengdeng" (vegetable dish) and herbal soups, is

believed to assist healing and milk production. Hilot (traditional massage) is used to restore muscle tone and promote circulation. Heat therapy, where mothers sit near charcoal stoves or use heated stones, is believed to prevent "cold" illnesses. Additionally, restrictions on bathing and exposure to cold water are customary to prevent "pasma" (a local folk illness attributed to sudden temperature changes). Furthermore, factors such as low maternal education and rural location can increase engagement in hazardous cultural practices. It has also been observed that mothers commonly use both traditional medicine and biomedical postnatal care simultaneously.

Despite existing literature, there is a lack of in-depth qualitative research exploring the cultural and experimental aspects of postpartum practices in the rural Philippine setting. Existing studies often focus on clinical outcomes, overlooking the cultural practices that shape many mothers' postpartum journeys. The study aims to qualitatively explore these lived experiences through open-ended questions, capturing the emotions, motivations, and cultural significance of these traditions. The findings are intended to guide the development of culturally sensitive healthcare interventions and support systems that bridge the gap between modern medical approaches and traditional beliefs.

### Research Objectives

This study explored the lived experiences of postpartum mothers in the context of traditional postpartum practices. Specifically, the study aimed to:

- a. Examine the perceived benefits and challenges of traditional postpartum practices as experienced by postpartum mothers.
- b. Propose a health education through IEC material that will strengthen the benefits and address challenges faced by postpartum mothers.

### METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative-descriptive research design, using interviews, focus group discussions, and field observations to collect non-numerical data. This approach enabled a deep exploration of mothers' lived experiences, capturing their thoughts, emotions, and perspectives. By emphasizing observation and description, the study provided valuable insights into their challenges, needs, and daily lives without altering or influencing their experiences.

Bambang, Nueva Vizcaya, was selected as the study locale due to its significant population of postpartum mothers and the strong presence of traditional and cultural beliefs that influence maternal health behaviors and outcomes. The study specifically focused on five barangays, Banggot, Buag, Homestead, Manamtan, and San Antonio North, which reported notable numbers of postpartum women in 2024, ranging from 15 to 43. Ten (10) respondents were selected through purposive sampling. Mothers who faced language barriers, speech disabilities, had children older than one year, or were emotionally, physically, or mentally unstable were excluded to ensure validity and participant well-being.

The researchers used a semi-structured interview guide in collecting the data. The recruitment of participants began with the distribution of communication letters to the five (5) barangay captains, specifically at Barangay Banggot, Buag, Homestead, Manamtan, and San Antonio North Bambang, to obtain approval for the study. After approval, the researchers coordinated with the barangay officials and the barangay nurse at the health station to obtain a list of mothers who had experienced traditional postpartum care. The researchers then held an initial meeting with barangay officials and the barangay health workers to discuss the study's objectives. These officials assisted in identifying and contacting eligible participants. The researchers approached the identified mothers through home visits. During this phase, the

researchers explained the study's purpose, voluntary participation, and ethical considerations, including confidentiality and informed consent.

This study utilized thematic analysis to identify, analyze, and interpret patterns or themes within a set of textual data. The analysis followed Clarke and Braun's six-phase process. The first phase, familiarization with the data, involved transcribing the interviews verbatim and reading them multiple times to become deeply immersed in the content. This was followed by the generation of initial codes, where significant features of the data were systematically identified and highlighted across the entire dataset. In the third phase, the initial codes were examined and collated into potential themes by identifying recurring patterns and meaningful groupings. The fourth phase involved reviewing these themes to ensure they accurately reflected both the coded data and the broader dataset context. Themes were refined, combined, or discarded as necessary. In the fifth phase, themes were clearly defined and named, capturing their essence in relation to the research objectives. Finally, the sixth phase involved producing a comprehensive analytic narrative. This final report wove together the themes, supported by data extracts, to present a compelling and coherent account of the participants' experiences.

Ethical considerations were addressed through prior approval from the Saint Mary's University Research Ethics Board, and all respondents were informed of their rights, including the option to participate voluntarily and data protection measures. The researchers ensured that only authorized personnel had access to the data. Any sensitive information retrieved was not disclosed to external parties without the respondents' consent. The study was designed to minimize risks while enhancing understanding of the lived experiences of postpartum mothers, particularly through their traditional postpartum practices.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Section 1. Cultural Traditions for Recovery

This section highlights how traditional beliefs and practices continue to play a vital role in the postpartum recovery of Filipino mothers. These customs are deeply rooted in culture and are passed down from generation to generation. They are often upheld because of the elders' influence in the family. Most mothers in the findings shared that their recovery period after giving birth was guided not just by medical advice, but also by traditional practices. These traditions were practiced regardless of the mother's personal beliefs, with many simply following them because they were expected to.

The findings reveal that 7 out of 10 mothers used "Tanggapd or postpartum resting", which involves complete rest from household chores like laundry, carrying heavy items, or cleaning. It is believed to help with physical healing and prevent complications such as 'binat'. Another was "Herbal Bathing Practices," in which 6 of the 10 respondents reported bathing with boiled herbal water made from guava, pomelo, and sampaloc leaves. These baths are believed to help prevent postpartum illness and speed up recovery. Additionally, "Food avoidance based on folk illness beliefs," in which 8 respondents reported avoiding certain foods such as eggplant, coconut milk, sour dishes, and bananas. These foods were believed to cause *subi-sub* or *binat*, affecting both the mother and baby, especially during pregnancy. Another is "Elder-enforced customs," in which 7 respondents reported that most mothers followed their traditions not out of personal belief but due to obligations and pressure, often fearing criticism or conflict if they questioned or refused them.

These findings are consistent with studies from Santos and Cruz (2022), who found that traditional postpartum practices remain widespread among Filipino women in both rural and

urban settings. Similarly, Delgado et al. (2021) reported that traditional beliefs often coexist with medical recommendations but usually carry more weight in family decision-making structures. According to the Health Belief Model (HBM), health behaviors are influenced by perceived susceptibility, severity, benefits, barriers, and cues to action (Hochbaum, 1958). Thus, nurses should recognize and respect the cultural significance of these practices while also serving as health educators. Cultural traditions offer emotional and social support to postpartum mothers. However, some practices highlight the need for improved health education. Balancing respect for tradition with medical guidance is key to helping mothers recover safely and confidently.

## **Section 2. Maternal Guidance**

Maternal guidance, often delivered by elderly female relatives such as mothers and grandmothers, serves as a primary source of knowledge about postpartum care in many communities. Mothers frequently learn postpartum practices through family traditions rather than formal healthcare advice, following them out of trust and respect for elders, even when the reasons behind the practices are not fully understood. All respondents in the study indicated that their postpartum care routines were taught by elders and passed down through generations, often without questioning or critical evaluation. This phenomenon is well-supported by comparative research, which finds that traditional beliefs and practices in postpartum care are deeply rooted across Southeast Asia—including the Philippines—and are strongly influenced by kinship and social norms. Understanding this cultural context is essential for healthcare providers who aim to support mothers effectively; integrating respectful dialogue and culturally sensitive education can help bridge the gap between tradition and evidence-based care.

Klaus and Kennel (2013) described how mothers and grandmothers act as key advisors during the postpartum period, often prioritizing tradition over clinical guidelines. Likewise, Sychareun et al. (2014) observe that in many Southeast Asian communities, cultural knowledge about childbirth and recovery is predominantly shared within family networks, with elder women serving as the primary custodians of this wisdom. While this preserves cultural identity and continuity, it may also limit the adoption of modern, evidence-based health practices. From the perspective of the Health Belief Model, maternal guidance acts as a strong cue to action, encouraging mothers to follow traditional practices to avoid perceived risks such as "binat" (postpartum illness) or harm to the baby. The high perceived severity and susceptibility related to these beliefs reinforce adherence. However, many women demonstrated low self-efficacy, often following advice out of fear or obligation rather than understanding, suggesting that empowerment is lacking.

For nursing practice, this calls for culturally sensitive interventions that engage not only new mothers but also the older women who influence them. Nurses can bridge traditional and medical knowledge by respectfully integrating safe cultural practices with health education. This approach can improve mothers' confidence and promote safer postpartum care, ultimately benefiting both mother and child.

## **Section 3. Health Adjustment**

Health adjustment refers to the physical, emotional, and psychological changes that mothers experience as they adapt to life after childbirth. It includes how they cope with physical recovery, emotional fluctuations, and the new role of motherhood, often shaped by personal resilience, cultural beliefs, and family support. This theme captures the overall process of how postpartum mothers navigate the early weeks after giving birth—managing fatigue, emotional highs and lows, and bodily changes. While many mothers reported feeling overwhelmed at first, they shared ways they coped and adjusted, such as resting, avoiding stress, and drawing strength

from cultural practices and family support. A sub-theme emerged from the data: 7 out of 10 respondents reported "Emotional Relief and Coping," referring to mothers managing emotional stress through rest, distraction, and positive thinking.

These findings are supported by Delgado et al. (2021), who found that Filipino mothers use traditional rituals as tools for emotional stability and illness prevention during the postpartum period. Santos et al. (2022) also confirmed that culturally guided postpartum rest and dietary restrictions contribute to faster recovery and fewer complications, reinforcing the effectiveness of these practices in promoting maternal health. From an HBM perspective, mothers' strict adherence to rest and food restrictions suggests high perceived susceptibility and severity toward postpartum complications like *binat*. Their behaviors are shaped by the belief that these actions prevent harm and promote recovery. Family influence acts as a strong cue to action, reinforcing cultural practices. Nurses should approach care by validating these traditions and offering gentle, evidence-based guidance that supports healing. By involving family members as active partners in care and promoting open communication, nurses can foster trust, enhance self-efficacy, and improve holistic health outcomes.

Overall, Postpartum health adjustment is not only about individual recovery but also about cultural and social reinforcement. Filipino mothers find emotional and physical relief through culturally embedded practices and family support. For nurses, recognizing this interconnectedness is essential in delivering respectful, effective postpartum care that supports both the body and mind.

#### **Section 4. Healing through Tradition**

Healing Through Tradition refers to how new mothers recover by following the traditional ways taught by their elders. These customs, such as eating certain foods, drinking herbal remedies, wearing warm clothes, avoiding cold air, and limiting physical activity, are believed to support both physical healing and emotional well-being after giving birth. In this study, 8 of 10 mothers reported feeling better when they followed these traditions. They believed that doing so helped them heal faster, avoid illnesses such as *binat* (a local belief about getting sick after childbirth), and feel more emotionally balanced.

Research supports these experiences. Choudhry (1997) found that traditional postpartum practices in many Asian and African cultures not only help physically but also bring comfort and emotional support during a sensitive time. Dennis and Chung-Lee (2006) also explained that cultural practices, such as staying indoors, eating special diets, and using herbs, can ease stress and support mental health because they align with the mother's beliefs.

According to the Health Belief Model, mothers are likely to adhere to traditional postpartum practices because they believe these traditions offer real benefits. The constructs of perceived severity and perceived susceptibility motivate their behavior: mothers fear potential illness or complications if they do not observe these traditions, making them take them seriously (perceived threat: susceptibility + severity). Cues to action are provided by elders, whose encouragement and reminders serve as external triggers prompting mothers to follow the practices. Moreover, because these practices are familiar, culturally embedded, and trusted, they foster self-efficacy—mothers feel confident in their ability to care for themselves and their newborns using them.

For nurses, this means recognizing and respecting these beliefs. Instead of immediately dismissing traditional ways, nurses should listen and understand. If a practice is safe, it can be supported. If it might be harmful, it's better to explain the risks in a kind and respectful way. Health teachings can include both modern and traditional knowledge, so mothers feel

understood and more open to learning. This reminds us that culture plays a big role in recovery. When mothers feel connected to their traditions and supported in following them, their healing becomes more meaningful, both physically and emotionally.

### **Section 5. Perceived Health Benefits**

Perceived health benefits refer to participants' beliefs that postpartum traditional practices positively impact the physical well-being and recovery of the mother and child. This theme captures how the respondents value these traditions for their preventive and protective purposes. This theme reflects the cultural perception that engaging in postpartum rituals provides tangible health benefits. Many participants believe these practices aid in faster recovery, prevent postpartum illness like 'binat', and ensure the baby's and mother's well-being. This belief is shaped by lived experience and the perceived absence of harm.

According to Su- Lyn et al. (2018), mothers believe their traditions help them rest and recover. Even if science doesn't always fully support these ideas, the belief in their benefits helped mothers feel better and take care of themselves. Mothers follow these traditions because they think it helps them feel better and avoid problems after giving birth. Many said they would recommend these practices to others. These beliefs are passed down from family and are an important part of how they take care of themselves. With these findings, nurses can guide mothers on which practices are safe and can be followed together with medical care. This makes mothers feel respected and supported, and helps them recover more quickly. Thus, the belief in the health benefits of traditional postpartum practices is strong. These traditions give mothers a sense of comfort and safety. They are part of how many women take care of their health after giving birth.

### **Section 6. Medical-Traditional Care Integration**

This theme illustrates how modern healthcare services were incorporated into postpartum recovery without contradicting or undermining cultural traditions. Most participants shared that their interactions with healthcare providers involved routine medical support, such as check-ups, baby vaccinations, and vitamin guidance, while allowing traditional practices like *tanggad*, herbal baths, and food restrictions to continue without opposition. This created a supportive environment where mothers could benefit from both medical and cultural approaches.

This finding aligns with Dennis and Chung-Lee's (2006) description of the value of culturally sensitive care, which increases trust and health outcomes. Similarly, Uy and Chua (2019) observed that many Filipino healthcare workers respect cultural customs, understanding that they contribute meaningfully to maternal well-being. These insights suggest that when healthcare professionals acknowledge traditional practices, mothers feel validated and supported rather than judged. For nurses, this highlights the importance of culturally aware care, listening to and working with families to combine medical knowledge with traditional beliefs. In doing so, they help create a healing environment that addresses both the mother's physical and cultural needs. Therefore, participants viewed healthcare providers as supportive partners in their postpartum journey. The respectful coexistence of clinical care and traditional customs contributed to a more holistic and positive recovery experience, underscoring the continued importance of culturally sensitive practices in maternal nursing care.

### **Section 7. IEC Material**

Information, education, and communication (IEC) materials were developed to help postpartum mothers safely integrate traditional practices with modern medical care. These

materials should provide clear guidance on the safety of traditional practices while also addressing any that may pose a health risk.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### Conclusion

The respondents reflected a diverse ethnolinguistic representation. Three were identified as Ilokano, while others belonged to the Ifugao, Kalanguya, Ilonggo, Igorot, and Bisaya groups. Regarding support systems during the postpartum period, most respondents were cared for by their husbands, indicating that spouses were involved in maternal recovery. Practices such as "tanggap" (postpartum resting), herbal baths, and food restrictions are deeply embedded in cultural norms and serve as essential tools for emotional and physical recovery during the postpartum period.

Maternal guidance, especially from older family members, was identified as the primary source of knowledge for postpartum care. The study revealed that mothers undergo a health adjustment process where they manage emotional stress, fatigue, and physical changes through rest, cultural practices, and family support. Emotional coping mechanisms such as avoiding stress and taking rest were critical in aiding the adjustment process. Family support emerged as a key factor in postpartum recovery. All respondents indicated receiving practical and emotional help from family members, which played an essential role in reducing stress and enhancing confidence in their new roles. The study highlighted that healthcare providers respected traditional practices while also providing routine medical care. This harmonious integration of medical care and cultural beliefs contributed positively to postpartum recovery and improved maternal health outcomes. Traditional practices were generally seen as beneficial but faced challenges when conflicting with medical advice.

### Recommendations

Several recommendations are put forth to enhance the acceptability and trustworthiness of health-related information on postpartum care. The healthcare providers should actively involve family members in the postpartum care process. Given that maternal guidance from older family members plays a significant role in postpartum knowledge transmission, including them in health education programs will help ensure the entire family is informed and can effectively support the new mother. The study also recommends collaboration between traditional and medical healthcare providers to create an integrated approach to postpartum care, allowing mothers to benefit from both cultural practices and medical guidance for a more holistic recovery. Finally, future studies should explore how healthcare providers can better integrate traditional practices into medical care, especially in diverse cultural contexts, and evaluate the effectiveness of IEC materials in improving maternal health outcomes by promoting safe postpartum practices.

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