

Ina, Bakit Naaga?: A Lived Experiences of Postpartum Mothers with Preterm Infant

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study delves into the lived experiences of mothers with preterm infants, aiming to shed light on their challenges, coping strategies, and insights for future mothers. The significance of this research lies in its potential to offer valuable support and guidance to mothers navigating the complexities of caring for preterm infants. This study utilized a phenomenological research design, engaging a specific group of participants, consisting of 15 mothers with preterm infants, within the scope of Nueva Ecija, Philippines. The inclusion was based on the following criteria: Mothers who have given birth to a preterm infant (born before 37 weeks of gestation), who have delivered preterm infants within the past 6 months, and who are residing in Nueva Ecija. The exclusion requirements were also: Pregnancies that ended in stillbirth and postpartum mothers with preterm infants who are still admitted to the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU). Additionally, snowball sampling was used with selected participants, it also employed a semi-structured interview guide, responding to predetermined open-ended questions. From the shared narratives, a multitude of challenges faced by mothers of preterm infants have been uncovered, these vividly depict the emotional challenges experienced by mothers. Furthermore, they highlight the significance of staying strong, embracing challenges, nurturing sincere relationships, and trusting one's faith. Postpartum mothers face a spectrum of emotions, including joy, sadness, anxiety, depression, fear, and self-doubt, compounded by the unpredictability of their infants' health and development. Coping strategies include reliance on support systems, belief, self-love, engagement in diverse activities, and virtual communities.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The postpartum period is a transformative and critical phase in a woman's life, marked by the challenges and joys of new motherhood. However, when the birth of an infant occurs preterm, introducing a unique set of circumstances and uncertainties, the postpartum experience becomes a complex journey that demands special attention. Understanding these lived experiences is crucial for providing targeted support as postpartum mothers with preterm infants navigate the delicate balance of caring for a vulnerable newborn while

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grappling with their emotional well-being. Approximately 15 million infants are born prematurely annually, with higher prevalence rates observed in both developed and developing countries. Preterm infants may share similar weight and size characteristics with some full-term infants, yet they remain metabolically and physiologically immature.

Consequently, these infants face an elevated risk of encountering medical complications compared to total-term infants, leading to increased morbidity and mortality during their hospital stay after birth. The Philippines, with 348,900 preterm births, is among the top 10 countries with the highest number of premature births. Inadequate provision of essential nutrients to preterm infants has resulted not only in growth failure but also in heightened morbidity and suboptimal brain growth, potentially restricting neurodevelopment [1]. A mother of a seriously ill child being exposed to the NICU and witnessing other newborns' life-or-death struggles causes ongoing mental stress. Women talked about not knowing what was going to happen or would happen. The mothers experienced ongoing tension and anxiety because of this "unknown". The effects of a preterm birth last for many years after the baby is discharged from the hospital and into the family home.

Without the proper care, the psychological trauma that premature baby mothers endure may continue for months or even years after they are released from the NICU and irreversibly change their bond with their children [4]. The effect of maternal age on the risk of preterm birth was found that advanced maternal age, precisely 40 years and older, correlated with a heightened risk of preterm birth even when accounting for confounding factors. Mothers aged 30–34 years exhibited the lowest risk of prematurity. Preterm birth predominantly occurred spontaneously among younger women aged 20–24 years, whereas it was more frequently attributed to iatrogenic causes in women over 40. In addition, a woman's body experiences a range of physical and psychological changes during this postpartum phase as it heals from the strains of pregnancy and childbirth. Preterm mothers who give birth to their babies typically must navigate new conditions while dealing with physical, emotional, and psychological challenges.

Premature birth can have a detrimental effect on a mother's ability to cope, which can alter how she takes care of the infant, resulting in the child's poor growth and development or even death [2]. Despite overwhelming support from family, friends, and professional care and assistance, which is vital in helping individuals cope with emotional issues, counseling, support groups, and professional support were inadequate. Mothers may experience psychological trauma persisting for an extended duration, spanning from months to years, after their newborn's time in the neonatal intensive care unit. This trauma can significantly impact the overall well-being and functioning of mothers who have given birth to premature infants. Furthermore, it influences the typical attachment process, as sufficient bonding is the cornerstone for establishing robust mother-child interactions, a critical factor for premature infants.

The emotional well-being of mothers, along with their perception of parental self-image and the early bond with the child, can be adversely affected by premature birth and the subsequent hospitalization of the child, regardless of the infant's gestational age at the time of preterm delivery [2]. A premature birth not only hinders a mother's ability to cope, but it also has the potential for adverse impacts on an infant's growth, development, and even their chances of life. The aftermath of the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) stay continues to impact mothers, manifesting as post-NICU psychological trauma with lasting effects on their functioning. Symptoms of postpartum depression, such as a persistent low mood, difficulty bonding with the baby, and severe anxiety, may persist during and after their baby's NICU stay [4]. Even though the postpartum period for mothers of preterm infants is crucial for maternal health and infant development, it is still a relatively unexplored area of study.

The objective of this research endeavor is to provide insight into the real-life struggles encountered by postpartum mothers who have delivered preterm infants. By conducting in-depth interviews with 15 mothers, the researchers hope to gain insight into their struggles, experiences, and coping mechanisms. The researchers understand the importance of postpartum mothers' narratives in influencing not only the conversation around maternal health but also the creation of focused interventions and support systems as they begin this investigation of the lived experiences of these postpartum mothers with preterm infants in Nueva Ecija. In the following pages, researchers explore this unique postpartum journey, highlighting the voices and experiences that shape maternal well-being. Not only is it crucial to comprehend the nuances of their experiences to provide these women with better care, but it also allows us to value and honor their courage and resiliency as they face the difficulties of early motherhood.

This study aims to determine the lived experiences of postpartum mothers with preterm infants. Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are the challenges faced by mothers who have preterm infants?
2. What coping strategies do mothers employ to navigate the challenges and uncertainties associated with having a preterm infant?
3. What learnings can the mothers impart and advise to future mothers who will have the same condition?

2. RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a phenomenological research design, a qualitative approach aimed at exploring individuals' lived experiences. This design is particularly suitable for understanding how participants perceive and make sense of their experiences. Phenomenology focuses on examining phenomena as they appear in consciousness, highlighting the significance of these experiences in participants' lives [5]. The research's objective was to delve into the experiences of postpartum mothers who had preterm infants, making this methodology a suitable choice.

Research Locale

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with mothers of preterm infants residing in Nueva Ecija, a province in the Philippines known for its diverse population. This setting was selected to capture a range of cultural and healthcare contexts, enhancing the investigation of postpartum experiences across different demographics. By incorporating both urban and rural perspectives, the study aimed to enlighten the distinct challenges and support systems mothers' encounter.

Sample and Sampling Method

This qualitative research engaged a specific group of participants, consisting of fifteen (15) mothers with preterm infants, located in Nueva Ecija. The sample size was strategically chosen to reflect the diversity of experiences and backgrounds among mothers of preterm infants, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter.

Inclusion Criteria

Participants were selected based on the following inclusion criteria:

1. Mothers who have given birth to a preterm infant (born before 37 weeks of gestation).
2. Mothers who have delivered preterm infants within the past six months.
3. Mothers residing within the geographical boundaries of Nueva Ecija.

Exclusion Criteria

To maintain the focus of the study, the following exclusion criteria were applied:

1. Pregnancies that resulted in stillbirth.
2. Postpartum mothers with preterm infants who are currently admitted to the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU), as their experiences may differ significantly from those whose infants are at home.

The study used snowball sampling, where initial participants (mothers with preterm infants) referred others who met the criteria. This method helped access a hard-to-reach community, allowing for diverse perspectives and experiences. By employing this sampling strategy, the research aimed to capture the lived experiences of these mothers, providing insights into their challenges, coping strategies, and support systems. This qualitative approach is crucial for understanding the complexities of maternal and infant health.

Scope and Delimitation

The study, titled "Ina, Bakit Naaga?: A Lived Experiences of Postpartum Mothers with Preterm Infants," is limited to mothers residing in Nueva Ecija whose children were born prematurely. Excluded are pregnancies resulting in stillbirths and mothers with infants still in the NICU. Confidentiality was maintained throughout the research, with all participant information used solely for study purposes.

Research Instruments

A semi-structured interview guide was developed, comprising twenty (20) open-ended questions divided into three sections: challenges faced by participants, coping mechanisms, and insights for future mothers. This format allows flexibility for deeper exploration of topics while providing reliable qualitative data (Cohen, 2006). Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for detailed analysis.

Data Gathering Procedures

The data collection process began with obtaining approval from the Dean of the College of Nursing and creating a comprehensive interview protocol. The researchers employed snowball sampling to select participants with significant experiences related to the study focus. Participants received clear information about the research objectives, data collection methods, and their rights, ensuring transparency and voluntary participation. They were given the autonomy to choose the interview location, fostering a comfortable environment. Informed consent was obtained, emphasizing participants' rights to withdraw at any time without consequences. Interviews lasted 45 minutes to 1 hour, during which data were recorded for accuracy. Findings were reported using participant quotes to highlight key points and link results to existing literature.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed Colaizzi's, method for phenomenological studies. Researchers verified transcriptions and reviewed each to gain an initial understanding. Essential statements regarding mothers' experiences were extracted and analyzed. Meanings were derived, considering factors like nonverbal cues. A validation process compared these meanings to established procedures, clustering them into themes and subthemes. The results were detailed to ensure comprehensive coverage of relevant data, and the essential components were summarized within a foundational framework. Finally, participants were consulted to

validate the analysis, confirming the accuracy of the findings and capturing the complexities of postpartum experiences with preterm infants.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

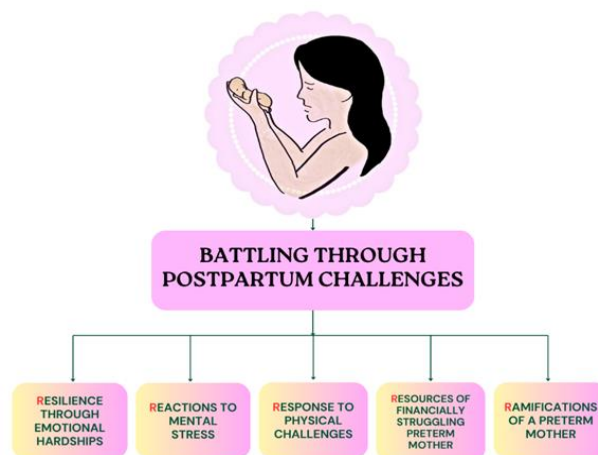


Figure 1.

Figure 1 shows the major theme and the sub-themes. As seen in the figure, the major theme is Battling Through Postpartum Challenges on board with sub-themes of Resilience through Emotional Hardships, Response to Physical challenges, Resources of Financially Struggling Preterm Mother, and Ramifications of a Preterm Mother. According to Medina, it reveals that mothers of extremely premature infants frequently encounter an "emotional crisis" during the postpartum period. This emotional turmoil is underscored by research conducted by Bonacquisti et al., which indicates that mothers of premature infants often experience heightened levels of anxiety, especially after prolonged stays in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit.

Sub-theme 1.1 Resilience through Emotional Hardships

This subtheme shows the emotional hardships of the participants, reflecting a wide range of feelings and struggles. They describe exhaustion, frustration, negative thoughts, and constant worrying about their child's well-being. Participants also grapple with feelings of uncertainty and paranoia, questioning their ability to care for their children adequately. The internal struggle against one's mind and emotions is acknowledged as particularly difficult. The internal struggle reflects the complexities of parenthood, where conflicting emotions arise amidst the unconditional love for their baby, which results in a moment of vulnerability.

"Napapagod na ako, kasi nga hindi ko na kinaya, nag breakdown nako, ("I'm just tired, because I couldn't handle it anymore.") P.1

"Ayon so, pagkalabas namin after 1 week ko syang pinanganak then after 1 week nilabas namin sya nauwi na namin akala ko ano na masaya na puro saya na ganyan pero iba, iba pala noh sobrang kabaligtaran" (After we brought her home a week after she was born, I thought everything would be happy and joyful, but it was the opposite.) P.3

The quotes show that mothers feel tired, disappointed, and emotionally stressed. Caring for a baby can be hard and uncertain, affecting mothers significantly. These sentiments underscore the significant emotional toll of motherhood and its profound impact on maternal well-being. For instance, research by Letourneau et al. (2020) found that mothers of preterm infants commonly experience high levels of stress, anxiety, and postpartum depression.

Sub-Theme 1.2 Reactions to Mental Stress

The narratives provided by participants underscore the profound impact of mental challenges experienced by mothers of preterm infants. Participants describe experiencing depression when faced with the possibility of losing their child, reflecting the emotional turmoil and distress associated with the NICU environment. Mental challenges emerge as a significant sub-theme, encompassing feelings of hopelessness, despair, and isolation.

"Sinabi nila na ilang araw lang, ilang lingo lang, maaaring bawiin sakín yung anak ko. Don ang apektadong apektado- depressed, stress, yung mga.. hindi ko na alam halo halo na yung nararamdaman ko. Minsan parang gusto ko nang bumigay. Ako na yung unang bumigay bago yung anak ko kaysa makita ko yung anak ko na nahihirapan." (They said it would only take a few days, a few weeks before death might take my child away from me, that's when I was affected—depressed, stressed, feeling a mix of emotions. "I was affected not only physically but also mentally—many thoughts were running through my mind. Sometimes, I felt like giving up. I wanted to be the first to give up rather than see my child suffer.) (P.8)

*“Yun yung matinding ano eh.. yung umaano sa depresyon mo.. yung magisa ka lang. parang naiisip mo na magisa ka lang sa journey mo sa pagpapalaki ng preterm baby mo ayun. *clears throat*” (That's what really exacerbates depression—feeling alone...being stuck at home, confined indoors, heightened the anxiety because there was no one else to talk to about it.) (P.14)*

The quotes reveal that postpartum depression is intensified by several factors, including uncertainty about how to proceed, feelings of being alone, and anxieties about the safety and well-being of the child. Furthermore, as noted by Beck and Cherry (2021), women experiencing postpartum depression described their internal experience as akin to living in a nightmare, marked by uncontrollable waves of worry, guilt, and intrusive thoughts. Moreover, according to Gelaye et al. found that mothers of preterm infants were at increased risk of developing postpartum depression, particularly in the presence of stress and anxiety related to the NICU experience [8].

Sub-theme 1.3 Response to Physical Challenges

The physical challenges faced by mothers of preterm infants extend beyond the neonatal period, impacting their long-term well-being. Based on the report, participants experienced weight and hair loss. Additionally, the demands of caring for a preterm infant impeded mothers' ability to prioritize self-care, further exacerbating physical strain. Understanding how mothers respond to their transformation to motherhood helps them navigate their physical challenges.

“Ayun iniisip ko na, mother na talaga ko, kailangan ko na talagang, isakripisyo lahat, kahit tulog pa yan, bawiin ko nalang, saka nalang, at least safe yung anak ko” (I'm really a mother now; I really need to sacrifice everything, even my sleep. I'll just catch up later, at least my child is safe. That was the moment that really opened my eyes, that's just how it is, there's really no sleep, it's really a sacrifice, your whole life, and all your time, for the safety of your baby.) (P.1)

“Oo namayat ako non talaga- kasi halos di ako natutulog non. Nakabantay lang ako tinitingnan ko. Sabi ko nga sayo kanina nakatitig ako lagi- tinitingnan ko baka di na humihinga. Yung buhok ko naglagas siguro dahil sa laging puyat. Yung pagiisip ganon. “ (Yes, I really lost weight back then because I hardly slept. I just watched over her, constantly checking on her. My hair fell out, probably due to lack of sleep.) (P.7)

“Napupuyat, laging binabantayan sa gabi para po maano makikita mo po sya lagi para titignan tignan mo kasi ah mahirap kasi pag ano pag hindi mo sya babantayan kasi una pag naaano sya ng kung humihinga pa pag ganun kasi yung habang nagpapadede po pag gabi kasi mahina po sya umiyak kaya kailangang bantayan po.” (I stay up late, always watching over him at night so I can always see him and check on him because it's difficult if you don't watch over him, especially when he's breathing. While breastfeeding at night, he doesn't cry much, so I need to watch over him.) (P.15)

The narratives portray the physical toll experienced by mothers of preterm infants, emphasizing sacrifices made for their children's well-being. According to Peacock et al. highlight that challenges persist beyond NICU discharge, including stress, compromised sleep, and emotional distress. These challenges can manifest physically, leading to exhaustion, weakened immune systems, and heightened illness vulnerability[9].

Sub-theme 1.4 Resources of Financially Struggling Preterm Mother

This sub-theme encapsulates the profound impact of financial strain on decision-making within the mothers. The participants emphasize the inability to access specialized emotional support due to financial limitations, highlighting that essential services become inaccessible without financial resources. The participants also reflect on the sacrifices made by facing financial difficulties and prioritizing the care of their children over pursuing employment opportunities. This highlights the financial challenges faced by the participants, including accessing adequate healthcare for themselves and their premature babies while grappling with financial constraints.

“Pinakamabigat, financial. Financial kase feeling ko ha sa lahat ng stress kaya mo yon kung meron kang financial, kung stable ka financially. Ang sakit ng katawan mo magpamasaha ka, yung emotional state mo pwede kang kumausap ng mga specialist pero magagawa mo ba yun kung may pera ka wala, hindi mo magagawa” (The heaviest burden is financial. Financially, because I feel like, amidst all the stress, you can handle it if you're financially stable. Your body might ache, so you can get a massage. Your emotional state might need a specialist, but can you afford that? If you don't have money, you can't.) (P.3)

“Ang ginagawa ko lang sa ngayon hindi ako nagtatrabaho para lahat ng atensyon.. maalagaan ko siya. Kahit medyo kapos kami ngayon. Totoo, kapos kami sa pinansyal. Kahit gusto ko magtrabaho, hindi ako nagpush magtrabaho kasi mas kailangan ako ng anak ko. Kasi sabi ko na lalaki panaman yung anak ko kahit hindi ako sangayon makakapaghanap buhay. Alam ko napag hindi ko siya iniwanan ngayon na maghahanap buhay ako, mas maaalagaan ko siya. Maibibigay ko yung mga pangangailangan niya na hindi kayang ibigay ng kahit sino paman.” (Right now, I'm not working, so I can focus all my attention on taking care of my baby. Even

though we're experiencing financial difficulties, I chose not to pursue a job because my child needs me more. I know that by not leaving him while I search for a job, I can take better care of him. I can provide for his needs in a way that nobody else can.” (P.8)

These reflections underscore the internal conflicts mothers face, torn between addressing their own emotional needs and prioritizing the care and well-being of their children. The inability to access specialized emotional support not only affects the mothers' mental health but also impacts their ability to provide optimal care for their children. According to Johnson et al. the significant financial burden faced by families with preterm infants, including costs associated with medical care, specialized equipment, and missed work opportunities, underscores the need for comprehensive support systems to alleviate financial strain on affected families [10].

Sub-theme 1.5 Ramifications of a Preterm Mother

This sub-theme underscores the emotional turmoil and self-reflection experienced by mothers following preterm birth. Participants expressed feelings of remorse and contemplation, questioning their actions and choices and wondering if they could have prevented the premature birth. The absence of support and companionship exacerbates feelings of sadness and self-blame. This reveals the emotional struggles characterized by self-doubt, guilt, and questioning of their actions during pregnancy.

“Sinisisi mo din dun talaga yung sarili mo, bakit mo ba kasi ginawa to sana hindi to nangyari ganon, bakit ba kasi hindi ako nag paawat sa mga ginagawa ko, bat ba kasi parang hindi ko inisip na buntis ako nung panahon na yon. “ (You wonder why you did certain things, why this happened, why you didn't take it easy with what you were doing, why you didn't think about being pregnant at that time)(P.3)

“Nung pagkapanganak ko sa kanya. Parang andun yung naninisi mo sa sarili mo tapos parang bakit kaya naaga, inalagaan ko naman sarili ko, babkit maaga syang naipanganak ganun yung mga tanong ko ko sa sirili ko” (Right after giving birth to her. It's like you blame yourself and wonder why it happened early, questioning yourself if you took care of yourself properly, why she was born prematurely, those were the questions I asked myself) (P.6)

“Yung pagod ko na hindi ko alam kung may sukli ba? Kung merong... kung yung pagod ko ba eh merong pupuntahan ganon” (I wondered if my exhaustion had any purpose—if it would lead to something.) (P.8)

*“Syempre, nasisisi mo sarili mo dahil wala nga sa iyo naka support. Yung asawa mo ala sa tabi mo. Tapos ang... ayun, sobrang lungkot, ang lungkot ko nun *chuckles*” (You blame yourself because you don't have support. Your husband isn't by your side. Then... there, I was so sad, so sad *chuckles*.) (P.9)*

The narratives shared by these mothers of preterm infants resonate deeply with the documented experiences of guilt and self-blame attributed to perceived failings during pregnancy, underscoring the significant emotional burden faced by mothers following premature birth and emphasizing the importance of providing comprehensive support and understanding to address their complex emotional needs. According to Feeley et al, mothers of preterm infants often experience feelings of guilt and self-blame related to perceived shortcomings during pregnancy [11].



Figure 2

Figure 2 shows the major theme one and the sub-themes. As seen in the figure, the major theme is Overcoming Hardship on board with sub-themes of Support System Supremacy, Strategies in Coping-Up Unexpectedly, Social Platforms Power, Self Love, and Sailing through Struggles with Belief. According to Larson and Raingruber, the study on postpartum resilience sheds light on the multifaceted nature of mothers' experiences during the postpartum period. Through qualitative analysis, the study delves into mothers' emotional, physical, and social challenges, illuminating their resilience in overcoming these obstacles. The research highlights mothers' diverse coping strategies to navigate the complexities of postpartum life, underscoring their ability to adapt and thrive despite adversity.

Sub-theme 2.1 Support System Supremacy

A strong support system recognizes the robust interconnectedness between individuals and their support networks. It underscores the idea that no one has to face hardships alone and that reaching out for support is not a sign of weakness but rather a demonstration of strength. By fostering connections with others and building a reliable support system, individuals can access diverse perspectives, resources, and emotional backing, enhancing their ability to navigate adversity with resilience and perseverance. In essence, "Support System Supremacy" underscores the transformative impact of supportive relationships in empowering individuals to overcome hardships and emerge stronger on the other side.

"Siguro nga dahil sa support system, especially kay husband na sinasabi naman na hindi mo kasalanan yan. yung mga friends ko nga, kahit hindi kami masyadong nagkikita, talagang nag rreach out sila na tatagan mo, lakasan mo, talagang nangyayari yan, hindi naman purkit premature, eh magiging sakitin si baby, talagang nkasuporta sila at pinapalakas nila yung loob ko, ayun, thankful ako sa mga taong iyon." (Perhaps it's because of my support system, especially my husband, who always says, It's not your fault. My friends, even though we didn't see each other much, they really reached out, telling me to stay strong, to have courage, that it really happens, just because the baby is premature doesn't mean they'll be sickly. They really supported me and boosted my morale. I'm thankful for them.) (P.1)

*"Supportive yung mga parents namin na, unang una financially, nung nalaman nila na ganun yung naging sitwasyon, kahit hindi ka lumalapit, nagbibigay sila, *wipes eyes*"*. (Parents were very supportive, both financially and emotionally, even if we didn't ask for it, they provided assistance when they learned about our situation. *wipes eyes*) (P.2)

"Kaya talagang salamat, kaya sa magulang ko andyan pa din tinutulungan nila ako, sa husband ko ano, sya yung nagaasikaso ng kung ano man yung mga hindi ko maasikaso lalo na kapag naaalaga ako kase talaga literal sakanya lang talaga umikot ang aking mundo. " (So, I'm really grateful to my parents; they're still there helping me, and to my husband, who takes care of whatever I can't manage, especially when I'm taking care of her because my world literally revolves around her.) (P.3)

These statements from the preterm mothers highlight the immense significance of social support in the lives of mothers with preterm babies. Family and friends emerge as crucial pillars of strength and encouragement. Through simple gestures like asking "How are you?" and offering words of reassurance and support, friends play a vital role in uplifting mothers' spirits and providing comfort during challenging times. According to Kim, family support can act as a buffer, mitigating the negative impact of stressful life events on mental health. Moreover, emotional support from others who understand their situation can help them feel less isolated and build resilience [12].

Sub-theme 2.2 Strategies in Coping-Up Unexpectedly

This aspect highlights how participants navigate the unpredictability and unforeseen challenges that come with preterm birth through unexpected coping mechanisms. They employ diverse strategies to deal with the uncertainties they encounter. Participants utilize a variety of methods to navigate the uncertainties they face. While some find solace in music, others turn to routine chores like gardening and cleaning for comfort. Additionally, caring for their infants provides a sense of relief, highlighting the calming impact of nurturing. Engaging in activities such as attending school provides entertainment and diversion, while regularly monitoring their baby brings reassurance and joy. This highlights diverse coping mechanisms to navigate the emotional challenges of preterm birth that reflect the multifaceted approach individuals take in coping with uncertainty and unexpected circumstances.

*"May pinapatugtog akong kanta eh, ano na nga yung tittle nun? *thinks*, basta parang "Be like this for long", parang ma motivate ako, na katatapos din yung ganung stage ni baby, and ma mimiss ko din yung ganitong stage, so pinapakinggan ko lang yung kanta na yun. "* (What I do is I play the song "It won't be like this for long." It motivates me that this stage with the baby will pass, and I'll miss this stage too, so I just listen to that song.) (P.1)

*"Yun nga magtanim, maglinis ng bahay *laughs* ganyan para di ako magisip"* (With the help of gardening and cleaning the house *laughs* things like that are the ones I always do to divert my emotions.) (P.9)

“ ... lagi ko nga siyang kinakantahan e tapos minasn pag wala akong maga ganyan ang pantanggal stress ko pag memake up, nagvivideo ako nag memake up ganyan o kaya kakanta ako.” (I always sing to him, and sometimes when I don't have anything to do, my stress reliever is putting on makeup. I make videos of myself putting on makeup or I sing) (P.12)

The quotes show that the varied coping strategies employed by participants underscore the complexity of navigating the emotional challenges of preterm birth. Through these strategies, individuals navigate challenges and find moments of comfort and strength amidst the journey of preterm birth. For instance, research by Sun et al. found that people sometimes discover unique strategies that work for them, which might seem unconventional. For mothers with premature infants, discovering unique coping strategies is not only common but often essential for navigating the complex emotions and challenges associated with preterm birth [13].

Sub-theme 2.3 Social Platforms Power

Social platforms wield significant influence on mothers with preterm infants, providing invaluable support networks and resources. These platforms serve as virtual communities where mothers can connect with others who share similar experiences, offering empathy, advice, and encouragement. Through these online spaces, mothers can access a wealth of information about preterm care, medical interventions, and developmental milestones, empowering them to navigate the complexities of caring for their premature babies. These social platforms facilitate communication with healthcare professionals and with other mothers experiencing the same challenges, enabling each other to seek guidance and clarification on medical issues promptly.

“ Ayun marami ako sinalihan, syempre as a new mom, marami kang issearch kung sino pa yung nakaranas nung na experience ko, like kamusta na yung baby nila ngayon, so sinesearch ko talaga sila, sa instagram, sa facebook, sa tiktok, naghahanap ako kung um-ok na ba yung baby nila, basta nag hahanap ako ng experiences, then ayun, nakahanap ako ng support system through online.” (As a new mom, I joined many online groups where I could search for others who had experienced what I was going through, like how their babies are doing now. I searched for them on Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok, seeking reassurance about their baby's progress.) (P.1)

“ Sa pagpapalaki naman ng preterm baby, ang daming makakatulong ayun nga sa pag-sali-Sali sa mga group yung marami ka kasi talagang matututunan doon, mga strategies, ano yung bawal, ano yung mas makakabuti sa bata na sa pagpapalaki mo sa preterm.” (In raising a preterm baby, there are so many things that can help, like joining support groups where you can really learn a lot, strategies, what's not allowed, what's better for the baby in raising a preterm baby) (P.14)

The friendships formed in these groups help mothers feel less alone and confirm that what they're going through is normal. This boosts their mood and ability to cope during a challenging and unsure period. According to Gonzalez et al. [14], technology is pivotal in supporting mothers, particularly those with preterm infants.

Sub-theme 2.4 Self Love

Self-love becomes a powerful tool for resilience, allowing mothers to face the uncertainties and stressors of premature birth with confidence, acceptance, and love for themselves, ultimately fostering a healthier and more fulfilling parenting experience. While caring for a premature infant may consume much of their time and energy, mothers benefit from maintaining connections with their interests, passions, and relationships outside their parent role. Engaging in activities that bring fulfillment and maintaining social connections help mothers maintain a sense of self beyond their caregiving responsibilities. Mothers emphasize the importance of loving themselves and finding activities that bring joy and relaxation amidst the stress of caring for a premature baby. Activities such as singing, putting on makeup, and engaging in hobbies serve as outlets for self-expression and stress relief, highlighting the value of nurturing one's emotional and mental health.

“ Hindi naman ikaw ang mahihirapan eh kapag ka nagkasakit ka, ang mahihirapan ay yung dalawang anak mo kasi kailangan ka nila, kaya mahalaga din lalo na kapag ka ikaw ang ina, kasabay nung pag aalaga nung anak mo ay pag aalaga sa sarili mo, kailangan ikaw yung malakas, matatag.” (It's not you who will suffer if you get sick, it's your two children because they need you. That's why it's important, especially when you're a mother, that along with taking care of your children, you also take care of yourself.) (P.2)

“ So kailangan mahal in mo muna yung sarili mo yung inner self and then once you are finally move on with that kasi emotion yung kalaban mo, actually the problem itself.” (It's important to love yourself first, your inner self, and once you have achieved that, you can tackle the emotional challenges that come with it.) (P.4)

The quotes underscore the importance of self-love in motherhood, highlighting the need to nurture one's inner self alongside caregiving duties. Gondwe et al. [15] suggest that practicing self-compassion can aid mothers in coping with the challenges of premature birth, fostering inner strength and emotional well-being.

By prioritizing self-care, recognizing their strengths, and engaging in self-compassion practices, mothers can enhance their capacity to provide loving care to their children.

Sub-theme 2.5 Sailing through Struggles with Belief

These mothers highlighted the value of persistent prayer and spiritual resilience in overcoming the difficulties involved in providing care for a premature baby. Furthermore, these mothers demonstrate a deep sense of surrender and acceptance of God's will, even in the face of uncertainty and adversity. They pray not only for their own strength and resilience but also for the health and well-being of their precious babies, expressing gratitude for the gift of motherhood and the opportunity to care for their children, regardless of the outcome. All things viewed, these mothers' words highlight the significant influence of spirituality and faith as coping strategies for handling the difficulties that result from preterm birth.

*“Isang talagang nagbigay ng pag asa saakin, ay yung pagtitiwala mo talaga sa Diyos, kase... maa-amaze ka nalang eh, kasi hindi mo akalain talagang, *teary eyed* “ (One thing that really gave me hope was my unwavering trust in God because... You'd just be amazed because you never really thought that. *teary eyed*) (P.2)*

“Constant prayer is number one kasi you have to be strong spiritually, emotionally, mentally with this things. “ (Constant prayer is essential because you must be strong spiritually, emotionally, and mentally to face these challenges.) (P.4)

“Talagang araw araw kong iniyyak kay Lord na..na.. ibigay niyo na saakin to. Kumbaga wag niyo nang pahirapan. Ibinigay niyo na po saakin, hindi niya deserve na ganong mahirapan at ang liit liit pa” (I really cried to the Lord every day, asking Him to give him to me and not to let him suffer. I prayed, You've already given him to me; he doesn't deserve to suffer like this, he's so small.) (P.14)

The quotes illustrate how these mothers draw strength and courage from their strong faith in God and consistent prayers. This faith gives them comfort, a positive outlook, and the determination to face their challenges head-on with resilience. According to Jones et al. (2020), who studied the effects of religious coping on maternal stress and anxiety in the NICU, particularly among mothers of premature infants, it is evident that relying on prayer, faith, and religious beliefs significantly impacts parental resilience and adaptation to the difficulties associated with premature birth. **Figure 3** shows the major theme and the sub-themes. As seen in the figure, the major theme is the Journey of Learning with sub-themes of Efficient Time Management, Embracing the Importance of Patience, and Effective Prevention Practices. According to Smith et al. [17] mothers' development of strategies for optimal caregiving, mainly through effective time management.

Moreover, Johnson et al. [18] highlights the importance of patience in navigating the unpredictable challenges of preterm birth. Additionally, Brown et al. [19] underscore mothers' proactive implementation of preventive measures like handwashing and vaccination to safeguard their preterm infants' health.

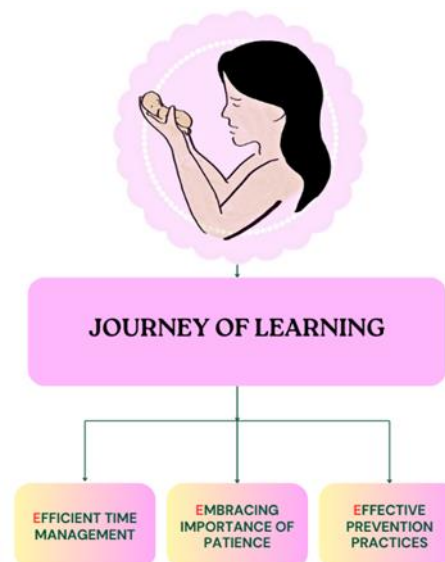


Figure 3.

Theme 3. Journey of Learning

Despite facing unexpected hurdles and complexities in caring for their vulnerable newborns, mothers of preterm infants demonstrate a remarkable capacity to learn, adapt, and overcome. Their ability to navigate these challenges with determination is reflected in sub-themes 3E's efficient time management, embracing the importance of patience, and effective prevention practices.

Sub-theme 3.1 Efficient Time Management

This sub-theme highlights the importance of efficient time management for mothers balancing work, childcare, and household responsibilities, emphasizing their dedication to maintaining a well-organized schedule to meet the needs of both their families and themselves. The emphasis on prioritization and self-care reflects their proactive approach to managing multiple responsibilities effectively. Mothers emphasize the significance of effective time management in balancing work, childcare, household responsibilities, and self-care.

“ Yun nga ano ko dyan yung time management. Kailangan ko mamanage yung time ko nang maayos para maalagaan ko rin siya nang tama- hano hindi magkulang.” (I focused on there is time management. I need to manage my time properly so I can take care of him well and not fall short.) (P.7)

“ Ano lang, hinahati hati lang yung oras ganon, para naalagaan ko yung sarili ko, naalagaan ko yung mga anak ko tas nagagawa ko yung mga gawaing bahay.” (Just dividing my time accordingly, ensuring I take care of myself, my children, and manage household chores.) (P.11)

This balance can be particularly challenging for mothers of preterm infants, given the additional care and attention these babies often require. It reflects the mother's determination and dedication to fulfilling her various roles despite the demands placed on her. Despite these challenges, studies by Miles et al. (2019) and Feeley et al. (2018) have shown that mothers of preterm infants exhibit remarkable resilience and adaptability in managing their time effectively. They often employ various strategies, such as prioritizing tasks, seeking social support, and optimizing available resources to meet the needs of both them and their infants.

Sub-theme 3.2 Embracing the Importance of Patience

This sub-theme illustrates the significance of embracing patience as a crucial coping mechanism for postpartum mothers of preterm infants as they navigate the uncertain journey of caring for their fragile newborns. They emphasize the significance of controlling emotions and maintaining a mindset focused on the well-being of their child. As they endure the trials associated with caring for a preterm infant, their understanding deepens, and their patience expands. Through enduring and expanding their understanding, these mothers express how patience symbolizes their love for their babies.

“ Kailangan um, di mainitin ulo mo, mahaba pasenya mo. Uh, uh kailangan ay isipin mo yan yung para sa lahat- sa ikabubuti ng iyong anak ayun.” (You need to keep your temper in check, have a lot of patience. You need to think that it's all for the best—for the well-being of your child) (P.7)

“ Hindi ako nagpadala sa ano ko, sa emosyon.” (I didn't let my emotions control me.) (P.9)

“ Ano, nagtyaga. Iniintindi, dahil nga ano kulang siya sa buwan ganon. Lumawak ang pang-unawa, mahabang pasensya” (...you endure. You understand, because he's lacking in months like that. Your understanding broadens, and patience lengthens.) (P.11)

“ Mahalaga 'yong pagpapasensya kasi dun mo nailalabas 'yong pagmamahal mo sa baby, kasi kung wala kang pasensya, di mo mapapadama sakanya na mahalaga siya.” (Patience is important because that's how you express your love for your baby) (P.13)

The insights shared by these mothers underscore the profound significance of patience as a coping tool in navigating the complexities of caring for preterm infants. Through their enduring journey, these mothers demonstrate resilience and a profound, enduring love for their babies, capturing the spirit of maternal strength and dedication in the face of preterm birth challenges. A study by Vigod et al. [22] highlights the potential long-term benefits of patience in promoting maternal well-being and bonding with preterm infants. Through patience, postpartum mothers can find solace and strength as they navigate the uncertainties of their preterm infants' journey, fostering a nurturing environment essential for their infants' growth and development.

Sub-theme 3.3 Effective Prevention Practices

Effective prevention practices in mothers with preterm infants involve a multifaceted approach aimed at reducing the risk of preterm birth and promoting maternal and infant health. By promoting comprehensive preventative care, including regular check-ups and healthy lifestyle choices, these practices help identify and address potential risk factors early in pregnancy, thus mitigating the likelihood of preterm birth.

“ Kasi hindi mo naman inaasahan na , hindi naman inaasahan yung sitwasyon na ganun talaga . siguro ang ano nalang siguro dun kung may naramdaman ka sa sarli mo kung may hindi kanais nais kng naramdaman sa sarili mo, siguro yun yung lesson na nakuha ko. punta ka agad sa doctor , sa ob kung ano para ano para ma ano na yun. diba sabi nga nila prevention is better than cure, paramaistop dun tas maano, masolusyunan.” (Because you don't expect that kind of situation to happen. Maybe the lesson I learned from that is if you feel something unusual about yourself, if you feel something undesirable about yourself, maybe that's the lesson I learned. Go immediately to the doctor or the OB to address it. As they say, prevention is better than cure, so you can stop it there and find a solution.) (P.6)

“ Uh, iwasan yung mga bagay na makakastress sayo- kasi isa yon sa ano.” (Avoid things that can stress you out, because that’s one thing.) (P.7)

The quotes underscore the need for mothers to pay attention to their bodies and to promptly seek medical attention if they notice any unusual symptoms or changes during pregnancy. By advocating for early intervention and preventive measures, such as regular check-ups with obstetricians, the statement emphasizes the role of preventive healthcare in mitigating potential risks and complications during pregnancy. A study by Goldenberg et al. (2018) emphasizes the critical role of prenatal care in preventing preterm birth, highlighting the importance of early and regular antenatal visits in identifying and managing risk factors.

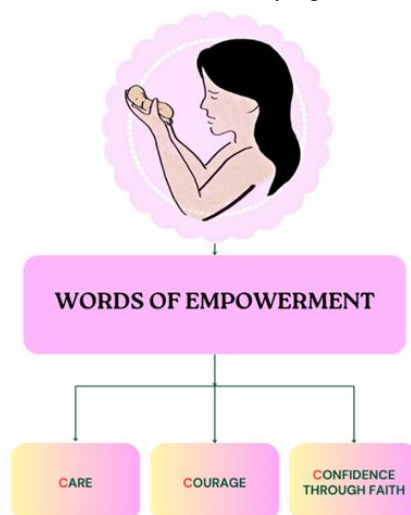


Figure 4

Figure 4 shows the major theme and the sub-themes. As seen in the figure, the major theme is the Words of Empowerment on board with sub-themes of Care, Courage, and Confidence through Faith.

According to Smith et al. [5] state that positive affirmations and supportive language can profoundly impact maternal well-being and coping mechanisms. This study underscores how encouragement and empowerment from healthcare providers, family members, and support networks can bolster maternal confidence and resilience during the challenging experience of caring for a preterm infant.

Sub-Theme 4.1 Care

This sub-theme highlights the pivotal role of prioritizing safety and well-being for premature infants as part of comprehensive care strategies. Implementing measures to ensure the health and security of these vulnerable infants involves following the doctor’s instructions, monitoring for potential complications, and creating a supportive environment conducive to optimal growth and development. Focusing on these aspects can mitigate risks, improve outcomes, and facilitate the infant’s transition to stable health post-preterm birth.

“ Siguro ayun pag premature alagaan ng mabuti bantayan tapos sundin yung sinasabi ng doctor, kung pano padedehin , tamang pagpapadede oras, yung ano pa ba... yung oras tapos laging ano laging ipacheck up.” (I guess, when it comes to prematurity, it’s important to take good care of them, watch over them, and follow the doctor’s instructions. Follow proper breastfeeding practices, feeding them at the right times. And always adhere to their schedule for check-ups. Premature babies are more susceptible to illnesses, so it’s crucial to have them regularly checked by a doctor.) (P.5)

“ And time sa panganganak ingat parin sa sarili kasi- walang masama sumunod sa mga sinasabi ng matatanda diba- maraming kuwan yung matatanda- maraming pamahiin mga ganyan. Kailangan parin sumusunod sa mga matatanda” (And during childbirth, still be careful with yourself, because there’s nothing wrong with following what the elders say, right?) (P.7)

“ Kailangan pagtuunan ng pansin, kasi di katulad ng pag-aalaga ng normal na bata. Yan kasi kailangan mo ibuhos yung oras mo sa kanya, ganon. Nakatutok. Kailangan konting iyak lang nyan nandon ka na kasi syempre sanggol” (You need to focus on it because taking care of a premature baby is different from caring for a normal baby. You have to dedicate your time to them like that. You have to be attentive. If they cry even just a little, you need to be there because, of course, they’re a baby.) (P.11)

“ Kailangan mo po na hindi mo po siya ano, pababayaan, palagi mo po siya babantayan lagi, tinitingnan.” (You need to not neglect him, always keep an eye on him, always check.) (P.15)

Providing care of postpartum mothers to their preterm infants is paramount to ensure their well-being and facilitate the bonding process with their vulnerable newborns. Research by Miles et al. (2020) underscores

the importance of healthcare professionals adopting a cautious approach in addressing the unique needs and concerns of these mothers, recognizing the heightened emotional vulnerability they may experience due to the unexpected circumstances of preterm birth.

Sub-Theme 4.2 Courage

This sub-theme showcases the valuable perspectives shared by these mothers, revealing the resilience essential for navigating the challenges of caring for preterm infants. They offer encouragement to others facing similar challenges, emphasizing the importance of inner strength, perseverance, open communication, and seeking support. Through their experiences, they underscore the necessity of maintaining mental resilience and seeking assistance when needed, ultimately inspiring hope and resilience in uncertain times.

“ Kasi pag sa sarili mo lang talagang iisipin mo, kailangan mo mag, kailangang mong magpakatataag e ang iniisip mo kapag you have to take care of yourself kaya lang minsan nakakapagod narin alagaan yung sarili mo kasi nauubos na sakanya ganon yung nangyayari so atleast kailangan mentally stable ka ano pagdating sa sarili mo’ (When you're just thinking about yourself, you need to be strong. You think, when you have to take care of yourself, but sometimes it gets tiring to take care of yourself because everything is being used up for the baby. So at least you need to be mentally stable when it comes to yourself.) (P.3)

“ Sa mga future naman I think ano isipin nila, isipin lang din nila na kakayanin din nila kase hindi natin, at tsaka hindi nila, hindi natin kasalanan siguro yun yung isa sa masasabi ko ano” (.For those in the future, I think they should think that they can handle it because it's not our, and it's not their, fault, I guess that's one thing I can say.) (P.3)

“ Uh, maging malakas ayan. Maging matapang kasi yan parte ng pagsubok sa buhay. Maging matapang harapin yung pagsubok. Huwag panghihinaan ng loob, sa halip na magpabaon sa problema- magseek ka ng mga bagay na makakapahpalakas sayo- makakatulong sayo at higit sa lahat don sa baby- don sa anak mo. “ (Be brave because that's part of life's challenges. Instead of letting problems weigh you down, seek out things that will strengthen you and help you, especially for your baby—for your child) (P.7)

Their words serve as a powerful reminder of the importance of inner strength, perseverance, and seeking support during challenging times. Their experiences provide a guiding light of hope and motivation for individuals encountering similar struggles, showcasing the unwavering determination needed to overcome difficulties. As they navigate the uncertain journey of preterm birth, these mothers exemplify the resilience of the human spirit and the power of community and support in overcoming obstacles. Ryan and Callaghan (2018) state the importance of understanding resilience among mothers of preterm infants. They delve into factors contributing to these mothers' ability to cope and thrive despite difficult circumstances.

Sub-Theme 4.3 Confidence through Faith

This sub-theme focuses on the concept of demonstrating sincerity in the relationship to God of mothers with preterm infants, showing a deep emotional and spiritual connection where mothers seek solace, guidance, and strength from their faith during the challenging experience of caring for a premature baby. This relationship reflects a profound sense of trust and reliance on spiritual beliefs to navigate the uncertainties and difficulties associated with preterm birth, offering comfort and support in times of need. By demonstrating sincerity in their relationship with God, mothers find comfort and support that transcends the physical and emotional challenges of preterm birth, providing them with a source of resilience and hope as they navigate this challenging experience.

“ Yon magdasal nga tapos gawing inspiration yung baby para lumakas yung loob. “ (They should pray and use their baby as inspiration to strengthen their resolve.) (P.10)

“ Lakasan mo lang yung loob mo, kasi kung talagang pasa sayo yan, ibibigay yan sayo ni Lord, palalakasin niya yan at bubuhayin niya para sayo.” (Just strengthen your spirit, because if it's meant for you, the Lord will give it to you, He will strengthen and sustain you) (P.13)

The quotes exemplify how mothers turn to prayer and rely on their relationship with God to find solace and guidance, viewing their babies as sources of inspiration and relying on divine support to navigate the uncertainties and difficulties associated with preterm birth. This profound spiritual connection underscores the importance of faith as a source of hope and endurance during this challenging experience. Shanks et al. (2022) found that in their study of parents with very preterm infants in a NICU, a significant portion identified as spiritual, and many reported finding comfort and support from their faith.

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Postpartum mothers with preterm infants faced a profound and multifaceted array of challenges, encompassing emotional rollercoaster, fear, emotional strain, and often underestimating the long-term consequences of their situation. Balancing the need for their own physical recovery with the demands of caring for a fragile newborn adds to their exhaustion, while financial pressures compound their stress, especially considering medical expenses. Nevertheless, despite these significant obstacles, these mothers demonstrate

remarkable resilience and an unwavering dedication to their infants' well-being. Their ability to persevere through adversity highlights the profound strength of maternal instinct and their enduring commitment to their children's health and happiness. Mothers of preterm infants demonstrate remarkable resilience and adaptability in coping with the challenges of prematurity. One key aspect is the support they receive from companionship and their support network, including family, friends, and healthcare professionals.

Furthermore, mothers of preterm infants embark on a journey of continuous learning, where they develop a deep understanding of their infants' unique needs and cultivate a sense of empowerment in their ability to provide the best possible care. Through sharing their experiences and knowledge, they contribute to a supportive community of parents, fostering resilience and hope in the journey of caring for preterm infants.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study and the conclusions derived from the study, the following recommendations are hereby forwarded: The researchers recommend establishing peer support groups for mothers of preterm infants in barangays led by experienced individuals like community health nurses, midwives, psychologists, and BHWs. These groups offer guidance and support through regular meetings, fostering communication, sharing experiences, and discussing emotional well-being and caregiving tips. The researchers also recommend enhancing the referral system by implementing home visiting programs for parents of premature infants coordinated through health centers. These programs aim to provide continuous care, from prenatal to postnatal periods, by identifying families requiring extra support. This collaborative approach empowers parents and promotes the optimal development of premature infants.

The researchers recommend conducting a comparative study to examine and compare the lived experiences of postpartum mothers with preterm infants and postpartum mothers with term infants. To inform healthcare practices, support services, and policy interventions to address the specific needs of postpartum mothers with preterm and term infants, contributing to improved maternal well-being and family outcomes in both scenarios. The researchers recommend that a broader sampling population be used to increase the likelihood of generalized findings and strengthen the validity of the research by providing a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

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