Oshada; Jurnal Kesehatan
https://nawalaeducation.com/index.php/O/index
Volume 2 Nomor 2, April 2025
e-ISSN : 3047-017X
DOI : https://doi.org/10.62872/3ekyxs58

The Role of Midwifery in Improving the Success of Exclusive Breastfeeding: A Systematic Literature Review

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Input : March 05, 2025
Revised : March 18, 2025
Accepted : April 05, 2025
Published : April 30, 2025

ABSTRACT

This study presents a systematic literature review exploring the multifaceted role of midwives in enhancing exclusive breastfeeding practices. Drawing from 64 peer-reviewed sources, the research highlights how midwives transcend clinical responsibilities to become pivotal agents of education, emotional support, and community mobilisation. Key findings reveal that midwifery-led education significantly boosts maternal knowledge and awareness, while psychological counselling increases mothers' confidence and perseverance in breastfeeding. Additionally, midwives play a crucial role in addressing physical and technical challenges that often hinder breastfeeding continuation. Their involvement in community empowerment initiatives and their interpersonal communication skills further amplify their impact, fostering environments that support sustained breastfeeding practices. However, systemic limitations such as inadequate training, workforce shortages, and lack of policy reinforcement frequently obstruct midwives from delivering optimal support. These insights underscore the urgent need for structural reforms that empower midwives with the tools, training, and institutional backing required to effectively promote exclusive breastfeeding. Overall, the study reinforces the critical and multi-dimensional role of midwives as both health practitioners and change agents in maternal and child health strategies.

Keywords: *Exclusive breastfeeding; midwifery; maternal education; psychological support; community empowerment; lactation counselling.*

INTRODUCTION

Exclusive breastfeeding is the fundamental foundation for ensuring optimal growth and development of infants from birth to six months of age. Breast milk not only provides the complete nutrition required by infants but also contains natural antibodies that function as protection against various infections and diseases. For mothers, breastfeeding offers physiological benefits such as helping uterine contractions, accelerating postpartum recovery, and reducing the risk of breast and ovarian cancer. Due to these extensive benefits, the World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF recommend exclusive breastfeeding

for the first six months of life without the addition of any other food or fluid, including water (WHO & UNICEF, 2023). However, despite this global recommendation being promoted for many years, its implementation on the ground still faces significant challenges.

Globally, the coverage of exclusive breastfeeding remains below the established target. According to the 2023 Global Breastfeeding Scorecard, only 48% of babies worldwide received exclusive breastfeeding during the first six months of life, approaching the 50% target set by the World Health Assembly for 2025 (UNICEF, 2023). In Indonesia, data from the Ministry of Health reported that the coverage of exclusive breastfeeding reached 69.7% in 2022, exceeding the national minimum target of 45%, yet still uneven across regions. In fact, 20 provinces remain below the national target (Ministry of Health RI, 2022; Husna et al., 2024). The low rates of exclusive breastfeeding reflect an existing gap between pro-breastfeeding policies and actual breastfeeding practices in the community, and also indicate that the current education and intervention efforts have not been entirely effective.

Several factors have been identified as causes of the low success rate of exclusive breastfeeding. Among them are a lack of maternal understanding of the benefits of breastfeeding, cultural and traditional beliefs that do not support breastfeeding practices, and the prevalence of myths and misinformation. Additionally, psychological pressure, socioeconomic conditions, and work demands especially for working mothers affect the decision to provide exclusive breastfeeding. Equally important, support from the surrounding environment, including spouses, families, and health workers, plays a crucial role in creating a supportive atmosphere for sustained breastfeeding.

In this context, healthcare workers, particularly midwives, have a strategic position as the frontline in maternal and child health services. Midwives are not only responsible for assisting in childbirth but also play a vital role in providing education, counseling, and support throughout pregnancy and postpartum. The presence of competent and empathetic midwives can help mothers overcome breastfeeding difficulties, provide motivation, and boost maternal confidence in exclusive breastfeeding practices. Various midwifery-based interventions, such as lactation counseling, antenatal classes, and home visits, are tangible forms of support that can enhance breastfeeding success.

However, despite the widely acknowledged role of midwives in supporting exclusive breastfeeding, few studies have systematically examined the effectiveness of midwifery interventions in improving breastfeeding practices. Most research is descriptive or case-based with limited context, thus necessitating a more comprehensive and integrated approach to obtain a complete picture of midwives' contributions in this area.

Therefore, it is essential to conduct a systematic review of the literature discussing the role of midwives in supporting exclusive breastfeeding success. Through a systematic literature review approach, researchers can identify the most effective strategies, assess the consistency of findings across studies, and

provide evidence-based recommendations to inform midwifery practices. This review is expected to strengthen the scientific foundation for policy formulation and enhance the capacity of midwives in more effectively supporting the national exclusive breastfeeding program.

METHOD

For this investigation, a systematic review of the literature was conducted to explore the influence of midwifery practices on the successful implementation of exclusive breastfeeding. The methodology was selected to enable a thorough and organised assessment of relevant studies. Articles were sourced from prestigious scholarly databases such as PubMed, Scopus, ScienceDirect, Google Scholar, and DOAJ, focusing on publications from 2018 to 2024 to ensure the findings were current and applicable. A range of search terms, including "midwifery role", "exclusive breastfeeding", "maternal support", and "health promotion", was used in combination with Boolean operators (AND, OR) to refine the search results.

The selection process led to the inclusion of 64 studies that met the defined criteria. These articles were full-text, peer-reviewed research papers, written in either English or Indonesian, and specifically addressed the role of midwives in fostering exclusive breastfeeding. Articles that were editorials, opinions, abstract-only papers, or not directly relevant were excluded. The selection procedure followed the PRISMA framework, progressing through stages of identification, screening, eligibility evaluation, and final inclusion of studies.

Each selected article was critically assessed for quality using JBI Critical Appraisal Tools and the CASP checklist according to the research design. The collected data were analysed thematically and narratively, with a focus on key themes such as midwifery interventions, educational efforts, and psychological support for breastfeeding mothers. This systematic approach provided a comprehensive synthesis of existing evidence regarding the contribution of midwives to improving the practice.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This chapter delves into a comprehensive interpretation of insights drawn from 64 academic sources, offering a nuanced understanding of how midwifery practice intersects with the promotion of exclusive breastfeeding. Rather than merely aggregating outcomes, the analysis deciphers patterns of impact where midwives act not just as healthcare providers, but as critical agents in shaping maternal choices and sustaining breastfeeding behaviours. Examining diverse healthcare contexts and maternal demographics, this discussion identifies not only the functional contributions of midwives, but also the systemic, cultural, and educational factors that enable or obstruct their effectiveness in advancing exclusive breastfeeding goals.

1. Transformative Educational Influence of Midwives on Maternal Breastfeeding Awareness

Midwifery-led education stands as a transformative force in altering maternal attitudes and deepening comprehension about the indispensable value of exclusive breastfeeding. Synthesised from 64 scholarly sources, the prevailing evidence demonstrates that targeted informational engagement by midwives substantially sharpens maternal understanding of breast milk's dual function—both as a primary source of nutrition and as a shield for infant immunity. A notable study by Setyowati et al. (2022) recorded a dramatic 75% surge in knowledge among mothers who participated in structured midwife-led sessions compared to uninformed counterparts. These educational encounters often dismantled pervasive cultural misconceptions, clarified optimal breastfeeding timing, and corrected flawed feeding techniques. Further reinforcing this perspective, WHO (2023) advocates for community-rooted education spearheaded by midwives as a cornerstone intervention in advancing exclusive breastfeeding rates in less-developed contexts. Ultimately, it is the depth, delivery, and regularity of educational interactions with midwives that appear to decisively shape maternal breastfeeding success.

2. Midwives as Catalysts for Emotional Resilience in Breastfeeding Mothers

While knowledge is foundational, a mother's emotional terrain often dictates her commitment to exclusive breastfeeding. The literature highlights a troubling prevalence of maternal self-doubt, postnatal stress, and social pressure—factors that can quietly erode breastfeeding intentions. In this emotional landscape, midwives emerge not merely as health providers but as essential emotional anchors. Pramanik's (2018) findings reveal that when midwives extend psychological guidance, maternal confidence in breastfeeding strengthens considerably. Mothers become more composed, self-assured, and internally motivated to continue breastfeeding despite setbacks. This emotional scaffolding, built through empathetic listening, therapeutic dialogue, and consistent positive reinforcement, reflects the holistic model endorsed by UNICEF (2022), which frames emotional support as intrinsic to maternal healthcare. Thus, midwives' role in nurturing psychological stability is no longer auxiliary it is central to sustaining exclusive breastfeeding over the critical first half-year of an infant's life.

3. Midwives as Key Agents in Resolving Breastfeeding-Related Physical and Practical Issues

Common physiological hurdles such as nipple pain, anxiety over milk sufficiency, or improper feeding posture often become tipping points that drive mothers to abandon exclusive breastfeeding earlier than intended. Within this context, midwives emerge not merely as caregivers, but as front-line troubleshooters equipped to resolve these intricate challenges. Metti & Ilda (2019) documented that a striking 67% of mothers who encountered such issues reported successful resolution following direct, hands-on support from midwives. These interventions encompassed guidance on infant latching, stimulation through oxytocin massage, and correcting positioning during feeds.

Reinforcing this, Rohemah's (2020) international review affirmed that technical support, particularly when delivered by skilled midwives, plays a substantial role in extending the practice of exclusive breastfeeding. As such, midwifery expertise in managing lactation-related complications is not an optional bonus it is a cornerstone of effective breastfeeding support.

4. Strengthening Breastfeeding Through Community Empowerment: The Midwife's Role Beyond the Clinic

Exclusive breastfeeding thrives not solely on a mother's determination but is deeply influenced by her social surroundings including partners, relatives, and the wider community. Midwives, in their expanded role, act as community mobilisers, creating informed networks of support that empower breastfeeding mothers. Sipayung (2022) highlighted that when midwives facilitated family-centred interventions, the duration of exclusive breastfeeding increased by up to 35% compared to mothers lacking such communal reinforcement. These efforts go far beyond clinical advice they involve grassroots actions like training breastfeeding ambassadors, leading household-based educational outreach, and spearheading awareness campaigns to promote paternal involvement. UNICEF (2023) bolsters this perspective, pointing to initiatives such as the "Baby-Friendly Community Initiative" as successful models of midwife-led community engagement in low-resource settings. Ultimately, the alliance between midwives and community actors represents a dynamic, sustainable force for elevating exclusive breastfeeding outcomes.

5. The Role of Interpersonal Skills in Enhancing Breastfeeding Counselling Outcomes

The capacity of midwives to establish meaningful, trust-based relationships with breastfeeding mothers plays a pivotal role in the success of counselling efforts. The reviewed literature underscores that outcomes are significantly influenced by the midwife's ability to communicate with empathy, clarity, and attentiveness to emotional cues. A study by Rahmadani (2021) highlights that when mothers are engaged through active listening and reciprocal dialogue, they are more forthcoming about their breastfeeding struggles and more inclined to follow guidance. Similarly, a report by the Ministry of Health (2023) revealed that nearly four in five mothers reported increased motivation to breastfeed after interacting with midwives who not only provided information but also validated their experiences. This finding echoes WHO's (2022) recommendation that communication training is essential in midwifery education, ensuring that support is offered with compassion and without judgement. In essence, the success of exclusive breastfeeding promotion is deeply rooted not just in clinical knowledge, but in the human connection forged through quality communication.

6. Structural Barriers Limiting Midwives' Contribution to Breastfeeding Support

Despite being central to maternal and child health, midwives frequently face

institutional and logistical barriers that undermine their effectiveness in supporting exclusive breastfeeding. Key constraints include disproportionate workloads, insufficient staffing in frontline healthcare settings, and a lack of ongoing professional development in lactation counselling. Research by Wahida et al. (2023) reveals that in remote regions, only 65% of midwives had access to breastfeeding training in the past two years, leading to gaps in both informational accuracy and emotional care offered to mothers. On a broader scale, the Global Breastfeeding Collective (WHO & UNICEF, 2023) identifies the absence of robust policy frameworks—particularly regarding routine training and incentive structures for midwives—as a critical obstacle in the global quest to reach 70% exclusive breastfeeding coverage by 2030. These findings point to the urgent need for structural health system reforms that not only recognise midwives as essential healthcare providers, but also equip them with the sustained support necessary to fulfil their promotive and educative roles effectively.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this systematic literature review highlight the pivotal role midwives play in enhancing the success of exclusive breastfeeding through multifaceted interventions. Educational efforts by midwives significantly improve maternal knowledge and awareness, shaping a more informed perception of breastfeeding benefits. Equally vital is their psychological support, which strengthens maternal confidence and motivation, especially during emotionally vulnerable postpartum periods. Midwives also provide critical technical guidance to overcome common lactation difficulties, thereby extending the duration of exclusive breastfeeding. Beyond the individual level, midwives contribute to creating a supportive socio-cultural environment through community-based initiatives and family-focused education. Their effectiveness, however, is highly dependent on communication competence, with empathetic and responsive counselling proving key to building trust and compliance among mothers. Despite these strengths, systemic barriers—such as inadequate training, staffing shortages, and lack of institutional support—remain substantial challenges. Addressing these structural issues through policy reform and ongoing professional development is essential to enable midwives to fully realise their promotive, preventive, and educational roles in advancing exclusive breastfeeding on a broader scale.

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