

Exploring Intrapersonal and Extrapersonal Factors Influencing Iranian Women's Indescribable Pleasure: A Content Analysis Study

Abstract

Background: Natural childbirth is one of the most challenging psychological events in women's lives. Women's perceptions of this experience exert a profound influence on their psychological state and can impact maternal and infant health outcomes. Therefore, this study aimed to explain Iranian women's experience with pleasant natural childbirth. **Materials and Methods:** This qualitative study employed conventional content analysis. Semistructured, in-depth interviews were conducted with 17 primiparous women who experienced natural childbirth. Purposive sampling, aiming for maximum variation, continued until data saturation was achieved. The analysis followed Granheim and Lundman's conventional content analysis method. **Results:** The analysis revealed a central theme of indescribable pleasure, supported by two main categories: intrapersonal factors and extrapersonal factors. The intrapersonal subcategories included mothers' self-confidence, feelings of security, heartfelt faith, feelings of empowerment, and a sense of worthiness. Extrapersonal factors encompassed respect for the mother, maternal support, midwives' professional skills, service quality, and the physical environment. **Conclusions:** The study's findings emphasize the importance of several intrapersonal and extrapersonal factors that help women experience immense pleasure during natural childbirth. We highlight the need for mental and emotional readiness before conception, acquiring essential skills for pregnancy and delivery, and ensuring high-quality, respectful care to guarantee a positive birthing experience.

Keywords: Childbirth, happiness, Iranian women

Introduction

Natural childbirth is a unique physiological process in a woman's life.^[1] The experience of childbirth can significantly vary from person to person. The perception of the childbirth experience can be influenced by several factors, such as cultural beliefs, traditions, the environment and services provided, and support from women.^[2,3] The birth experience combines physiological, mental, and psychological processes.^[4] A pleasant birth experience can increase women's patience, responsibility, self-esteem, self-efficacy, self-sufficiency, happiness, and independence and improve their quality of life.^[2,5]

The World Health Organization (WHO) has recently recommended the necessity of a pleasant birth experience as a vital aspect of high-quality care. A positive experience is defined as "an experience that satisfies personal and sociocultural expectations or exceeds a woman's previous expectations and includes the birth of a healthy baby

in a clinically and psychologically safe environment with ongoing care and emotional support".^[6] Positive childbirth experiences can significantly enable women to confront and integrate the powerful new feelings associated with motherhood.^[7] Negative childbirth experiences, on the other hand, can have many adverse consequences such as postpartum depression, impaired mother–baby attachment, delayed breastfeeding initiation, increased need for sedatives during labor, slower labor progression, and lower infant Apgar scores.^[8–10] Psychologists like Abraham Maslow suggest that pleasantness is a form of inner pleasure with a deeper meaning than mere positive experience, happiness, or satisfaction.^[11] They view it as a cognitive construct that individuals may or may not consciously synthesize from their experiences.^[12] While childbirth can involve excruciating pain, labor pain is physiological and its perception as pleasurable or painful is influenced by several factors.^[13] Several

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studies have been conducted on different aspects of women's childbirth experiences including childbirth pain,^[14] fear of childbirth,^[15] satisfaction with childbirth,^[16] and both positive and negative birthing experiences.^[2,17] Given that pleasantness is an emotion encompassing previously mentioned experiences (satisfaction, pain, fear, positive experience), and acknowledging the apparent lack of studies in Iran exploring the concept of pleasantness in natural childbirth, this study aimed to explain Iranian women's experience with pleasant natural childbirth.

Materials and Methods

This qualitative study is one component of a larger sequential exploratory mixed-methods study, which aims to design and psychometrically evaluate a new instrument. Data were collected from December 30, 2023 to March 12, 2024. For this qualitative phase, we interviewed 17 primiparous women who had vaginal deliveries within the preceding 24 to 72 hours. Participants were selected via purposive sampling based on the following inclusion criteria: willingness to participate, ability to communicate,

primiparity, low-risk delivery, no childbirth trauma, no neonatal ward admission for the infant, and no history of depression, neurological disorder, or childbirth-related mental illness. For the convenience of the participants, the interviews were conducted in a quiet room in the post-partum department. To enhance the diversity of the participants, women with varying levels of educational attainment, age, occupational status, and geographical residence were inclusively taken into account [Table 1]. The data were collected via semistructured, in-depth interviews. The data collection process involved several steps. First, the researcher obtained ethical approval and ensured adherence to ethical guidelines. Subsequently, an introduction letter was used to facilitate referral to the postpartum department of the selected hospital.

Prior to commencing the interviews, the participants were briefed on the study's objectives and received assurances that their information would be maintained with strict confidentiality and that no identifying details would be included in any reports or publications. Informed consent for audio recording of the interviews was obtained

Table 1: Participants' demographic and fertility profiles

	Mother's age	Mother's educational attainment	Mother's employment status	Pregnancy type	Parent company in preparatory classes for childbirth	The presence of the husband or a family during the labor process	Husband's age	Husband's educational attainment	Husband's employment status
1	26	High school and less	Unemployed	Wanted	Yes	No	32	Diploma	Unemployed
2	20	Diploma	Unemployed	Wanted	Yes	Yes	25	Bachelor and above	Employed
3	32	High school and less	Unemployed	Unwanted	NO	No	39	Diploma	Unemployed
4	18	Diploma	Employed	Wanted	Yes	Yes	26	Diploma	Employed
5	24	Bachelor and above	Unemployed	Wanted	Yes	Yes	26	Bachelor and above	Employed
6	33	High school and lower	Unemployed	Wanted	NO	No	40	Diploma	Unemployed
7	38	High school and lower	Unemployed	Unwanted	NO	No	44	High school and lower	Employed
8	28	Bachelor and above	Employed	Wanted	Yes	Yes	34	Bachelor and above	Employed
9	37	High school and lower	Unemployed	Unwanted	NO	No	41	High school and lower	Unemployed
10	19	Diploma	employed	Wanted	Yes	Yes	28	Bachelor and above	Employed
11	26	High school and lower	Unemployed	Wanted	NO	No	28	Bachelor and above	Unemployed
12	35	Diploma	Employed	Unwanted	NO	No	38	Bachelor and above	Employed
13	30	Bachelor and above	Unemployed	Wanted	Yes	No	39	Diploma	Employed
14	29	Bachelor and above	Employed	Wanted	Yes	Yes	36	Diploma	Employed
15	18	Diploma	Employed	Wanted	Yes	Yes	27	Bachelor and above	Unemployed
16	27	High school and lower	Unemployed	Wanted	NO	No	33	Bachelor and above	Employed
17	35	Diploma	Employed	Unwanted	NO	No	42	High school and lower	Unemployed

from all participants. The interviews began with a few general questions including questions about demographic characteristics [Table 1]. Subsequently, open-ended questions were used to elicit in-depth and flexible responses. To further enhance understanding, exploratory questions were posed as the interviews progressed. This approach facilitated the collection of rich and detailed information, providing valuable insights into the participants' perspectives on the discussed topic. The main interview questions included the following: [1] Describe your experience of natural childbirth. [2] How do you define a pleasant natural birth experience? [3] Based on your own experiences, what factors contribute to a pleasant natural childbirth?

The interview process was guided by the participant's answers to the main questions. To obtain nonverbal cues, participants' body movements, including silence, smiles, tears, and facial expressions, were meticulously observed. Each interview lasted between 50 and 65 minutes to allow for in-depth discussions. Data collection continued until data saturation, which was achieved after 14 interviews were conducted. Three additional interviews were conducted to ensure the thorough exploration and confirmation of findings, bringing the total number of participants to 17 primiparous mothers. Data were analyzed using the conventional content analysis method. The goal was to identify patterns, themes, and meaning units within the data to develop a deeper understanding of the subject.^[18,19] The recorded interviews were transcribed immediately after each session to ensure accuracy and facilitate the analysis. The whole text of each interview was read several times to understand the content comprehensively. Meaning units were identified in the texts, and primary codes were assigned to these units. Similar primary codes were grouped into broader categories, which facilitated both data organization and data analysis. Each meaning unit was converted into dense meaning units while retaining the original meaning to simplify the analysis process.^[20,21] The data were coded by two independent researchers (L.B. and S.M.). This collaborative approach ensured the stability and reliability of the analysis [Table 2].

To ensure the trustworthiness of qualitative studies, rigor was established through adherence to criteria such as credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The researchers' continuous engagement with the research topic helped maintain the validity of the collected data, and their familiarity with the topic increased the depth of understanding. Sufficient time was allocated to data collection to allow for a comprehensive exploration of the participants' experiences. To ensure the categories derived from the data accurately reflected participants' actual experiences, their content was cross-referenced by two participants and the researcher. The opinions of two external observers (PhD holders in midwifery and reproductive health) were included in the analysis phase. This external

Table 2: Themes, Main Categories, and Subcategories

Theme	Main Categories	Subcategories
Indescribable pleasure	Intrapersonal factors	Mothers' self-confidence Feelings of security Heartfelt faith Feelings of empowerment A sense of worthiness
	Extrapersonal factors	Respect for the mother Maternal support Midwives' professional skills Service quality The physical environment

validation helped increase the dependability of the study findings. The research team set aside personal biases and asked two experts in both obstetrics and reproductive health to establish a consensus on the formation of subgroups and categories. This collaborative approach increased the reliability of the analysis process.^[21,22]

Ethical considerations

Informed consent was obtained from the participants before commencement of the interview. The mothers were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time, and those requiring specialized care during the study were provided with appropriate referrals. The Ethics Committee of Ahvaz Jundishapur University of Medical Sciences approved this study. (IR.AJUMS.REC.1402.373).

Results

The results of the interviews conducted with 17 participants revealed a central theme of indescribable pleasure, supported by two main categories: intrapersonal factors and extrapersonal factors. The intrapersonal subcategories included mothers' self-confidence, feelings of security, heartfelt faith, feelings of empowerment, and a sense of worthiness. Extrapersonal factors encompassed respect for the mother, maternal support, midwives' professional skills, service quality, and the physical environment.

These categories are illustrated by quotes from primiparous women reporting their pleasant natural childbirth experiences.

1- Intrapersonal factors: Childbirth is a unique yet widely shared experience among women. Our analysis of women's accounts revealed that a range of intrapersonal factors, stemming from their inner feelings, significantly influenced a pleasant natural childbirth experience. These factors included:

1-1 Mothers' self-confidence: The analysis of the conducted interviews showed that self-confidence is an important factor in having a pleasant childbirth experience. *"My confidence was good because I had read a little about childbirth during my pregnancy, and I knew we were going to make it. When I gave birth, my husband called me and*

congratulated me. You have no idea how happy I was at that moment. I don't know how to say; it was a very good feeling". (Participant 3)

"I have always believed in myself. I think every woman knows herself more than anyone else. Natural childbirth is indeed difficult and painful, but self-confidence helps women manage themselves better. When the delivery is over, she can be happy. I was proud of myself". (Participant 8)

1-2 Feelings of security: The women believed that the feeling of security in the unfamiliar environment of the maternity hospital for someone who is enduring the severe pain of childbirth is a strong factor in creating peace and pleasure in childbirth. "I didn't know anyone in the maternity hospital, I felt it was a terrible place, I wanted someone to come to me. The midwife, who noticed my fear, said do not worry, I'm taking care of you. When she said this, I calmed down. I felt like she was my friend. I felt much better". (Participant 13)

"A year before I had my baby, one of my friends lost her child during childbirth, and it really made me scared of the hospital. I was so worried something bad would happen to my baby. But once I got there, the midwives kept checking the baby's heartbeat, and every time I heard it, I just got so excited". (Participant 5)

1-3 Heartfelt faith: According to the participants, faith in God can act as a powerful source of energy and provide inner happiness and peace for women during important life events such as childbirth. "I was trying to pray under my breath and ask God for help. It made me feel good, and my fear of giving birth was reduced. When I gave birth, I thanked God from the bottom of my heart; I couldn't say how happy I was that God was with me. I believed in God more than before ". (Participant 15)

"When a woman is in labor, she may not cooperate, and because of that, she or the baby will have problems. I liked to listen to the Qur'an because it gave me peace. I'm happy that I didn't forget God in that situation, and God was also with me". (Participant 10) **Feelings of empowerment:** Women often feel a significant sense of self-worth from their ability to endure childbirth pain, breastfeed, and manage personal tasks in the immediate postpartum hours. Many even reported a desire to experience natural childbirth again soon after delivery. "Although I knew I could bear the pain, I wasn't sure if I could breastfeed. To be honest, I didn't feel good about breastfeeding, but after giving birth, when I was able to breastfeed the baby, I felt very strange. I will never forget that moment. It is indescribable". (Participant 23)

"Natural childbirth is very good because after giving birth, the terrible pain ended, and I was also able to get up soon and do a lot of my work on my own. A woman, who gives birth naturally, is strong, and she can certainly experience another natural birth". (Participant 17)

1-4 A sense of worthiness: Interest in the natural childbirth experience, and the family's cultural view of natural childbirth

were important factors in creating a sense of value and great happiness in the studied Iranian women. "In my opinion, natural childbirth is very valuable. I wanted to give birth naturally. The Qur'an also discusses the value of motherhood. Even all grandmothers in the past easily gave birth naturally. It gives you a sense of worthiness". (Participant 11)

"My husband's family said that you shouldn't have a cesarean section. Cesarean sections are for lazy women, and I was afraid that I wouldn't be able to give birth naturally and would always be blamed in the family. However, thank God, I was able to give birth naturally, and I am very happy. Enduring the pain is worth this immense happiness". (Participant 6)

2-Extrapersonal factors: The second main theme identified in our data analysis was extrapersonal factors. These factors, originating from a woman's environment and the people around her, contribute significantly to her perception of a pleasant birthing experience.

2-1 Respect for the mother: Women consistently reported that respect is crucial for a pleasant natural childbirth experience, particularly given the sensitive and challenging conditions of labor. "When I was in a lot of pain, several midwives came and examined me quickly without giving me an explanation. They didn't care about my condition at all. They did not even answer my questions. They simply came to see what was going on. I was very annoyed. When I remember this memory, I forget the joy of having a child". (Participant 7)

"During that time, a mother might ignore what's being said or asked, or even unintentionally dirty the bed. Hearing obscenities is incredibly upsetting. Mostly, she just wants to walk, shout, and drink water, but they won't give her anything." (Participant 12)

2-2 Maternal support: Mothers participating in this study emphasized the crucial role of support in achieving a pleasant childbirth. This support can come from a range of individuals, such as midwives, doctors, husbands, or other family members, and manifest in various forms. "When a woman is in pain, she needs someone to pay attention to her, talk to her, listen to her, give her a massage, and comfort her. Some midwives are very good and kind, but some are rude and neglectful". (Participant 20)

"I felt like I was dying from the pain. The midwife came and gave me a painkiller shot and massaged my back. After a few minutes, I felt much better, and I tried to listen to her words. She really encouraged me, telling me to be patient and that it would all be over soon. And when it finally was, I just cried tears of happiness". (Participant 9)

2-3 Midwives' professional skills: Women who had positive experiences during childbirth often mentioned the expertise and competence of their midwives as a key factor. Midwives who were knowledgeable, skilled, and experienced in managing labor and delivery were able to provide effective support and care to the mothers, leading

to a more pleasant and empowering experience. “*I was always looking for an experienced midwife who would do a good job. I was afraid that during the delivery, there would be a problem for me and the baby, and no one would be able to help us. However, I was lucky, and the midwife, who was responsible for my delivery, was very experienced, and thus, I was very happy*”. (Participant 14)

“*When you give birth naturally, it's a really big deal that your private parts don't get messed up afterwards. Most women really hope a skilled midwife is there to stitch up any tears. I was super happy with how my midwife handled things, and I'm so thankful to her!*”. (Participant 2)

2-4 Service quality: The women participating in this study felt that the quality of service profoundly impacts their ability to have a pleasant and memorable birth experience. “*Hearing my baby's heartbeat made me feel better. The midwife would listen to his heart with the machine and told me with a smile that he was fine. Wow! You don't know how I felt; it was simply amazing. It even helped with breastfeeding, which was incredibly exciting. It's truly difficult to put into words.*”. (Participant 4)

“*I was in a lot of pain. I didn't like lying on the bed and being examined all the time. I liked to walk. The midwife gave me a birthing ball and taught me how to move with the help of the ball. When I sat on the ball, it made me feel better. It was enjoyable like I used to go up and down with the children. I will never forget it (loud laughter)*”. (Participant 1)

2-5 Physical empowerment: The participants believed that the environment of the maternity hospital, the room, the delivery bed, and even the condition of the bathroom could significantly affect the pleasantness of their experience of childbirth. “*I was happy that my room had only one bed, and there was no other patient in front of me because some women screamed a lot when they were in pain. Everything was in the room, including the midwifery equipment and the bathroom and toilet. I only used it myself*”. (Participant 16)

“*When a woman's in labor, a lot of things are just out of her control. For instance, she might pass gas without meaning to. If her room and bed aren't shared, it makes her feel a lot less bothered. I was so relieved when I saw my room was private. It really felt like I had my own space.*” (Participant 19)

Discussion

This study primarily aimed to explore Iranian women's experiences with pleasant natural childbirth, focusing on the concept of “*indescribable pleasure*” and its positive associations. The pleasurable aspect associated with natural childbirth is influenced by a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic factors, underscoring the emotional and psychological dimensions inherent in the childbirth process beyond its physical manifestations. Women's narratives of this pleasure suggest a profound connection

with the birthing experience that transcends mere feelings of contentment. This research highlights the importance of various factors, including self-assurance, feelings of security, spiritual beliefs, empowerment, and maternal self-esteem, in shaping a favorable childbirth encounter. Furthermore, the degree of dignity maintained during childbirth, the support received from healthcare providers and family members, the professionalism exhibited by midwives, and the physical setting of the birthing environment are pivotal in shaping the overall childbirth experience and can have enduring implications on women's holistic well-being.

Intrapersonal factors play an important role in shaping a mother's childbirth experience. Building self-confidence through education, preparation, support, and positive affirmations can help mothers feel more empowered and in control during labor and delivery. This, in turn, can lead to a more positive and satisfying childbirth experience for both the mother and her baby. The sense of security and safety can help reduce anxiety and fear, allowing the mother to focus on the process of labor and delivery and leading to a more positive and satisfying outcome for both the mother and her baby. In this study, the women believed that spiritual connection and trust in a higher power can increase their comfort, strength, and sense of purpose and contribute to a positive emotional state and well-being. Moreover, the sense of empowerment experienced by mothers was reported to significantly influence their childbirth experience. When women exhibit confidence in their capacity to endure labor pain, successfully breastfeed, and manage personal responsibilities soon after giving birth, it can foster a positive self-image and a feeling of achievement. This empowerment is likely attributed to the physical and emotional resilience demonstrated during the childbirth process and the initial postpartum period. This sense of empowerment, along with the cultural value given to motherhood in Iranian society, motivates women to seek a positive and meaningful experience in this important life event.

Our findings align with existing research on the factors influencing positive natural childbirth experiences. Mental factors play a crucial role in the success of the birth process and significantly impact a woman's childbirth experience, as reported by Gustafsson *et al.* (2024).^[23] Specifically, Raudasjö *et al.* (2022)^[24] found that women's self-confidence directly correlates with positive or negative natural childbirth experiences. Furthermore, a study by Curtin *et al.* (2020)^[25] emphasizes that self-confidence and a feeling of safety are vital contributors to a woman's overall childbirth experience.

The presence of a supportive and experienced midwife during childbirth can foster a sense of security and perceived empowerment, leading to a more positive experience, as suggested by Khodarahmi *et al.*^[26] (2022). Banaei Heravan's study (2023)^[27] further supports this, showing that a woman's belief in her ability to give birth

naturally and physiologically enhances her self-efficacy in managing natural birth, resulting in a pleasant experience.

Beyond professional support, spiritual beliefs also emerge as significant. Ahmadi (2020) reported that faith in God can be one of the most important ways to address childbirth fear, which in turn impacts the pleasantness of the experience.^[28] Similarly, Khamehchian *et al.* (2020)^[29] reported that spiritual support can be effective in managing childbirth, contributing to a pleasant experience. Ultimately, women's innate instinct toward childbirth cultivates their inner motivation, leading them to view success in this process as an intrinsic value; by relying on the value of motherhood, they can create a pain-free experience for themselves.^[30]

External factors can cause women to experience emotional and physical vulnerability during childbirth. Providing comprehensive respect and support from service providers, such as midwives, husbands, or other family members, can greatly improve women's childbirth experiences. Midwives can ensure respect for the mother by fostering positive and amicable communication, alleviating her discomfort through various techniques, and empathizing with her situation. Women believe that respect goes beyond just words—it also includes nonverbal communication. Disregarding the wellbeing of mothers, for example, is considered a sign of disrespect toward their character. The midwife's expertise in handling the delivery process, particularly in emergencies and unforeseen situations, and providing top-notch care brings immense joy to women. Ensuring timely and supportive services, minimizing unnecessary interventions, assisting mothers with movement during childbirth, and creating a comfortable physical environment in the hospital delivery room could contribute to enhancing the childbirth experience. This includes several factors, such as noise levels, privacy, and the availability of obstetric and sanitary equipment.

Positive interactions with service providers, feelings of support, and respect are crucial for ensuring that women have a positive childbirth experience.^[31] Hall *et al.* (2023)^[17] further highlight that key factors like respectful care and clear communication can significantly contribute to a positive childbirth experience. A study by Barnett *et al.* (2023)^[32] revealed that pregnant women view being respected as a fundamental right and prioritize it. The World Health Organization (WHO) also emphasizes that respect and comprehensive support are essential for creating a positive experience.^[6,33]

Demirci *et al.* (2019)^[34] found that women prefer natural childbirth without intervention, coupled with emotional support. Ahmed *et al.* (2023)^[35] conducted a meta-synthesis, highlighting the importance of providing high-quality, woman-centered services for a positive natural childbirth experience. Goldkuhl *et al.* (2023)^[36] indicated that a delivery room's environment and functionality, tailored to individual needs, can positively influence the delivery experience of first-time mothers. Furthermore,

several studies.^[37-39] have demonstrated that a favorable delivery room, prioritizing privacy and fostering physical and psychological security, can significantly influence the emotional wellbeing of pregnant women, shifting their focus toward a more positive state. Given the limited studies on the pleasantness of natural childbirth in Iran, this study seems to provide a deeper understanding of the concept of pleasantness with respect to the cultural context in this field. As one of the limitations of this study, participants were limited to women who gave birth in the only maternity hospital in the city. Since this was a selected population, it seems that their views may not be representative of all women. However, we tried to explore the experiences of women through in-depth interviews.

Conclusion

Our study found that the pleasure experienced during natural childbirth can surpass conventional feelings of happiness. When various crucial factors for a positive childbirth experience are effectively combined, they significantly enhance this overall sense of indescribable pleasure. Ultimately, a woman's positive experience during pregnancy and childbirth, which is deeply connected to her mental and emotional wellbeing, plays a significant role in the health outcomes for both her and her baby. To address this vital aspect, we must provide comprehensive educational and clinical support before, during, and after pregnancy. This means preparing women mentally and emotionally for childbirth, equipping them with the necessary knowledge and skills for managing pregnancy and delivery, and ensuring they receive high-quality, respectful care throughout the process.

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Conflicts of interest

Nothing to declare.

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