

PERSPECTIVE OF NEW MOTHERS IN THE EARLY YEARS OF MOTHERHOOD IN COLLECTIVISTIC CULTURE

Original Research

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ABSTRACT

Background: Motherhood in collectivistic cultures presents unique challenges, as societal expectations and family structures significantly shape maternal experiences. In Pakistan, new mothers residing in joint family systems often encounter emotional, psychological, and cultural pressures while navigating their early years of motherhood. The balance between caregiving responsibilities, household duties, and personal well-being becomes particularly complex when autonomy is limited by traditional family hierarchies. Understanding these challenges is essential for developing culturally sensitive interventions that support maternal well-being and promote healthier family dynamics.

Objective: This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of first-time mothers within Pakistani collectivistic culture, particularly the emotional, relational, and cultural challenges they encounter within the first three years of marriage and motherhood.

Methods: A qualitative research design utilizing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was employed to provide an in-depth exploration of maternal experiences. A purposive sample of six first-time mothers residing in joint family systems and married for less than three years was selected. Data collection involved semi-structured interviews and demographic questionnaires to capture detailed narratives. Verbatim transcription was performed, followed by thematic analysis to identify emergent patterns. Superordinate themes, including self-identity, resilience, adaptation, and interpersonal relationships, were categorized into master themes such as coping strategies, cultural identity, and social expectations.

Results: The findings revealed that new mothers face significant emotional distress due to limited autonomy, cultural expectations, and societal pressures. Challenges included balancing household responsibilities, child-rearing practices dictated by extended family members, and financial constraints. While social support was a primary coping strategy, many mothers found it insufficient, leading to psychological strain. Despite these adversities, resilience was evident among participants who employed self-reflection, boundary-setting, and adaptive coping mechanisms.

Conclusion: The study highlights the need for culturally informed support systems that promote maternal mental health and encourage shared caregiving responsibilities within collectivistic family structures. Policies and community-based interventions should be developed to enhance maternal well-being, strengthen spousal support, and foster greater autonomy for new mothers.

Keywords: Adaptation, Cultural identity, Maternal stress, Motherhood, Pakistani women, Psychological well-being, Social support.

INTRODUCTION

Motherhood marks a significant transition in a woman's life, characterized by profound emotional, relational, and cultural adjustments. In collectivistic societies, where familial interdependence is deeply rooted, the experience of new mothers is shaped not only by the responsibilities of child-rearing but also by the expectations imposed by extended family structures. This study aims to explore the perspectives of new mothers in Pakistani collectivistic culture within the first three years of marriage and motherhood, examining the challenges they encounter and the coping mechanisms they adopt. The joint family system, prevalent in collectivistic cultures, provides structural and emotional support; however, it also introduces hierarchical dynamics that can complicate a new mother's adjustment to her evolving role (1). The interplay between traditional expectations and contemporary shifts in maternal roles creates a complex psychosocial landscape, influencing the well-being of mothers during this critical period. The cultural framework in which Pakistani mothers navigate early motherhood is laden with both support and pressure. While the presence of extended family members can ease certain burdens, it can simultaneously lead to a loss of autonomy, interference in parenting decisions, and increased emotional strain (2). The expectation to conform to predefined maternal roles while managing personal aspirations often results in feelings of incompetence, loneliness, and psychological distress (3). These challenges are exacerbated by limited decision-making authority, societal norms dictating maternal behavior, and the lack of accessible childcare solutions, all of which contribute to maternal stress and hinder their adaptation to motherhood (4). Furthermore, conflicts arising from differing generational beliefs about child-rearing practices often place new mothers in difficult positions, requiring them to navigate between respecting tradition and implementing modern parenting approaches (5).

The sociocultural pressures surrounding early motherhood are further intensified by the inherent characteristics of collectivistic cultures, where individual needs are often subordinated to communal obligations (6). Collectivism fosters a sense of duty and self-sacrifice, requiring individuals to prioritize family harmony over personal well-being. This aspect significantly influences maternal mental health, as new mothers often experience tension between their evolving identities and familial expectations (7). Research indicates that in collectivistic family structures, particularly joint households, multiple authority figures dictate aspects of maternal care, limiting a mother's ability to make independent parenting choices (8). Such environments can impose significant psychological strain, as mothers are expected to adhere to cultural norms and familial customs, sometimes at the cost of their emotional well-being (9). Existing literature underscores the impact of these cultural and social expectations on postpartum mental health. Studies examining maternal stress in South Asian collectivistic cultures highlight the intricate relationship between societal norms and mental health outcomes (10). The intersection of traditional postpartum practices and modern healthcare perspectives also influences maternal well-being, with some customs providing beneficial support while others contribute to psychological distress (11). While extended family support can be advantageous, excessive involvement or unsolicited guidance can create tensions in marital relationships, further complicating the new mother's adjustment (12). Similar findings have been observed in cross-cultural analyses comparing South Asian and Western family structures, emphasizing the need for culturally sensitive support interventions to address maternal mental health challenges effectively (13). Despite these challenges, new mothers employ various coping strategies to navigate their experiences. Social support networks, including spousal support, peer interactions, and community-based assistance, play a crucial role in mitigating stress and enhancing maternal well-being (14). Additionally, research suggests that the adoption of assertive communication strategies and boundary-setting within joint family systems can improve autonomy and psychological health among new mothers (15). Addressing these concerns necessitates a deeper understanding of how sociocultural norms shape maternal experiences and how targeted interventions can alleviate associated stressors. This study aims to bridge this gap by providing insights into the lived experiences of new mothers in Pakistan's collectivistic cultural context, ultimately contributing to the development of culturally relevant support systems and interventions.

METHODS

The study employed a phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of first-time mothers navigating early motherhood within the collectivistic culture of Pakistan. This approach facilitated an in-depth understanding of how participants perceived and made sense of their experiences, emotions, and relationships in the context of joint family systems (1). The use of qualitative methods, particularly semi-structured interviews, enabled the collection of rich narrative data to uncover cultural expectations, maternal roles, and coping mechanisms (2). The phenomenological framework was selected based on its ability to capture

subjective experiences, aligning with previous research that emphasizes the importance of personal meaning-making in understanding complex social and psychological phenomena (3). This design allowed for an exploration of both the supportive and constraining aspects of collectivistic cultural norms on maternal well-being (16). Participants were selected using purposive sampling, targeting first-time mothers residing in joint family households. A total of six participants were recruited, ensuring a focus on those experiencing the initial phase of motherhood within the sociocultural constraints of a collectivistic society. The inclusion criteria required participants to be first-time mothers, married for up to three years, and currently residing in a joint family system in Pakistan. Mothers with prior experience of childbirth or those diagnosed with chronic mental or physical illnesses before conception were excluded to maintain homogeneity in the sample and prevent confounding variables (4). The selection criteria ensured that the study exclusively examined the psychological, emotional, and cultural challenges encountered by new mothers without prior parenting experience (17).

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews, which allowed flexibility while maintaining a structured inquiry into key research themes. The interview protocol was developed in accordance with phenomenological guidelines, incorporating open-ended questions designed to explore maternal identity, cultural expectations, relational challenges, and coping strategies (5). Interviews were conducted in a quiet and controlled setting to ensure participant comfort and minimize external influences. Each session lasted approximately 40 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent. Demographic data, including age, marital duration, education level, family structure, and household income, were collected to contextualize the findings within broader sociocultural and economic frameworks. Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants to maintain confidentiality and anonymity (18). Ethical considerations were meticulously upheld throughout the research process. Prior to participation, written informed consent was obtained from each respondent, ensuring voluntary participation and the right to withdraw at any stage. Approval for the study was granted by the Institutional Review Board (IRB), affirming adherence to ethical research principles, including participant confidentiality, emotional well-being, and data security. In cases where interviews triggered emotional distress, immediate debriefing and counseling support were offered. Data storage was secured through encrypted digital files, accessible only to the research team, to safeguard participant privacy (19).

Data analysis followed a systematic process to ensure accuracy and depth in capturing the essence of participants' experiences. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, preserving linguistic nuances, tone, and emphasis to maintain authenticity in interpretation. Using an inductive approach, significant statements reflecting participants' lived realities were identified and categorized into emerging themes through thematic analysis. Master themes and subordinate themes were developed to highlight key dimensions of maternal experiences, such as cultural pressures, emotional well-being, familial relationships, and adaptation strategies (6). Ethnographic notes documenting participants' expressions, pauses, and non-verbal cues complemented the narrative data, adding further depth to the interpretative analysis. This holistic approach ensured that the study encapsulated the multifaceted nature of early motherhood within the collectivistic framework (20). The rationale for this study stemmed from the necessity to bridge the gap between existing literature and real-life maternal experiences in collectivistic cultures. While previous research has highlighted the significance of cultural expectations in shaping maternal roles, limited empirical evidence exists on how first-time mothers navigate these dynamics within joint family structures. Understanding the emotional, relational, and psychological stressors faced by new mothers is crucial for informing culturally sensitive support interventions. Given the centrality of motherhood in Pakistani society, where mothers are expected to uphold child-rearing responsibilities and cultural transmission, this study aimed to provide practical insights into the unique stressors and coping mechanisms that define early motherhood in this context (7). By integrating participants' experiences with existing research, the findings seek to inform policies and support programs tailored to the needs of new mothers within collectivistic family systems (21).

Table 1: Demographic Information from the Participants

	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th
Age	21	24	20	23	27	26
Education	FSc	B.A	FSc	B.A.	MSc	B.A
Family system	Joint	joint	joint	joint	joint	Joint
Duration of marriage	1y	2y	1.5y	1y	2.5y	2y
Husband occupation	private job	private job	business man	govt job	business man	Private Job
Monthly income	80,000	100,000	150,000	80,000	200,000	75,000

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

1. **"In your family structure, how do you view your role as a mother?"**
آپ اپنے خاندان کے نظام میں، ایک ماں کے طور پر اپنے کردار کو کیسے دیکھتی ہیں؟
2. **"In raising a child, what kind of support do you look for or wish you had?"**
بچے کی پرورش میں آپ کس قسم کی مدد کی توقع رکھتی ہیں یا خواہش کرتی ہیں کہ آپ کو حاصل ہوتی؟
3. **"Are there any unique difficulties you have experienced while parenting your child while living with other family members?"**
کیا آپ کو اپنے بچے کی پرورش کے دوران مشترکہ خاندانی نظام میں رہتے ہوئے کوئی منفرد مشکلات درپیش آئیں؟
4. **"How has your experience of becoming a mother for the first time been?"**
پہلی بار ماں بننے کا آپ کا تجربہ کیسا رہا؟
5. **"What were your feelings like as a new mother within a collectivistic culture?"**
اجتماعی ثقافت میں ایک نئی ماں کے طور پر آپ کے جذباتی تجربات کیسے رہے؟
6. **"When experiencing emotional challenges, what kind of strategies did you employ to overcome them?"**
نئی ماں کے طور پر، جب آپ جذباتی چیلنجوں کا سامنا کرتی ہیں تو آپ انہیں دور کرنے کے لیے کون سی حکمت عملی اپناتی ہیں؟
7. **"Have there been times when cultural expectations conflicted with your personal desires as a new mother? If yes, please explain."**
کیا کبھی ایسا ہوا ہے کہ ثقافتی توقعات آپ کی ذاتی خواہشات سے متصادم ہوئیں؟ اگر ہاں، تو براہ کرم وضاحت کریں۔
8. **"In what way do you think collectivistic culture influences your position and duties as a mother?"**
آپ کے خیال میں اجتماعی ثقافت ایک ماں کے طور پر آپ کے کردار اور فرائض پر کس طرح اثر انداز ہوتی ہے؟
9. **"How do you rely on your family members or friends for help or support in handling various difficulties?"**
آپ مختلف چیلنجوں سے نمٹنے میں اپنے خاندان کے افراد یا دوستوں پر مدد اور تعاون کے لیے کس حد تک انحصار کرتی ہیں؟
10. **"Can you elaborate on any situations in which you felt stifled or pressured as a new mother due to collectivistic cultural norms? How did it impact your emotional well-being?"**
کیا آپ ایسے کوئی واقعات بیان کر سکتی ہیں جہاں اجتماعی ثقافت کی روایات نے آپ کو ایک نئی ماں کے طور پر دباؤ یا گھٹن کا احساس دیا ہو؟ اس کا آپ کی جذباتی صحت پر کیا اثر ہوا؟

RESULTS

The analysis of interview transcripts revealed several emergent themes, which were systematically categorized into master themes and further synthesized into superordinate themes. This structured approach facilitated a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of first-time mothers navigating early motherhood within a collectivistic cultural framework. The findings highlighted significant emotional, social, and cultural challenges, emphasizing the complex interplay between traditional family expectations, maternal identity, and psychological well-being. The emotional experiences of first-time mothers were largely shaped by societal expectations and familial pressures. Participants reported feelings of emotional isolation, stress, and psychological strain due to the overwhelming responsibilities associated with motherhood. The expectation to fulfill traditional maternal roles, often without sufficient support, contributed to heightened levels of anxiety and self-doubt. Many mothers struggled with balancing personal aspirations with the expectations imposed by their extended families. The constant scrutiny from family members and societal norms surrounding motherhood exacerbated feelings of inadequacy and self-criticism. Several participants described experiences of being judged for their parenting choices, leading to emotional distress and diminished self-confidence.

Coping mechanisms varied among participants, with some relying on social support networks, while others reported difficulty in accessing emotional or practical assistance. The presence of extended family, which is traditionally considered a source of support in collectivistic cultures, was perceived by many as a source of additional stress due to conflicting parenting opinions and excessive interference in child-rearing decisions. The tension between modern parenting practices and traditional beliefs resulted in significant role conflicts, with mothers frequently feeling pressured to conform to established norms despite personal preferences. Mothers expressed frustration over the limited autonomy in decision-making, particularly regarding childcare practices, household responsibilities, and financial management. Financial stress emerged as a significant factor affecting maternal well-being. Participants highlighted the increasing economic burden of child-rearing and the additional financial responsibilities expected within extended family households. The financial strain was further compounded by limited contributions from spouses or in-laws, leading to concerns about meeting the growing needs of their children. Economic limitations also restricted access to external childcare support, leaving mothers solely responsible for caregiving and household duties. The absence of financial independence further reinforced feelings of powerlessness, particularly among mothers who wished to pursue education or employment but faced resistance from their families.

The relationship dynamics within joint family systems played a crucial role in shaping the maternal experience. Many participants reported that their marital relationships were affected by the expectations of extended family members, leading to conflicts between spouses. Husbands were often perceived as passive participants in childcare and household responsibilities, reinforcing gendered caregiving roles. The lack of emotional support from spouses intensified the psychological burden on mothers, who felt overwhelmed by the continuous demands of motherhood. In several cases, participants described experiences where their personal needs were entirely overlooked in favor of familial expectations, resulting in feelings of neglect and emotional exhaustion. Psychosocial stressors, including societal criticism, cultural obligations, and the pressure to maintain a harmonious family environment, further contributed to maternal distress. The societal expectation for mothers to prioritize their children above all else was a recurring theme, with many participants expressing a sense of personal loss and identity erosion. Mothers described difficulties in maintaining personal well-being, with limited opportunities for self-care, rest, or personal growth. The cultural emphasis on maternal sacrifice often left them struggling to find a balance between their roles as caregivers and their individual aspirations. Some participants reported experiencing depressive symptoms, anxiety, and emotional fatigue as a result of the relentless demands of motherhood within a collectivistic family setting.

Despite these challenges, resilience and adaptation strategies were evident among participants. Some mothers actively sought emotional support from close friends or their own mothers, providing them with a sense of relief and reassurance. Others engaged in self-reflection and personal growth strategies, attempting to navigate the complexities of motherhood by redefining their roles and expectations. While cultural norms and familial obligations placed significant constraints on their autonomy, certain participants demonstrated a capacity for negotiating their needs within the existing structure, asserting themselves in parenting decisions and gradually establishing boundaries with extended family members. Overall, the findings underscored the intricate and often conflicting experiences of first-time mothers in collectivistic cultures. The coexistence of support and stress within joint family systems, the ongoing struggle for autonomy, and the profound emotional impact of societal expectations highlighted the multidimensional nature of early motherhood. These insights emphasize the need for culturally sensitive interventions aimed at improving maternal mental health, fostering supportive family environments, and promoting greater autonomy for mothers in collectivistic settings.

Summary of Superordinate and Master Themes

Superordinate Themes	Master Themes
Emotional Well-being	Emotional Regulation, Mental Health, Coping Strategies
Cultural and Societal Influence	Cultural Identity, Societal Expectations, Gender Roles
Interpersonal Relationships	Social Support, Conflict Resolution, Communication Dynamics
Challenges of Balancing Responsibilities	Household Responsibilities, Financial Strain, Lack of Support
Personal Growth and Adaptation	Self-Identity, Autonomy, Life Transitions

Key Challenges Faced by First-Time Mothers

Challenge Areas	Key Issues
Emotional and Psychological Stress	Feelings of isolation, anxiety, and self-doubt
Cultural and Familial Expectations	Pressure to conform to traditional maternal roles
Limited Decision-Making Power	Lack of autonomy in child-rearing and household decisions
Financial Constraints	Economic dependency, financial strain in joint families
Work-Life Balance	Difficulty balancing professional aspirations with family duties

Coping Mechanisms and Support Systems

Coping Mechanisms	Effectiveness
Seeking Social Support	Support from friends and maternal figures, though often inadequate
Emotional Resilience	Internal strength to manage stress despite cultural constraints
Self-Reflection	Reevaluating beliefs and personal expectations
Boundary-Setting	Negotiating autonomy within family structures
Professional Help	Limited access to mental health services due to stigma

Implications for Policy and Interventions

Focus Areas	Recommendations
Maternal Mental Health Support	Integrate psychological counseling in maternal care programs
Cultural Sensitivity in Family Structures	Develop awareness programs to reduce family pressures on mothers
Spousal Involvement	Encourage shared parenting responsibilities
Economic and Professional Empowerment	Enhance employment opportunities and financial independence for mothers
Community-Based Interventions	Establish maternal support groups and accessible childcare services

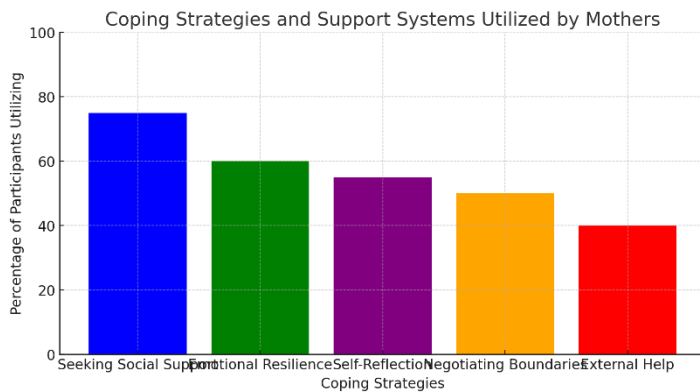


Figure 2 Coping Strategies and Support System Utilized by Mothers

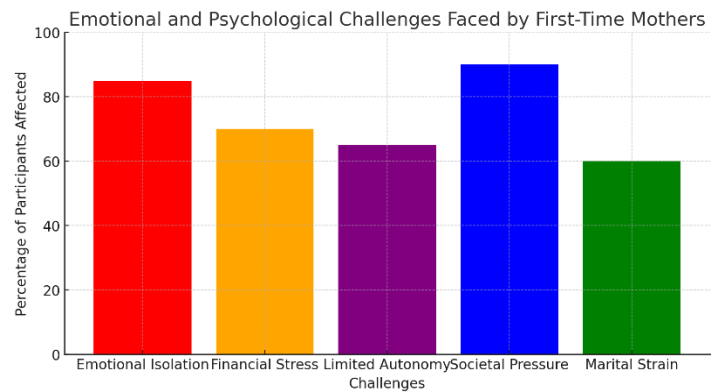


Figure 1 Emotional and Psychological Challenges Faced by First Time Mothers

DISCUSSION

The experiences of first-time mothers in collectivistic cultures, particularly within the joint family system, highlight a complex interplay between cultural norms, familial expectations, and maternal well-being. The findings of this study revealed that new mothers undergo significant emotional, psychological, and practical challenges, aligning with prior research that emphasizes the influence of cultural and societal expectations on maternal stress. The traditional collectivistic structure, which often prioritizes the needs of the family over individual autonomy, creates an environment where new mothers struggle to balance caregiving responsibilities, household chores, and, in some cases, professional aspirations. These findings reinforce the notion that maternal stress is not solely a result of the physical demands of motherhood but is exacerbated by the cultural and familial pressures placed upon them (22). Coping mechanisms among first-time mothers were observed to be highly individualized, with varying degrees of effectiveness. Social support emerged as a primary coping strategy, yet many mothers reported dissatisfaction with the level of assistance received from their families. This is consistent with prior research highlighting that while collectivistic cultures emphasize family support, the hierarchical nature of these structures often results in additional stress rather than relief. The expectations placed upon new mothers to conform to traditional caregiving roles, coupled with unsolicited advice and interference from extended family members, often lead to emotional exhaustion and feelings of incompetence. Despite these challenges, resilience was evident among participants who sought alternative means of coping, including emotional regulation, personal reflection, and, in some cases, negotiating boundaries within their households (23).

Financial constraints further compounded maternal stress, as economic responsibilities were often shared within joint families, yet the financial burden of childcare remained primarily on mothers. Limited financial independence restricted mothers' ability to seek external childcare or professional support, reinforcing their dependence on family structures that may not always be conducive to their well-being. Economic limitations have been widely recognized as a key stressor for new mothers, particularly in cultures where employment opportunities for women are constrained by traditional gender roles. The findings indicate that financial strain, coupled with restricted decision-making autonomy, negatively impacted maternal psychological well-being and increased feelings of powerlessness (24). The relationship dynamics within the joint family system played a critical role in shaping maternal experiences. Marital relationships were affected by the influence of extended family members, with many mothers experiencing a lack of spousal support in child-rearing responsibilities. The traditional gender roles within collectivistic cultures often delegate financial responsibilities to men and caregiving duties to women, leading to an imbalance that exacerbates maternal stress. Mothers who felt unsupported by their spouses reported heightened emotional distress, further contributing to feelings of isolation and self-doubt. This aligns with previous studies that emphasize the significance of spousal involvement in mitigating maternal stress and promoting psychological well-being (18).

Psychosocial stressors, including societal criticism and rigid cultural norms, significantly impacted the mental health of new mothers. The expectation to prioritize the needs of the child and extended family often led to neglect of personal well-being, with mothers reporting a loss of self-identity and decreased opportunities for self-care. The pressure to conform to traditional maternal ideals reinforced feelings of guilt and inadequacy, particularly when mothers sought autonomy or attempted to assert their preferences in parenting. While religious and cultural values served as a source of comfort for some, they also reinforced expectations that contributed to stress, particularly when personal desires conflicted with societal norms (25). The study identified significant emotional and psychological consequences of these challenges, with many mothers experiencing symptoms of anxiety, depression, and emotional

fatigue. These findings support existing research that emphasizes the profound mental health impact of maternal stress, particularly in cultures where motherhood is idealized and heavily scrutinized. Limited access to mental health resources and the cultural stigma surrounding psychological distress further complicated efforts to seek professional support, reinforcing the need for structured maternal mental health interventions (12,26).

Despite these challenges, some mothers demonstrated adaptive strategies that allowed them to navigate the complexities of motherhood in a collectivistic culture. Engaging in self-care activities, establishing small personal boundaries, and seeking support from friends or maternal figures were common strategies that contributed to emotional resilience. The findings highlight the importance of integrating culturally sensitive support mechanisms that acknowledge the unique challenges faced by new mothers in collectivistic settings. Community-based interventions, educational programs on maternal mental health, and policies that promote shared caregiving responsibilities within families could significantly alleviate maternal distress (8,10,27). Although the study provided valuable insights into the lived experiences of first-time mothers, certain limitations must be acknowledged. The small sample size limits the generalizability of the findings, as individual experiences may not fully represent the diverse maternal experiences within Pakistani collectivistic culture. Additionally, differences in regional cultural practices and family dynamics could influence the applicability of these findings across various social strata. The qualitative nature of the study, while beneficial in capturing nuanced perspectives, introduces an element of subjectivity in data interpretation. Future research incorporating quantitative methodologies could provide broader statistical validation of these findings, offering a more comprehensive understanding of maternal challenges in collectivistic cultures (14,17). Further exploration into the role of paternal involvement, extended family dynamics, and the impact of socio-economic status on maternal well-being could enhance the depth of understanding in this domain. Longitudinal studies examining the long-term psychological effects of collectivistic cultural expectations on maternal mental health would provide a more detailed perspective on the evolving experiences of mothers beyond the initial postpartum period. Addressing these gaps could contribute to the development of more effective policies and interventions aimed at fostering maternal well-being in collectivistic societies.

CONCLUSION

This study provided an in-depth exploration of the experiences of first-time mothers navigating early motherhood within a collectivistic cultural framework, highlighting the significant emotional, psychological, and practical challenges they face. The findings underscored the profound influence of cultural expectations, familial pressures, and societal norms on maternal well-being, revealing that while extended family structures offer support, they often impose additional stress and limit maternal autonomy. The imbalance of caregiving responsibilities, financial constraints, and limited decision-making power further compounded maternal distress, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions that promote shared responsibilities and mental health support. Despite these challenges, mothers demonstrated resilience through various coping strategies, although many lacked sufficient support systems to alleviate their burdens effectively. The study's insights contribute to a broader understanding of maternal mental health within collectivistic cultures, reinforcing the importance of culturally sensitive interventions that empower mothers, enhance spousal involvement, and foster more supportive family dynamics. By addressing these challenges through policy reforms, community-based programs, and accessible mental health services, the well-being of new mothers can be significantly improved, ultimately benefiting both maternal and child health in collectivistic societies.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Author	Contribution
Maham Fayyaz*	Substantial Contribution to study design, analysis, acquisition of Data
	Manuscript Writing
	Has given Final Approval of the version to be published
Samia Rani	Substantial Contribution to study design, acquisition and interpretation of Data
	Critical Review and Manuscript Writing
	Has given Final Approval of the version to be published

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