

Article

A Descriptive Phenomenological Study on Women's Experiences of Gentle Birth

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Background: Gentle birth is a natural birthing approach that emphasizes relaxation, minimal intervention, and maternal empowerment. Despite its growing popularity, research on mothers' lived experiences with this method remains limited, particularly in the Indonesian context. This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of mothers who underwent childbirth using the gentle birth method.

Methods: A descriptive phenomenological approach was employed to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of mothers who delivered using gentle birth techniques. This approach allowed the researchers to elicit and synthesize the essence of participants' experiences through their own narratives. Data were collected from respondents who met the inclusion and exclusion criteria, with the final sample exceeding the minimum requirement of 10 participants.

Results: The findings revealed that gentle birth is not limited to highly educated mothers but rather to those who are open to learning about natural birthing techniques. Mothers reported preparing for childbirth through prenatal education classes, hypnobirthing, prenatal yoga, abdominal breathing, and baby relaxation techniques. These practices enhanced their confidence and promoted a more positive birthing experience.

Conclusion: The study underscores the importance of equipping midwives with updated knowledge and skills related to gentle birth practices. Integrating gentle birth methods into routine maternity care can promote maternal comfort and reduce unnecessary medical interventions.

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descriptive phenomenology, gentle birth, childbirth experience, labor preparation

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INTRODUCTION

The family is a foundational unit in society, encompassing shared living arrangements, economic cooperation, and reproduction (Murdock, 1949). While family structures may evolve, core functions such as childbirth, caregiving, and problem-solving remain consistent over time (Saputri & La Kahija, 2020). Indonesia, the world's fourth most populous country, recorded a population of over 270 million in 2020 (Statistik, 2020). Despite ongoing efforts to improve maternal care, data from the National Population and Family Planning Agency revealed fluctuating rates of deliveries in health facilities between 2017 and 2020. In 2020, only 81.18% of the targeted deliveries received assistance from trained health professionals, reflecting a decline in facility-based births.

Pregnancy and childbirth are often accompanied by psychological distress. According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2012), among 2,321 pregnant women surveyed, 36% experienced fear, 42% anxiety, and 22% lacked confidence. These findings align with national data, including the Indonesian Health Demographic Survey and Medan Health Department reports, which indicate significant levels of stress, fear, and anxiety among pregnant women (Ardila, 2021). Research has shown that antenatal education significantly impacts birth outcomes. Labor preparation programs, such as prenatal yoga, childbirth education, and hypnobirthing enhance maternal satisfaction, reduce pain perception, and empower women to participate in decision-making during labor (Albin et al., 2022; Arlym & Herawati, 2021). Fear of childbirth remains a prevalent concern, often stemming from perceptions of labor as a traumatic or life-threatening experience. This fear induces muscle tension, hinders physiological responses, and can lead to longer, more painful labors requiring medical intervention (Suyani, 2020; Jha et al., 2018). Addressing this fear is crucial for improving childbirth experiences (Purwati, 2024).

The gentle birth method has emerged as a humanistic and low-intervention approach to childbirth. Defined as a calm, conscious, and minimally traumatic process, gentle birth emphasizes relaxation, trust in the body's natural

ability, and reduced reliance on medical procedures (Aprillia, 2017; Johnson et al., 2019). When fear is minimized, uterine arteries remain relaxed, facilitating smoother cervical dilation and fetal descent (Toohill et al., 2014). In a gentle birth, the birthing process is viewed as an intimate and empowering experience (Supriatin, 2025). Mothers are encouraged to take an active role in choosing their birthing method, supported by health professionals and family as facilitators rather than controllers of the process (Rosita, 2021). To promote the adoption of gentle birth practices, it is essential to understand the lived experiences of mothers who have undergone such deliveries. This study, therefore, aims to explore these experiences through a phenomenological lens.

METHODE

Study design

This study employed a descriptive phenomenological approach to explore and understand the lived experiences of mothers who gave birth using the gentle birth method. Descriptive phenomenology, rooted in Husserlian philosophy, was chosen to capture participants' perspectives while bracketing the researchers' assumptions, allowing the essence of the experience to emerge directly from the narratives.

Sample

Participants were selected using purposive sampling. A total of 25 postpartum mothers were included based on the following criteria: having undergone a vaginal birth using gentle birth techniques with minimal medical intervention, participation in birth preparation activities such as prenatal yoga, childbirth education classes, or hypnobirthing, and having a low-risk pregnancy. Participants were also required to be able to communicate effectively and willing to share their experiences. Mothers who experienced emergency interventions or had difficulty articulating their childbirth experiences were excluded.

Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted either in person or via secure video conferencing platforms, depending on the participants' preferences and public health considerations. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participants' consent. The interview guide was designed to encourage open exploration of experiences, with questions such as, "Can you describe how you prepared for your gentle birth?" and "What did you feel physically and emotionally during the birthing process?" Follow-up questions were used to clarify and expand on participants' responses.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Colaizzi's method, which involves reading transcripts thoroughly, identifying significant statements, formulating meanings, clustering themes, and developing comprehensive descriptions of the phenomenon. The final structure of the experience was validated through member checking, whereby participants reviewed and confirmed the interpretations of their narratives. Throughout the analysis, the researchers engaged in bracketing to maintain objectivity and minimize personal bias.

Credibility

Trustworthiness of the study was established through credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Credibility was ensured through member checking and detailed field notes. An audit trail was maintained to support dependability and confirmability. Transferability was enhanced by providing rich descriptions of the participants, setting, and context to allow for relevance in similar environments.

Ethical Consideration

Ethical approval was obtained from affiliated university, and all participants provided written informed consent. Participants were assured of confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw at any time without consequences.

RESULTS

A total of 25 mothers who had experienced gentle birth participated in this study. All participants met the inclusion criteria, including having prepared for childbirth through various supportive practices and having experienced low-risk, vaginal deliveries with minimal medical intervention. The age range of participants was between 22 and 39 years, and they came from diverse educational and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Through thematic analysis using Colaizzi's method, several major themes and subthemes emerged that captured the essence of the participants' experiences with gentle birth. These themes reflect the emotional, physical, psychological, and spiritual dimensions of the birthing process as narrated by the mothers.

Theme 1: Empowerment Through Preparation

Many mothers emphasized the importance of being well-informed and actively involved in their pregnancy journey. Participation in prenatal yoga, childbirth education classes, and hypnobirthing sessions contributed to feelings of readiness and confidence.

One participant shared, *“Before this pregnancy, I never knew I had the power to choose how I wanted to give birth. Learning about gentle birth changed everything.”*

Theme 2: Emotional Regulation and Fear Reduction

Participants described a noticeable reduction in fear and anxiety during labor as a result of breathing techniques and mental conditioning. Practicing mindfulness, affirmations, and guided relaxation helped them to remain calm and focused throughout the birthing process. Several mothers stated that the absence of fear allowed their bodies to respond more naturally during labor.

Theme 3: Physical Comfort and Pain Reframing

Contrary to common perceptions of childbirth as painful and traumatic, many participants perceived labor pain as manageable and purposeful. Techniques such as deep abdominal breathing and upright birthing positions were frequently mentioned as contributing to greater comfort and control.

One mother noted, *“I could feel the contractions, but I wasn’t afraid. I knew my body was working with me, not against me.”*

Theme 4: Supportive Birth Environment

A calm and supportive environment, both at home and in healthcare settings, played a critical role in the gentle birth experience. The presence of trusted companions, including partners, midwives, or doulas, helped mothers feel emotionally secure. Participants emphasized that the non-interventionist and respectful attitudes of healthcare providers were essential to preserving their autonomy and comfort.

Theme 5: Spiritual Connection and Personal Transformation

Several mothers described their birthing experience as spiritually meaningful and transformative. The sense of inner peace and connectedness with the baby was a recurring sentiment.

One participant expressed, *“It felt like I was not just giving birth to my baby, but also to a new version of myself.”*

Overall, the findings suggest that gentle birth empowers women by allowing them to reclaim agency over their childbirth experiences. Regardless of educational background, participants emphasized that willingness to learn and prepare was more important than formal education. The study reveals that gentle birth can lead to a deeply positive, empowering, and holistic childbirth experience when mothers are adequately supported and informed.

DISCUSSION

This study explored the lived experiences of mothers who gave birth using the gentle birth method. The findings revealed that gentle birth was perceived not only as a physical process but also as a deeply emotional and transformative experience. Several key themes emerged: empowerment through preparation, emotional regulation, pain reframing, the importance of a supportive environment, and spiritual connection. The theme of empowerment through preparation is consistent with previous literature highlighting the value of antenatal education in enhancing maternal confidence and self-efficacy (Albin et al., 2022; Lisa Trina Arlym & Herawati, 2021). Participants in this study emphasized the significance of prenatal learning, particularly regarding breathing techniques, mindfulness, and labor physiology. These findings underscore the role of education in reducing fear and promoting autonomous decision-making during childbirth.

The theme of emotional regulation and fear reduction echoes Toohill et al. (2014), who asserted that reducing fear during childbirth is essential for facilitating physiological labor. Participants described how hypnobirthing, positive affirmations, and emotional readiness enabled them to navigate labor with calmness and clarity. This supports the growing body of evidence that childbirth experiences are strongly influenced by maternal emotions and cognitive framing (Suyani, 2020). Reframing pain as a purposeful and manageable aspect of labor was another notable finding. This aligns with Johnson et al. (2019), who reported that mothers using gentle birth methods often describe pain not as suffering but as an expected part of the birth journey. The use of upright positions, water immersion, and relaxation techniques in this study mirrors practices advocated in evidence-based intrapartum care for reducing labor pain and improving maternal outcomes (WHO, 2018).

The supportive birth environment, particularly the attitudes of healthcare professionals, significantly influenced participants' satisfaction. Respectful maternity care—defined by compassion, autonomy, and absence of coercion is increasingly recognized as a global priority (Bohren et al., 2015). Participants who felt heard and supported by midwives and partners reported more positive birthing experiences. Finally, the spiritual and transformative nature of gentle birth emerged as a powerful theme. For many women, giving birth was not only a clinical event but a deeply personal and existential experience. This resonates with Klainin & Arthur's (2009) assertion that childbirth in many cultures holds spiritual and cultural significance, often shaping women's identities and roles.

This study confirms that gentle birth can offer a meaningful, empowering alternative to medicalized childbirth, particularly when supported by respectful care and adequate prenatal education. Notably, mothers from various educational backgrounds benefitted equally when given access to knowledge and resources, challenging assumptions that gentle birth is exclusive to more privileged populations. However, this study is not without limitations. The sample was limited to mothers with low-risk pregnancies and those who had access to prenatal education, which may limit the transferability of findings to more diverse or high-risk populations. Future research could explore the perspectives of healthcare providers and partners involved in gentle birth to develop a more comprehensive understanding.

CONCLUSION

This phenomenological study highlights that gentle birth is a powerful, empowering, and holistic childbirth experience shaped by preparation, emotional resilience, supportive environments, and spiritual meaning. Mothers emphasized that gentle birth is not limited to formal education levels but requires openness to learning and active participation throughout pregnancy. The findings suggest that promoting gentle birth practices can enhance maternal satisfaction, reduce birth trauma, and foster respectful, individualized care. Midwives and healthcare providers are encouraged to integrate gentle birth principles into routine maternal care, offer accessible childbirth education, and create environments that honor women's autonomy and choices. Future policies should focus on training health professionals in gentle birth facilitation, expanding prenatal education programs, and increasing public awareness about the benefits of gentle birth. By prioritizing humanized, low-intervention birth practices, healthcare systems can better support women in achieving safe and satisfying birth experiences.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest related to the conduct, authorship, or publication of this study.

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Data Availability Statement

The datasets generated and analyzed during the current study are not publicly available due to participant confidentiality but are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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