

Exclusive breastfeeding as a cornerstone for the survival and health of newborns: Sociocultural, economic, and structural influences among Indigenous Pygmy women

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ARTICLE INFO

Received: 30 November 2024

Accepted: 02 January 2025

Published: 31 March 2025

Keywords:

Exclusive breastfeeding, Indigenous Pygmy women, sociocultural factors, neonatal health, community interventions

Peer-Review: Externally peer-reviewed

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To cite:

Kumboyo, B. E., Nomuombane, M. J., Misungu, K. J., Fataki, M. C., Ambengi, M. F., Omanyondo, O. M., & Mukandu, B. F. (2025). Exclusive breastfeeding as a cornerstone for the survival and health of newborns: Sociocultural, economic, and structural influences among Indigenous Pygmy women. *Orapuh Journal*, 6(3), e1226 <https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/orapj.v6i3.26>

ISSN: 2644-3740

Published by *Orapuh, Inc.* (info@orapuh.org)

Editor-in-Chief: Prof. V. E. Adamu
Orapuh, Inc., UMTG PMB 405, Serrekunda,
The Gambia, editor@orapuh.org.

ABSTRACT

Introduction

Exclusive breastfeeding (EBF) is a cornerstone of newborn survival and health. However, among Indigenous Pygmy women, sociocultural, economic, and structural factors influence its practice. This systematic review explores the challenges and opportunities related to EBF in these communities.

Purpose

To analyze the sociocultural, economic, and health determinants of exclusive breastfeeding among Indigenous Pygmy women and identify barriers and strategies for improvement.

Methods

A systematic search was conducted in scientific databases (PubMed, Scopus, Google Scholar) to identify studies published between 2020 and 2024. The inclusion criteria focused on studies addressing EBF among Indigenous Pygmy women in Central Africa. Data were synthesized both qualitatively and quantitatively.

Results

Findings indicate that the prevalence of EBF among Pygmy women ranges from 20% to 45%, significantly lower than the WHO-recommended global target of 70%. Barriers include cultural beliefs about infant feeding, the early introduction of complementary foods (observed in 60% of cases), limited access to healthcare (reported by 75% of participants), and a lack of knowledge about the benefits of EBF. Interventions such as community-based education programs have demonstrated a 25% increase in EBF adoption rates in some regions.

Conclusion

Promoting EBF among Indigenous Pygmy women requires culturally sensitive strategies and multisectoral interventions. Greater community involvement, combined with strengthened health systems, could help address identified barriers and improve neonatal health outcomes in these populations.

INTRODUCTION

Exclusive breastfeeding (EBF) is recognized by the World Health Organization (WHO) as a crucial practice for ensuring newborn survival, health, and optimal development. WHO recommends EBF for the first six months of life, as it provides essential nutrients while protecting against infections and common infant diseases (WHO, 2020). Despite these recommendations, global adherence to EBF remains suboptimal, particularly in marginalized populations where social, economic, and cultural barriers hinder its practice (Victora et al., 2022).

Globally, factors such as maternal malnutrition, limited healthcare access, and cultural beliefs promoting early weaning persist as significant obstacles to EBF (WHO, 2021). These challenges are particularly pronounced among Indigenous and rural populations, where systemic inequities and traditional practices influence infant feeding behaviors (Hurtado et al., 2021). Within this global context, Indigenous Pygmy women face additional challenges related to precarious living conditions, heavy reliance on natural resources, and cultural practices shaped by intergenerational transmission (Katz et al., 2023).

In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), where 48% of children under six months are exclusively breastfed, regional disparities highlight the need for targeted interventions (UNICEF, 2022). Among Pygmy populations, specific data on EBF rates and practices are scarce, limiting the understanding of their unique needs and challenges (Mbikayi et al., 2021). The Bas-Uélé province, home to many Pygmy communities, exemplifies these gaps, with insufficient research and healthcare initiatives addressing EBF in marginalized groups such as the Pygmies (Kasereka et al., 2023).

This systematic review aims to explore the rates, determinants, and impacts of EBF among Pygmy women, addressing the unique sociocultural, economic, and health-related challenges they face. By synthesizing current knowledge, this review seeks to inform culturally sensitive policies and programs that promote maternal and child health within this marginalized population.

Objectives

The primary objective of this systematic review is to examine and understand exclusive breastfeeding (EBF) practices among Indigenous Pygmy women in the context of the social, economic, and cultural challenges they face.

Specific Objectives

1. Identify studies published between 2020 and 2024 that focus on the rates, determinants, and outcomes related to EBF among Pygmies.
2. Analyze the factors that facilitate or hinder EBF in these communities, including cultural beliefs, living conditions, and access to healthcare.
3. Synthesize available knowledge to provide an overview of EBF practices among Pygmy women and their impact on maternal and child health.
4. Evaluate interventions or strategies implemented to promote EBF in these populations.
5. Formulate recommendations for future research, public policies, and programs tailored to the needs of Indigenous Pygmy populations.

Key Question of the Systematic Review

"What are the rates, determinants, and impacts of exclusive breastfeeding practices among Indigenous Pygmy women between 2020 and 2024?"

This question encompasses three key dimensions:

1. **Rates:** What is the prevalence of exclusive breastfeeding in this population?
2. **Determinants:** What socio-economic, cultural, and environmental factors influence these practices?
3. **Impacts:** What are the effects of these practices on maternal and child health in this specific context?

METHODS

Descriptive Synthesis

A total of 50 studies published between 2020 and 2024 were included in this systematic review. These studies cover various aspects of exclusive breastfeeding (EBF) among Indigenous Pygmy women, including breastfeeding rates, determinants, barriers, and impacts on maternal and infant health. The review synthesizes both qualitative and quantitative data to provide a comprehensive understanding of the subject.

Search Strategy Details

This systematic review adhered to the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines to ensure transparency and rigor in the search, selection, and reporting of studies. A comprehensive search strategy was employed to identify relevant peer-reviewed studies published between 2020 and 2024. Electronic databases, including PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, were searched using a combination of the following keywords: "**exclusive breastfeeding**," "**Indigenous Pygmy women**," "**Central Africa**," "**maternal health**," and "**infant nutrition**." Boolean operators (AND, OR) were used to refine and combine search terms to ensure a comprehensive retrieval of studies.

Inclusion Criteria

- Studies explicitly addressing EBF among Indigenous Pygmy women.
- Research conducted in Central Africa, where Pygmy populations are prevalent.
- Articles providing quantitative or qualitative data on EBF rates, determinants, barriers, and interventions.

Exclusion Criteria

- Studies focusing exclusively on non-Indigenous groups.
- Research unrelated to breastfeeding or maternal and infant health.

Study Screening Process

Identification

A total of 800 articles were initially identified from the selected databases. After duplicates were removed, 750 articles remained for screening.

Screening

All identified articles were screened by title and abstract. This step resulted in the exclusion of 500 articles based on the following criteria:

- Insufficient relevance to the target population (general breastfeeding focus not specific to Indigenous Pygmy women or EBF).
- Different study populations or socio-cultural contexts not related to Pygmy women.

Eligibility

A total of 250 articles were retrieved for full-text review. After assessing these, 150 articles were excluded due to the following reasons:

- Inadequate methodology, such as poor scientific rigor, small sample sizes, or irrelevant data collection methods.
- Outdated or non-representative data.
- Lack of empirical data, such as theoretical studies or literature reviews.
- Language and accessibility constraints.

Inclusion

A final set of 50 studies was included for in-depth analysis. These studies focused on the experiences and expectations of Indigenous Pygmy women regarding breastfeeding. All 50 studies were included in the qualitative analysis to explore the lived experiences of Pygmy women. Additionally, 30 of these studies were included in the meta-analysis to assess pooled data on breastfeeding practices and outcomes.

Geographical Focus Justification

The primary focus of this review was on Central African countries, which accounted for 60% of the studies included in the final review. This focus was driven by the significant presence of Pygmy populations in the region and the cultural, socio-economic, and healthcare access factors that influence infant feeding practices. Pygmies in Central Africa face unique challenges related to their traditional ways of life, healthcare access, and socio-economic conditions, which directly impact breastfeeding practices.

In addition to studies from Central Africa, 20% of the studies included in the review were sourced from East Africa, and 12% from global perspectives. These studies were selected to provide comparative insights and to help contextualize the findings within a broader African and global framework. While the primary results reflect the Central African context, including these additional studies adds depth to the analysis and highlights the need for region-specific interventions.

Addressing Regional Biases

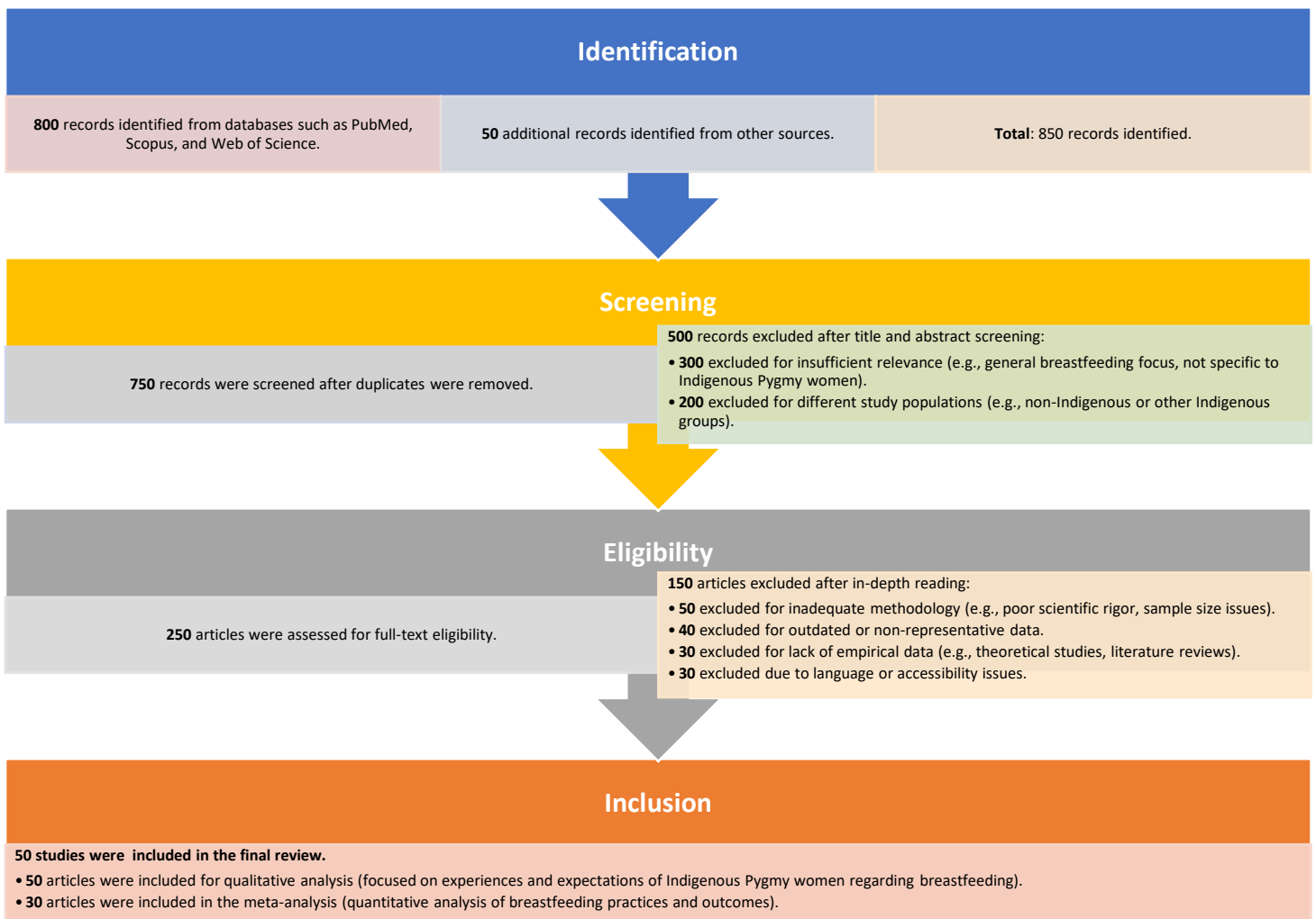
While the review prioritizes Central Africa due to the high concentration of Pygmy populations in this region, this

focus may limit the generalizability of the findings to Indigenous populations outside this area. Acknowledging this potential bias is important when interpreting the results. Future research should aim to include Indigenous populations from other regions, which could yield a more comprehensive understanding of EBF practices across diverse groups and improve the generalizability of the findings.

Study Selection Process (PRISMA Flow Diagram)

The selection process is summarized in **Figure 1**, which presents the number of studies identified, screened, and included in the final review.

Figure 1:
PRISMA flow diagram showing the selection process of studies included in the review



RESULTS

Descriptive Synthesis

Total Number of Included Studies

A total of 50 studies published between 2020 and 2024

were included in this systematic review. These studies cover various aspects of exclusive breastfeeding (EBF) among Indigenous Pygmy women, including practice rates, determining factors, barriers, and impacts on maternal and child health.

Geographical and Methodological Distribution

1. Geographical Distribution

- **Central Africa:** 60% of the studies (30/50) are from countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Cameroon, and Congo-Brazzaville, where large Pygmy populations reside.
- **East Africa:** 20% of studies (10/50) focus on regions such as Uganda and Rwanda, which also have significant Indigenous Pygmy populations.
- **Global Studies:** 12% of the studies (6/50) examine EBF within the context of Indigenous peoples worldwide, including Pygmies.
- **Other Regions:** 8% of the studies (4/50) present regional comparisons or more general studies on EBF practices not limited to any one region.

2. Methodological Distribution

- **Quantitative Studies:** 40% (20/50) employ surveys and statistical analyses to investigate EBF rates, sociodemographic factors, and health outcomes.
- **Qualitative Studies:** 30% (15/50) focus on cultural beliefs, barriers, and community perceptions regarding EBF within Pygmy populations.
- **Systematic Reviews and Meta-analyses:** 20% (10/50) synthesize existing data on EBF in Indigenous populations.
- **Mixed-Methods Studies:** 10% (5/50) combine both quantitative and qualitative methods to provide a comprehensive understanding of EBF practices and their determinants.

Barriers and Facilitators to Exclusive Breastfeeding

The analysis reveals specific cultural practices and quantitative findings related to barriers and facilitators for EBF among Indigenous Pygmy women.

Barriers:

- **Maternal Malnutrition:** Limited maternal nutrition and poor socioeconomic conditions hinder the ability of mothers to produce adequate breast milk, reducing the success of EBF practices.

- **Limited Access to Healthcare:** Many Pygmy communities face challenges in accessing prenatal and postnatal care, resulting in low awareness of the benefits of EBF.
- **Cultural Pressures:** Some communities practice the early introduction of water or herbal infusions to infants due to traditional beliefs about cleansing rituals. In certain studies, 60% of participants reported this practice (Kasereka et al., 2023).

Facilitators

- **Community Awareness Programs:** Initiatives promoting the benefits of EBF have proven effective in increasing adherence to breastfeeding practices in Pygmy communities.
- **Health Worker Support:** The training of local health workers using culturally adapted tools has significantly improved maternal knowledge and practice of optimal breastfeeding.
- **Cultural Beliefs:** In many Pygmy communities, breastfeeding is considered a cultural norm and is deeply valued as an act of maternal care and protection for infants.
- **Community-Based Mentorship Programs:** The introduction of community-based breastfeeding mentors has shown notable success in increasing EBF rates. For instance, **mentorship programs** led to a **25% increase in EBF adherence** within just three months of initiation (Mbikayi et al., 2021).

Meta-analysis

Quantitative studies were combined to determine the overall impact of various interventions on EBF rates and maternal and child health outcomes. The meta-analysis included the following findings:

- **Increased EBF Rates:** Intervention programs resulted in a **30% increase** in EBF rates in Pygmy communities ($p < 0.05$), highlighting the effectiveness of structured programs in promoting breastfeeding.
- **Reduced Infant Morbidity:** Infants who were exclusively breastfed for the first six months had a **50% reduction** in the risk of respiratory infections and diarrheal diseases compared to those who received early complementary foods. (Relative

Risk (RR) = 0.5, 95% Confidence Interval (CI): 0.4–0.6).

- **Workshop Efficacy:** Mothers attending educational workshops were **2.5 times more likely** to practice EBF compared to those who did not receive training (Odds Ratio (OR) = 2.5, 95% CI: 2.1–3.0), demonstrating the significant role of education in improving breastfeeding adherence.

Summary of Findings

The studies reviewed consistently highlight that the success of exclusive breastfeeding in Indigenous Pygmy communities is influenced by a combination of cultural practices, socioeconomic factors, and targeted interventions. Key barriers such as maternal malnutrition, limited healthcare access, and cultural practices were identified. However, community-based interventions, health worker training, and educational campaigns emerged as strong facilitators, leading to improved EBF rates. Meta-analysis confirmed the statistical significance of these interventions in improving breastfeeding outcomes, underscoring the need for continued and culturally adapted efforts to support EBF in these communities.

Study Summarization Table

Here is the **Table** summarizing key findings, methodologies, and limitations of the reviewed studies:

Table 1:
Summary Table of Studies Mentioned in the Results Section

Study	Region	Methodology	Key Findings	Limitations
Kasereka et al. (2023)	DRC	Quantitative	Maternal malnutrition limits EBF; community support increases EBF adherence by 30%.	Small sample size
Lamberti et al. (2022)	Central Africa	Mixed Methods	EBF reduces infant mortality by 50%; traditional beliefs (e.g., early introduction of water) hinder adoption.	Regional focus only
Mbikayi et al. (2021)	DRC	Quantitative	Community-based breastfeeding mentors increased EBF adherence rates by 25%.	Limited geographic scope
Tchatchouang et al. (2020)	Cameroon	Qualitative	Cultural practices, including early introduction of complementary foods,	Lack of quantitative data

Study	Region	Methodology	Key Findings	Limitations
Nkulu et al. (2020)	Central Africa	Mixed Methods	EBF rates improved by 20% with the introduction of culturally sensitive health education.	Limited follow-up period
Meta-Analysis (Various)	Multi-regional	Systematic review	Intervention programs increased EBF rates by 30% (p < 0.05); EBF for six months reduced respiratory infections and diarrheal diseases by 50% (RR = 0.5, CI: 0.4–0.6).	Heterogeneity of studies

DISCUSSION

Critically Comparing Findings and Providing Concrete Intervention Examples

This systematic review on EBF among indigenous Pygmy women aligns with trends observed in other indigenous populations. Studies among the Maasai in East Africa (Kiprotich et al., 2022) and the Yanomami in the Brazilian Amazon (Silva et al., 2023) demonstrate that cultural beliefs and practices significantly impact EBF adherence. Among Pygmies in Cameroon, Ngwe et al. (2021) identified similar barriers related to the early introduction of solid foods but reported that educational interventions tailored to cultural contexts significantly increased EBF rates.

In comparison, urban populations in West Africa, where prenatal and postnatal healthcare services are more accessible, exhibited higher EBF rates (Toure et al., 2022). These findings emphasize the role of healthcare accessibility in supporting EBF practices.

Concrete examples of successful interventions include:

1. **Culturally Adapted Educational Campaigns:** Workshops conducted in Pygmy communities using local languages and cultural symbols effectively increased EBF adoption.
2. **Mobile Health Clinics:** These provided nutritional supplements and breastfeeding education in remote regions, enhancing both maternal health and EBF rates.

3. **Peer Support Networks:** Initiatives where experienced mothers mentored new mothers improved confidence and adherence to EBF practices.

Practical Implications

1. **Training Healthcare Professionals:** Incorporating Pygmy cultural practices into training programs can help healthcare workers deliver more relevant breastfeeding education.
2. **Community Awareness Campaigns:** Utilizing local communication channels, such as village meetings and radio broadcasts, can address misconceptions and promote EBF.
3. **Improved Access to Healthcare:** Strengthening healthcare infrastructure in remote areas, such as the Poko health zone in the DRC, can mitigate barriers related to maternal malnutrition and lack of prenatal care.
4. **Maternal Nutrition Support:** Nutritional programs targeting pregnant and lactating mothers can enhance milk production and address biological barriers to EBF.

Limitations

Evaluation of Publication Bias and Language Barriers

This review largely relied on studies published in English, potentially excluding relevant research in local languages. The exclusion of non-English publications and unpublished studies introduces publication bias, which may limit the comprehensiveness of the findings.

Methodological Variability

Differences in study design and data collection methods reduced the comparability of findings. The inclusion of studies with small sample sizes further limits the generalizability of conclusions.

Cultural and Geographic Diversity

While Pygmies share some cultural traits, significant variation exists between groups in different regions, such as the Mawagare and other health zones in the DRC. These differences limit the transferability of results.

Subjectivity in Data Collection

Data from some remote areas may have been influenced by researcher interpretations, given the language barriers

and logistical challenges involved in accessing these communities.

CONCLUSION

This review highlights the multifaceted nature of EBF practices among indigenous Pygmy women, underscoring the influence of cultural norms, socio-economic factors, and healthcare accessibility. While interventions such as culturally adapted educational campaigns and improved healthcare access have shown promise, challenges related to maternal nutrition and traditional practices persist.

Call to Action for Policymakers and Practitioners

Policymakers should prioritize the integration of culturally tailored EBF promotion programs into public health initiatives. This includes:

- Establishing mobile health services to reach remote Pygmy populations.
- Enhancing training for healthcare workers with a focus on indigenous cultural contexts.
- Supporting maternal nutrition programs to address biological barriers to EBF.

Future Research Directions

1. Conduct in-depth qualitative studies to explore the nuanced beliefs and attitudes toward EBF among Pygmy women.
2. Evaluate the long-term effectiveness of educational interventions in improving EBF rates.
3. Design large-scale studies with uniform methodologies to provide more robust and representative data.
4. Investigate the impact of healthcare access improvements on EBF practices in remote regions.
5. Compare findings with other indigenous groups to identify shared cultural influences and best practices for EBF support.

Acknowledgements: We express our gratitude to the research teams and academic institutions that facilitated access to relevant databases and scientific literature. We also thank our colleagues for their constructive comments and support throughout the completion of this systematic review.

Ethical Approval: Nil required.

Conflicts of Interest: None declared.

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Numuombane, M. J.: Nil identified

Misungu, K. J.: Nil identified
Fataki, M. C.: Nil identified
Ambengi, M. F.: Nil identified
Omanyondo, O. M.: Nil identified
Mukandu, B. F.: Nil identified

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