Research Article

Exclusive Breastfeeding and Its Determinants in Yaoundé, Cameroon: A Retrospective Survival Analysis

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Received 26 May 2021; Revised 11 February 2022; Accepted 2 August 2022; Published 31 August 2022

Academic Editor: A.Seval Ozgu-Erdinc

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Exclusive breastfeeding (EBF) of infants for the first six months of life is a global public health goal that is linked to the reduction of morbidity and mortality in infants, especially in low middle-income countries. In low middle-income countries like Cameroon, it is realistic that compliance with EBF can significantly reduce the burden of under-five mortality rate. The purpose of this study was to assess adherence and determinants influencing the duration of exclusive breastfeeding in Yaoundé, Cameroon. Data was collected through a mixed method and systematically through a retrospective survival analysis approach where a total number of 503 randomly selected individuals in Yaoundé, Cameroon, participated in the study. Data was collected between November 2019 and May 2020. A Cox proportional hazard modelling and Kaplan-Meier analysis were employed to identify prognostic factors affecting survival time defined as the duration, in months, from birth until the time of stopping EBF. The average time for nursing mothers to practice EBF was 3.61 ± 0.010 months. This study found that more than 90% of mothers were aware of the importance of compliance with EBF but only 38% practiced EBF and 62% of mothers could not adhere to EBF recommendations. Factors that influence compliance with EBF included a mother being married (HR: 0.70; 95% CI = [0.55-0.89], P = 0.003) which was a protective factor while mother’s tertiary education (HR: 1.43; 95% CI = [1.11-1.84], P = 0.005) was a risk factor with non-compliance with EBF when compared to those with basic or no formal education. The Kaplan-Meier curve indicated that as time goes on, babies are less likely to be exclusively breastfed after a specific time period within two and three months. This implies that the chance for a baby to remain exclusively breastfed after five months is 74.3% (0.74). Continuous sensitization and enforcement measures are recommended to promote EBF.

1. Introduction

The World Health Organization [1] defines exclusive breastfeeding (EBF) as the procedure whereby infants receive only breast milk from a mother or wet nurse expressed to a child, with no other liquids or solids inclusive not even water for the first six months with the exception of oral rehydration solutions, syrups of vitamins and minerals, or medication. Exclusive breastfeeding of infants for the first six months of life is considered a global public health goal that is linked to the reduction of morbidity and mortality in infants especially in low middle-income countries [2]. International agencies and policy makers adopted a declaration in August, 1990, which affirmed that all infants should be exclusively breastfed from birth till four months of age. Subsequently, the WHO recommendations amended the breastfeeding declaration to six months in 2001 [3, 4]. Global public health recommendation by the WHO and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) requires infants to receive only breast milk for the first six months of life coupled with
lactation and other complementary food for up to two years or beyond [5, 6]. Knowledge about breastfeeding recommenda-
tions is important as it may influence breastfeeding prac-
tices especially for first-time mothers [6]. Globally, ap-
proximately 34.8% of infants are exclusively breastfed for
the first six months of life [7]. Exclusive breastfeeding is
the first prized gift from mother to the baby that exists to
benefit the baby, mother, and community [8, 9]. Exclusive
breastfeeding has numerous benefits in terms of providing
energy, protein, water, and other nutrients required for the
development of an infant [10]. Other benefits of EBF include
growth improvement as well as enhanced development of
the immune system and cognitive ability of children [11].

Breast milk carries antibodies from the mother that helps
in combating diseases and in addition helps prevent future
harm and reduces spending on future health care [12, 13].

More so, breast milk also provides a healthy weight balance
thereby reducing children’s risk of becoming overweight
[5, 14]. Evidence-based research has proven that some
deaths can be prevented through proper breastfeeding
methods where improved lactation rates can save globally
over 800,000 children under five years annually [9, 15, 16].

Due to these benefits, the WHO and UNICEF recommend
that all mothers should breastfeed their children exclusively
for the first six months and thereafter continue to breastfeed
for as long as the mother and child desires, with appropriate
and sufficient weaning food included after six months of life
[4, 11]. Non-compliance to adequate lactation practices is a
public health threat and concern with major causes of deaths
and morbidity in infants and young children [17]. Further-
more, failure to exclusively breastfeed for the first six months
of life can result in 1.4 million deaths and 10% of disease bur-
den in children younger than five years according to Black
et al. and Gejo et al. [7, 18]. When an infant is inadequately
breastfed, the child becomes more exposed to risk factors
and health complications such as frequent gastrointestinal
infections and poor brain development coupled with lower
and upper respiratory tract infections [17, 19]. Approxi-
mately 41% of under 05 death’s occurrence in Sub-Saharan
Africa (SSA) is linked to inadequate breastfeeding in combi-
nations with other diseases which causes about 30% of
diarrhea deaths and 18% of acute respiratory deaths [1, 20].

Promoting proper feeding practices is one of the main pro-
grammed areas that the Department of Nutrition for Health
and Development in Cameroon focuses on by providing
 counselling courses and guidance for the protection, promo-
tion, and support of infant and young child feeding [21].

Promoting and striving to increase the trends of EBF in
Cameroon are also done by implementing the National
Breastfeeding Sensitization Plan by the Ministry of Public
Health Cameroon (2016) in partnership with WHO in
Cameroon. Exclusive breastfeeding is a well-acknowledged
and cause-effective intervention against malnutrition-
related illnesses in children [17]. Despite the documented
importance and advantages of practicing EBF, the practice
is still not widespread with an unsatisfactory level recorded
across the globe and most especially in developing countries
[18, 22]. More is yet to be done to narrow this gap and sustain
EBF practices. Still, the associated factors vary within differ-
ent countries and even within the same country where a
gap still exists [22]. In Cameroon, about 92% of children less
than six months old are exposed to breastfeeding, but of
these, less than 50% are exclusively breastfed for six months
and about 88.8% receive colostrum [7, 21]. This study was
designed to assess adherence and to identify determinants
influencing the shortened time to exclusively breastfed in
Yaoundé, Cameroon, using a survival analysis approach.

Interventions such as maternity leave and nursing breaks
for working mothers were introduced although they are not
fully implemented where only 42 countries (23%) meet or
exceed the recommendation of 18 weeks’ leave for breast-
feeding mother [23]. Findings from this study are needed to
provide and update information on the current situation
and also make recommendations on what can be done to
comply with the six months exclusive breastfeeding plan as
recommended by the WHO [24].

2. Methodology

2.1. Study Area. This study was conducted in the urban city
of Yaoundé in Cameroon. Yaoundé is located in the south-
ern part of the country which has an elevation of about
726 meters above sea level and a total surface area of
180km². The city is situated at 3°52’N and 11°31’E. Yaoundé
is the second largest city in the country, after Douala, with
an estimated population of 2.8 million inhabitants [25].
The average temperature in Yaoundé varies from 18.9°C to
30.6°C and rarely below 16.7°C or above 32.8°C.

2.2. Study Design. This was a hospital-based cross-sectional
study conducted among 503 mothers with babies aged
between six and ten months. Data was collected through a
mixed method and systematically through a retrospective
survival analysis approach where a total number of 503
randomly selected individuals in Yaoundé, Cameroon, par-
ticipated in the study. A retrospective survival analysis
approach was adopted in order to determine time to the
occurrence of an unwanted event of interest (stopping of
EBF). The prognostic factors, defined as factors which
contributed to an abrupt cessation of EBF, were identified.
During the study, the outcome variable was defined as the
duration of months, from birth to the occurrence of cessa-
tion of EBF before the recommended six months. Censoring
was considered when the child under consideration reached
six months without experiencing the event of interest.

2.3. Sample Size Estimation. The sample size was determined
using the Fisher formula: \( S = Z^2 \* P \* (1 - P) / M^2 \) at a given
prevalence rate of 0.452 with a confidence level of 95% and
marginal error of 0.05. The estimated sample size was 381
participants. An additional 32% was added to the sample
size giving a total of 503 participants from whom data was
collected to have a greater statistical power to detect signifi-
cant difference.

2.4. Survival Analysis Approach. It is a set of statistical
methods used to analyze data in which the time until the
event of interest occurs. The response is often referred to
Data was collected between November 2019 and May 2020 through formal interviews guided by structured questionnaire that was pre-tested before use. The questionnaire recorded key variables such as time to adherence to EBF as a dependent variable as well as other independent variables including maternal age, education level, employment status, marital status, antenatal care, immunization, colostrum intake, reasons for cessation of EBF, and baby developed diarrhea or any respiratory tract infection. Interviews were done individually and independently. The questionnaires comprised of both open and close-ended questions that were pretested after which probe questions were added to elicit clear responses. Responses from mothers were complemented by recording information available on the baby’s vaccination card such as the baby’s age, sex, and weight. Participant’s consent was obtained and the interview session was recorded.

2.9. Data Analysis. A dataset was generated from the data collected using the questionnaire. Quantitative data was analyzed using SPSS version 21.0 (Statistical package for social science) and STATA Version 16 for statistical analysis. A Kaplan-Meier curve plotting was carried out for the survival probability. A Cox proportional hazard regression analysis was also used to investigate and identify different prognostic factors including assessment of their effects on the survival time. The relationship between the outcome variable and prognostic factors was analyzed (using univariable analysis) and corresponding P-values recorded. Those which qualified (P < 0.05) were considered being significant to the outcome variable for the next step of multivariable analysis and were fitted together using backward elimination approach. The final model included all prognostic factors which appeared significant at P < 0.05 or had significant biological significance for retention in the final model. For qualitative analysis, audios were verbatim transcribed and manually coded on Microsoft Word. Themes were developed and major exemplar quotations selected for each theme are presented in the “Results” section.

2.10. Ethical Consideration. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Regional Center Ethics Committee for Human Health Research at the Ministry of Public Health Yaoundé Cameroon in October 2019. All participants gave their consent to participate in the study and researcher signed and complied with confidentiality requirement throughout the data collection and processing period. Confidentiality was ensured at all levels since mothers were interviewed independently in a confined vaccination room with only staff members of the vaccination unit present.

2.11. Limitations. This study is not a representative of the whole Cameroon; hence, results of this work cannot be generalized to the entire country. However, the findings are still very informative about the current trend of EBF. Like any other study, due to limited resources, this study might have excluded other factors likely to influence EBF in Cameroon. In addition, long recall period for mothers could influence the validity of their responses.

3. Results

3.1. Demographic Distribution and Characteristics of the Mothers Who Participated in the Study. The age of mothers who participated in this study ranged from 18 to 44 years while; for babies, their age ranged from six to ten months. Approximately 70% of nursing mothers within the study were legally married or cohabiting. About 69% of...
respondents within the study reported to have attained a higher (tertiary) level of education as summarized in Table 1. Only 38% of nursing mothers practiced EBF and 62% of mothers could not adhere to EBF recommendations. Knowledge about breastfeeding recommendations was received by more than 90% of nursing mothers who attended ANC. It was observed that as time goes on, the probability to exclusively breastfeed decreased.

3.2. Demographic Distribution and Characteristics of Babies Who Participated in the Study. The average age group of participating babies within the study was six months old. During the study, approximately 26.4% of babies contracted diarrhea and 6.2% contracted respiratory problems as represented in Table 2.

3.3. Prognostic Factors Associated with Duration of Exclusive Breastfeeding. Prognostic factors that were significantly associated with the duration of EBF included mother’s marital status and educational level. It was found that a mother who was married was more likely to comply with EBF (HR: 0.70; 95% CI = [0.55-0.89], P = 0.003) when compared to a mother who was not married. With respect to the influence of level of education, a mother who had attained a tertiary education was more likely not to comply with EBF (HR: 1.43; 95% CI = [1.11-1.84], P = 0.005) when compared with the mother with basic or no formal education as summarized in Tables 3 and 4. However, this study found that a nursing mother’s employment status did not influence EBF duration (P value = 0.425) as shown in Table 4 but it was retained in the final model due to its biological importance and evidence from previous studies.

3.4. Kaplan-Meier Survival Analysis. The Kaplan-Meier curve indicated that as time goes on, babies are less likely to be exclusively breastfed, more so after the second and third months. Thus, the chances for a baby to remain exclusively breastfed after five months is less than 75% for unmarried mothers as indicated in Figure 1.

3.5. Determinants to Nonexclusive Breastfeeding Based on Open-Ended Responses from Mothers. Our findings revealed that initiation and duration to EBF were influenced by some prognostic factors such as social and cultural attitude, availability of breast milk substitutes, mode of delivery, and unavailability of nursing mother. Exemplary quotes selected from themes of why some mothers did not practice EBF were:

“I didn’t practice EBF after child birth because, I gave birth through caesarean section which inhibited my breast milk flow and for this reason I had to introduce my baby to artificial milk” Mother, Vaccination Center Chantal Biya Foundation.

“I stopped practicing exclusive breastfeeding because my baby used to scream a lot which was an indication to me that he needed more than just breastmilk and I had no other option than add up with artificial milk” Mother, Consultation Unit Chantal Biya Foundation.

“Some babies deliberately refuse breast milk no matter how you force them to eat for example my girl child is so selective to feeding” Mother, Vaccination Center Chantal Biya Foundation.

“Because I leave very early for work and come back late I can’t consistently breastfeed my baby and I don’t feel comfortable expressing breast milk for my baby because I believe that my baby’ nanny will not hygienically handle it” Mother, Vaccination Unit FCB.

“My boy child cannot get satisfied on breast milk alone, he usually cries a lot when I give him only breast milk. So I decided to add up with cereals and fruit juice to make him healthy and satisfied” Mother, Consultation Unit Chantal Biya Foundation.

| Variable                  | Level                | Number | Percentage |
|---------------------------|----------------------|--------|------------|
| Employment                | Employed            | 273    | 54.3       |
|                           | Unemployed           | 230    | 45.7       |
| Education level           | Basic/no formal education | 156    | 31.0       |
|                           | Tertiary or higher   | 347    | 69.0       |
| Marital status            | Married/cohabitating | 356    | 70.8       |
|                           | Not married          | 147    | 29.2       |
| Practiced EBF*            | Yes                  | 191    | 38.0       |
|                           | No                   | 312    | 62.0       |
| Practiced breast expression | Yes                | 200    | 39.8       |
|                           | No                   | 303    | 60.2       |
| Attended ANC *            | Yes                  | 501    | 99.6       |
|                           | No                   | 02     | 0.4        |

ANC: antenatal clinic; EBF: exclusive breastfeeding.

| Variable                      | Level | Number | Percentage |
|-------------------------------|-------|--------|------------|
| Sex                           | Male  | 241    | 47.9       |
|                               | Female| 262    | 52.1       |
| Colostrum intake              | Yes   | 464    | 92.2       |
|                               | No    | 39     | 7.8        |
| Contracted diarrhea           | Yes   | 133    | 26.4       |
|                               | No    | 370    | 73.6       |
| Developed respiratory problems during the study | Yes | 31 | 6.2 |
|                               | No    | 472    | 93.8       |

Worthy of note is that 92.2% of babies were initiated to breastfeeding and equally received colostrum; meanwhile, 7.8% of babies were not initiated to breastfeeding and as a result did not equally receive colostrum.

Table 1: Demographic distribution and characteristics of mothers (N = 503).

Table 2: Demographic distribution and characteristics of babies (N = 503).
3.6. Misconception about Exclusive Breastfeeding. While some mothers reported factors that challenged them from practicing EBF, some mothers had some misconception about EBF practices. Misconception about EBF was discovered to be associated to some cultural practices and lack of proper knowledge about EBF. Exemplar quotes selected were:

“In my tradition a child cannot survive only on breastmilk alone for six months, you must mix it with something to make the bones of the baby very strong” Mother, Vaccination Center Chantal Biya Foundation.

“Breastmilk alone is very light weighted, the baby cannot be feeding on it alone, Yes, it is true that breast milk has good nutrients but it is not heavy enough to support the baby for long” Mother, Vaccination Chantal Biya Foundation.

4. Discussion

This study provided an overview on the determinants of EBF using the survival analysis approach in Yaoundé, Cameroon. It aimed at assessing the adherence and determinants influencing the shortened duration of exclusive breastfeeding among breastfeeding mothers in Yaoundé. Our findings highlight that the prevalence rate of EBF was at 38%. Previous studies conducted in Yaoundé, Cameroon [28] revealed an EBF rate of only 15% whereas other findings conducted in Yaoundé documented that about 42.5% of babies were exclusively breastfed for six months [12]. With reference to past studies conducted and the present study, much room for improvement is needed to reach the global breastfeeding target of 50% [29]. Despite the global and local efforts to promote exclusive breastfeeding practices, the rates are still below the recommended standards. Most first-time mothers fall victim to early cessation of EBF which is commonly substituted with artificial milk, water, juice, and other liquid food supplement [30]. According to UNICEF, if more efforts are provided, countries might meet up to the global target of at least 50% prevalence rate of EBF by 2025 and a target of 70% by 2030. A mother’s decision to exclusively breastfeed her baby is influenced by a variety of factors. While most women are aware that breastfeeding is the best source of nutrition for infants, they often lack knowledge regarding the numerous health benefits or reduction in health risks that occur through breastfeeding. This lack of knowledge inhibits mothers from properly weighing the advantages and disadvantages of breastfeeding to make an informed decision [31]. In addition, findings from this study revealed that EBF was significantly common among married mothers than unmarried mothers. This pattern of results is also consistent with past evidence-based studies conducted in the United States of America with 25,197 telephone interviews.
of breastfeeding mothers; it was observed that children living with both parents were more likely to have been exclusively breastfed (80.4%) than children of other types of families [32]. Furthermore, exclusive breastfeeding was not common among higher educated women. Similar patterns were also seen in wealthier, better-educated, and urban women in other low middle-income countries [23, 33]. It is essential to note that this class of women perceived breast milk substitutes as modern and prestigious while associating EBF with being poor and unsophisticated [23, 33]. Our findings further revealed that the probability for a baby to be exclusively breastfed for six months is not significantly influence by the employment status of the mother. Notwithstanding, past studies had proven a significant difference between these two groups. Past studies conducted [34] revealed that the duration of EBF is higher among unemployed mothers where mothers who are unemployed also practice EBF as the best option of cost-effective practice [34]. Income earning also goes as a boosting factor for artificial milk purchase, thereby widening the gap of non-exclusive breastfeeding. It is also noted that the general decline in breastfeeding is also correlated to the production and availability of synthetic breast milk and its substitutes [16, 35]. This study also revealed that water was the main factor altering EBF for six months as most nursing mothers supplemented the baby’s breastfeeding pattern with water to quench their thirst out of the grip of fear. Most breastfeeding mothers perceived that a baby needed to drink water from their tender age for healthy growth. Other supplements that interrupted EBF were cereals, corn porridge, fruit juice, and bananas. More so, some babies could not receive only breast milk from the day of birth because some expecting mothers gave birth through the cesarean section and preterm delivery which did not stimulate enough milk production after child birth. This therefore prompted some mothers to involuntary practice mixed feeding. Improved counselling and sensitization plan on the benefits of EBF by peer breastfeeding counselors or health care providers will go a long way to narrow the gap of nonexclusive breastfeeding. This strategy will bring about behavioral changes for some mothers not adhering to EBF practices. A study has proven that counselling and moral support offered by health care providers and peer counsellors can strengthen breastfeeding initiation, duration, and a positive outcome for EBF rates [36]. Based on evidence, the longer the breastfeeding duration, the lower the risk to disease exposure. Determinants to nonexclusive breastfeeding in this study were observed to be social and cultural attitude, availability of breast milk substitute, unavailability of nursing mother, assisted, and preterm birth. A recent study also indicated similar patterns where assisted delivery and long hospital stays, poor maternal health, and preterm delivery could result to inappropriate or late breastfeeding [23]. In addition, inadequate support, especially in the first weeks after birth, and anticipation of breastfeeding difficulties are some common reasons for breastfeeding cessation. More so, mothers who do not successfully breastfeed in their first pregnancies are less likely to attempt breastfeeding in subsequent pregnancies [23]. This study provides an overview on the current trends of EBF in Yaoundé, Cameroon.

5. Conclusion

Despite the implementation of the National Breastfeeding Sensitization Plan by the Ministry of Public Health Cameroon (2016) in partnership with WHO in Cameroon, EBF rates in Cameroon are still below satisfactory levels [21]. Findings from the study revealed that above 90% of mothers were knowledgeable about EBF benefits and equally attended an antenatal clinic. Notwithstanding, about 38% of mothers exclusively breastfed their babies for six months meanwhile 62% of mothers could not adhere to EBF practices. If much effort is vested upon nursing mothers through counselling and sensitization plans on the benefits of practicing EBF, the gap of EBF will be narrowed and the prevalence rate of EBF shall increase in subsequent years. Counselling and sensitization goals can be achieved through ANC visits. It was noted that prognostic factors which were significant to determinants of EBF durations were the mother’s level of education and marital status. This study provides an overview on the current trend of EBF practices in Yaoundé. In addition, the findings present evidence that EBF rates in Cameroon are still below the satisfactory level and need to be improved. Exclusive breastfeeding remains the best approach for protection against numerous diseases. Therefore, we suggest that future studies should aim at rolling out interventions to narrow this gap.

6. Recommendations

Based on this finding conducted in Yaoundé, Cameroon, the study recommends the following: (i) Reformation of some national working policies for nursing mothers in some demanding sectors of employment, such as offshore mining and outpostation diplomatic services. Revision of some policies will lead to flexibility and time to breastfeed due to our qualitative analysis which indicated that the nature of their job hindered them from practicing EBF. (ii) Reinforce prenatal sensitization on the benefits of EBF for both mother and child. (iii) The state should train peer breastfeeding counselors to carry out community-based counselling for knowledge brokering on EBF in their convenient language. (iv) Offer more counselling and training sessions on breast milk expression to support mothers establish sufficient milk supply. (v) Recommend mothers to increase frequency of breastfeeding to maintain milk supply.

Data Availability

The raw dataset used to support this finding are available for this study and can be provided by the corresponding author upon request.

Conflicts of Interest

All authors declare no conflict of interest in the findings of the study.
Authors’ Contributions

GANO developed the project and designed the study protocol. EDK, HAN, and ENF contributed on the operationa- lization and supervised the study. GANO carried out data collection, conducted data analysis, and developed the manuscript with the supervision and input contributions from all authors. All authors critically commented, interpreted, provided discussion on the results, and approved the final revised version of the manuscript.

Acknowledgments

Special thanks are due to all respondents during the study who spared their priceless time for interviews. We acknowledge the managing director of the Chantal Biya foundation Prof. Koki Ndombo Paul and all staffs of the consultation and vaccination unit. We also acknowledge the contribution and supervision of some academic staff of SUA Tanzania.

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