


THE IMPACT OF SUPPORT NETWORKS IN THE POSTPARTUM PERIOD: AN ANALYSIS OF THEIR INFLUENCE ON WOMEN'S MENTAL HEALTH

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ABSTRACT

The present study aimed to analyze the influence of support networks on the mental health of women in the postpartum period. The methodology used was an integrative literature review, with a search for articles in the PubMed, SciELO, and VHL databases, published between 2014 and 2024. Seven studies with different methodological designs were included, most of which were qualitative. The results showed that the presence of family, social, institutional or community support networks acts as a protective factor for maternal mental health, significantly reducing the risks of depression, anxiety and other psychic disorders in the puerperium. On the other hand, the absence or fragility of these networks is associated with an increase in negative emotional symptoms and difficulty in establishing the mother-baby bond. The evidence also indicates that the support offered by health professionals, combined with humanized and intersectoral public policies, contributes to a more effective and comprehensive care for women in the postpartum period. It is concluded that the strengthening of support networks is essential for the promotion of the psychological and emotional well-being of the puerperal woman, and it is necessary to invest in strategies that expand access to these resources, especially in contexts of social vulnerability.

Keywords: Support network. Mental health. Motherhood. Postpartum depression.

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INTRODUCTION

The postpartum period represents a phase of profound physical, emotional and social transformations for women. In addition to the demands related to the care of the newborn, many mothers face drastic changes in routine, sleep, food and their personal identity. This context, full of challenges, can result in significant changes in the psychological well-being of the postpartum woman, with mental health being a critical aspect that deserves adequate attention and acceptance by health professionals and society in general (Greinert *et al.*, 2019)

Recent data from the Ministry of Health indicate that approximately 25% of Brazilian women have symptoms of postpartum depression. This condition, if not diagnosed and treated early, can progress to more serious conditions, compromising the bond between mother and baby and the quality of family life (Fiocruz, 2016). The lack of adequate social support, maternal overload and lack of information about rights and care during the puerperium contribute significantly to the worsening of these situations

Support networks that encompass family, friends, health services, public policies and the community that play an essential role in promoting maternal well-being during the postpartum period. They are defined as social and institutional structures that offer emotional, informational and practical support to postpartum women, directly influencing their experience in motherhood and their ability to face the challenges of this phase of life (Maffei; Mark; Crepaldi 2019).

The effective presence of these networks can significantly reduce the risk of mental disorders, such as depression and postpartum anxiety. The support received contributes to the construction of a safer, more welcoming and healthy motherhood, and is considered by several studies to be a protective factor for women's emotional health. In this sense, the strengthening of support networks is recognized as a fundamental strategy for the prevention of maternal mental health problems (Maffei; Mark; Crepaldi 2019).

On the other hand, the absence or fragility of these networks can intensify feelings of loneliness, guilt, and powerlessness. Many women report that when they become mothers they are confronted with the lack of support from their partner, the distance from friendships, the scarce availability of family members and difficulties in accessing mental health services. This lack of assistance highlights the urgent need for more effective and humanized public policies aimed at the postpartum period (Dos Santos *et al.*, 2025).

The Ministry of Health, through the Stork Network, aims to ensure comprehensive health care for women and children from prenatal care to the postpartum period. However, even with the advances obtained, there are still gaps in the effectiveness of this care, especially with regard to the psychological monitoring of postpartum women (Brasil, 2021).

In addition, the socioeconomic context of women also has a direct impact on the structure and effectiveness of support networks. Women in situations of social vulnerability, such as those living in extreme poverty or in rural areas or urban peripheries, face greater barriers to accessing health services, exercising their rights, and obtaining community support. This structural inequality contributes to the increase in the rates of postpartum mental disorders among these populations (Silva de Andrade *et al.*, 2024; Dos Santos *et al.*, 2025).

However, postpartum mental health care still faces the social stigma that permeates female psychological suffering during this period. Many women feel guilty for not meeting the idealized expectations of motherhood, thus making it difficult to seek professional help. Combating this stigma requires a comprehensive cultural shift that promotes the recognition of mental health as an essential part of maternal care (Silva de Andrade *et al.*, 2024).

Psychological follow-up in the postpartum period should be considered a priority within primary care. The performance of multiprofessional teams in health services focused on listening, guidance, and continuous support to women can be decisive in avoiding aggravations and strengthening social protection networks. Integration between health, social assistance and education services is essential to achieve more effective results. In addition, the objective of this study is to evaluate how the support of support networks influences the psychological and emotional well-being of women after childbirth.

METHODOLOGY

This study consists of an integrative literature review, a method that enables the systematic and critical synthesis of the results of previous investigations on a specific topic, aiming to obtain more comprehensive conclusions about the object in question. Integrative review is especially suitable for the health area, since it allows the incorporation of different research methods and designs.

The elaboration of the review followed the following steps: definition of the research problem; establishment of inclusion and exclusion criteria; search of databases; selection of studies; critical analysis of the findings; and presentation of the synthesis of the results. The

guiding question of the research was formulated based on the PICO strategy, as follows: P (population): postpartum women; I (intervention): support networks; C (comparison): absence or fragility of the support; The (outcome): mental health. The question formulated was: "What is the impact of support networks on women's mental health in the postpartum period?". The databases selected for the search of studies were: PubMed, SciELO (*Scientific Electronic Library Online*) and Virtual Health Library (VHL). These databases were chosen due to their relevance in the health area and the offer of access to up-to-date and peer-reviewed scientific studies.

The inclusion criteria consisted of: articles available in full, published in Portuguese, English or Spanish, between 2014 and 2024, which directly or indirectly addressed the impact of support networks on the mental health of women in the postpartum period. Studies with a qualitative, quantitative or mixed approach were included. The exclusion criteria included: duplicate studies, systematic or integrative reviews, abstracts of scientific events, articles that discussed only clinical aspects of the puerperium without mentioning mental health or support networks, in addition to those that did not present clear or relevant results for the proposed objective.

The search for articles was carried out using the following controlled and uncontrolled descriptors, combined with Boolean operators *AND* and *OR*: "postpartum", "support network", "mental health", "maternity", and "postpartum depression" After the initial search, the articles were organized and analyzed in three stages: reading of the titles, reading of the abstracts and, subsequently, full reading of the selected texts. The selection was carried out by two independent reviewers and, in case of disagreement, a consensus was sought. The data extracted from each study included: author, year of publication, country, study objective, type of methodology, main results, and conclusions.

The data were organized in a table to facilitate visualization and subsequent analysis of the contents. The analysis of the studies was conducted in a descriptive and interpretative manner, based on the research objectives. We sought to identify convergences, divergences and gaps in the studies found, contributing to a deeper understanding of the role of support networks in the mental health of postpartum women.

Because this is a study based on data available in the public domain and that did not directly involve human beings, it was not necessary to approve the Research Ethics Committee, according to Resolution No. 510/2016 of the National Health Council. It is important to emphasize that the main limitation of this integrative review was the temporal

and linguistic restriction of the selected articles, which may have resulted in the exclusion of relevant studies due to these barriers. However, the criteria adopted ensured the representativeness and scientific quality of the results analyzed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The present study included seven scientific articles that address the influence of support networks on women's mental health in the postpartum period. The publications included vary between the years 2018 and 2023, with a predominance of qualitative studies and integrative reviews. The results unanimously showed that social and family support acts as a protective factor for maternal mental health in the puerperium. The absence of this support is strongly associated with the development of mental disorders, such as depression and postpartum anxiety.

Table 1 – Studies included in the integrative review:

STUDY TITLE	AUTHOR(S)	DESIGN OF STUDY
Postpartum Depression: An Approach to the Mental Health of the Postpartum Woman from the Nursing Perspective	Zamorano, 2021	Systematic literature review
Significant Social Network in the Gestational Process: An Integrative Review	Maffei; Mark; Crepaldi 2019	Integrative review
Role of a Support Network for Refugee Mothers	Aching; Granato 2018	Clinical-based qualitative study
Adolescent Maternity: The Support Matrix and the Context of Postpartum Depression	Frizzo <i>et al.</i> 2019	Qualitative study with adolescents
Health Care in Mental Disorders in the Postpartum Period: An Integrative Review	Silva <i>et al.</i> 2023	Descriptive integrative review
Impact of Maternal Mental Health on Mother-Infant Interaction and Its Effects on Child Development	Alvarenga <i>et al.</i> 2018	Observational study with interaction analysis
Perinatal Maternal Mental Health Promotion: From Scientific Evidence to the Construction of an Intervention Prototype	Sebastião, 2020	Qualitative study with focus groups

SOURCE: Authors, 2025.

The present study included seven scientific articles that explore the influence of support networks on women's mental health during the postpartum period. The publications analyzed cover the years 2018 to 2023, with a predominance of qualitative studies and integrative reviews. The results unanimously demonstrated that social and family support acts as a protective factor for maternal mental health in the puerperium. The absence of this

support is strongly related to the development of mental disorders, such as depression and postpartum anxiety.

Zamorano (2021) highlights that postpartum depression is a common condition, affecting up to 20% of women, and is closely linked to the lack of support networks. The author emphasizes that early diagnosis, along with family and community emotional support, can significantly reduce the severity of symptoms. The study also highlights the central role of nursing in early identification and intervention. The lack of support during pregnancy and the puerperium is identified as a risk factor for women's psychological suffering.

Maffeti *et al.* (2019) observed that partner support is one of the main protective elements of mental health in the gestational and postnatal process. A significant support network, composed of family, friends and health professionals, acts as an emotional buffer in the face of the demands of motherhood. In addition, the review suggests the expansion of studies that evaluate changes in the woman's social network throughout pregnancy and the puerperium. This analysis contributes to more effective and targeted interventions.

Aching and Granato (2018) focus on refugee mothers and point out that the absence of institutional and family support aggravates feelings of loneliness and maternal incompetence. When these women receive welcome and empathy in specialized services, they build a support network that favors adequate motherhood. The authors show that appropriate professional care can minimize the impacts of social vulnerabilities. The study reinforces the importance of sensitive listening in maternal care.

Frizzo *et al.* (2019) analyzed adolescent mothers and found that those with indicators of postpartum depression reported fewer support figures than those without depressive symptoms. Adolescence represents a period of intense transformations, and when combined with motherhood, it enhances emotional vulnerability. The study emphasizes that the support matrix is decisive in the young mother's perception of acceptance and security, and its fragility is capable of aggravating already existing depressive conditions.

Silva *et al.* (2023), through an integrative review, identified that low social and family support was the main factor associated with mental disorders in the puerperium. The study highlights the role of nursing professionals in the implementation of preventive strategies aimed at emotional support. The valorization of collective health actions is pointed out as an alternative to expand the reach of interventions. In addition, the authors recommend the integration between mental health and primary care.

Alvarenga *et al.* (2018) investigated the effects of maternal depression and anxiety on mother-infant interaction and their impact on child development. The findings show that mothers with mental disorders have a lower frequency of sensitive and responsive behaviors, compromising the affective bond. The study indicates that the presence of support networks contributes to a greater emotional availability of the mother. Thus, postpartum mental health care has direct repercussions on child well-being.

Sebastião (2020) proposed an evidence-based interventionist model to promote perinatal maternal mental health in primary care. The author identified as protective factors: the constant presence of the partner, the strengthening of family and community networks, in addition to the humanized practices of health professionals. Suggested interventions include support groups, skilled listening, and educational programs. The study advocates intersectoral action as a path to prevention in maternal mental health.

When comparing the studies, it is observed that all of them highlight the centrality of support networks in the adaptive process to motherhood. Although the contexts vary, such as adolescence, refuge or situations of social vulnerability, the presence of emotional and practical support is configured as a constant protective factor. The literature also reveals the urgent need to expand the training of health professionals in active listening and adequate welcoming. The lack of this preparation can compromise access to comprehensive care.

Zamorano (2021) and Frizzo *et al.* (2019) converge in emphasizing the importance of early diagnosis of postpartum depression. Both studies underline that the support network can act as a facilitator for women to seek professional help when needed. On the other hand, negligence in relation to emotional symptoms and blaming mothers tend to further aggravate the clinical picture presented by them. These findings suggest that social support should coexist with nonjudgmental listening.

The study conducted by Maffei; Menezes and Crepaldi (2019) highlight that emotional instability is part of the adaptive process to motherhood. In line with this, Sebastião (2020) suggests interventions based on understanding these emotions as legitimate and expected experiences during this phase of female life. This approach collaborates to depathologize maternal experiences while strengthening the self-esteem of the women involved in this transformative process. Thus, support networks emerge as valuable spaces for active listening and female empowerment.

Aching and Granato (2018) reiterate that both technical and institutional support are of the same importance as family support traditionally recognized in everyday social

interactions; especially in contexts where traditional networks become absent or fragile due to refuge or forced displacement faced by refugee women; In this particular sense, it is essential to ensure professional reception appropriate to the needs of these mothers; Such a perspective considerably expands the contemporary concept of the social networks available to women-mothers; This understanding is crucial for developing inclusive public policies that address the specific needs of these women in different social and cultural contexts.

The comparison between Alvarenga *et al.* (2018) and Silva *et al.* (2023) reveals that the quality of the support received has a direct impact on child development; circumstances in which mothers have emotional fragility resulting from the lack of this support have detrimental implications for the quality of interactions established with their babies; thus, it can be stated that not only women benefit from the social support provided by their close networks; but also their children are protected from these emotional adversities; such This finding further reinforces the imperative need for strategic creation integrated into health care initiatives aimed at articulating mother-baby as a fundamental unit within the care system offered by the multidisciplinary team.

The integration of the findings of Sebastião (2020) and Frizzo *et al.* (2019) reveals that the absence of support can generate feelings of failure and loneliness, especially in adolescent mothers. This negative perception compromises the construction of maternal identity, aggravating depressive symptoms. The author highlights the importance of preparatory courses and support groups in the promotion of mental health. Frizzo *et al.* (2019) point out that adolescents, when experiencing role conflict, need even more support to perform motherhood.

The study by Alvarenga *et al.* (2018) highlights that mothers with depressive symptoms had a lower frequency of smiles and positive stimuli to the baby. This corroborates the study by Silva *et al.* (2023), which points to low family support as one of the main factors associated with mental disorders in the puerperium. Both pieces of evidence reinforce the thesis that investing in emotional support in the postpartum period is also a strategy to promote healthy child development. Mother-infant interaction is mediated by the quality of maternal mental health.

Maffei's review; Menezes and Crepaldi (2019) also make an important contribution when considering that partner support is one of the main factors of emotional stability. The male presence during pregnancy and postpartum is related to lower rates of depression

and greater subjective well-being of mothers. This is connected with the findings of Sebastião (2020), who argues that fathers should be included in educational actions and welcomed as care agents. Thus, the marital support network gains prominence in the planning of public policies.

The study by Aching and Granato (2018) brought an important reflection on maternity in intercultural contexts, such as that of refugee women. Lack of familiarity with the services, language and cultural practices of the host country intensify loneliness in the postpartum period. In this sense, the role of the health professional transcends the technical, assuming a place of cultural mediator. This aspect was little addressed in the other studies, showing a gap to be filled in care practice.

Sebastião (2020) proposes a prototype intervention that considers the multiple dimensions of the perinatal experience, including emotional, social, and relational factors. The model includes workshops, support groups, qualified listening and interdisciplinary care. This proposal is supported by the studies by Silva *et al.* (2023) and Maffei; Menezes and Crepaldi 2019 (2019), who suggest that collective health promotion strategies are more effective than isolated approaches. Care should be centered on the needs of the woman and her support network.

Zamorano (2021) and Alvarenga *et al.* (2018) converge in highlighting the importance of early diagnosis as a prevention tool. The two studies indicate that, often, the initial symptoms of depression and anxiety are minimized or confused with "normal postpartum sadness". This delays the treatment and aggravates the suffering. The inclusion of mental health assessment in routine consultations is pointed out as a viable and necessary strategy.

The data from Frizzo *et al.* (2019) warn of the risk of neglect of the mental health of adolescent mothers, who often do not access services due to fear or shame. The support matrix, composed of significant figures, plays a decisive role in the prevention of depressive conditions. At this point, the authors argue that schools, health services, and religious institutions can act as an extension of this network. Intersectoral action is crucial to ensure comprehensive care.

The study by Silva *et al.* (2023) reinforces that family and care support contributes to coping with mental disorders in the puerperium. Nursing actions, such as home visits and listening groups, are highlighted as strategies for continuous care. This practice is connected with the proposal of Sebastião (2020), who defends an active role of health

professionals in the community. The territory becomes a privileged space for the promotion of mental health.

The relationship between maternal mental health and child development, pointed out by Alvarenga *et al.* (2018), reveals that postpartum depression does not only affect the woman, but compromises the bond with the baby. The reduction of maternal sensitivity impairs the formation of secure affective bonds, essential for the child's cognitive and emotional development. Therefore, investing in support networks is also a child care policy. Early action prevents future damage.

Maffei; Menezes and Crepaldi (2019). suggest that changes in the support network over time should be monitored by health professionals. This is because the woman can start the pregnancy with a solid network and, after childbirth, experience ruptures, such as estrangement from her partner or family conflicts. This fluctuation directly interferes with the emotional stability of the postpartum woman. Thus, continuity of care during the pregnancy-puerperal cycle is indispensable

The study by Aching and Granato (2018) presents a psychodynamic approach to motherhood in adverse contexts, proposing that the construction of the maternal bond is favored when the woman feels welcomed and culturally respected. This factor is relevant even in situations of extreme vulnerability, such as refuge. The authors point out that professional empathy is capable of restoring the mother's confidence in herself. This aspect reinforces humanization as the central axis of care.

Sebastião (2020), by developing a course to promote maternal mental health, proposes the training of professionals in active listening, management of emotions and support for affective bonding. These competencies expand the team's capacity to welcome the singularities of the maternal experience. The intervention model is structured based on the evidence found in other studies, which guarantees its scientific validity. This is a promising proposal for primary care services.

Zamorano (2021) and Silva *et al.* (2023) highlight that, in addition to listening, it is necessary to ensure access to specialized mental health services. Many women face difficulties with scheduling, transportation, or stigma. This reinforces the importance of integrated action between primary care and specialized care. The construction of lines of care is defended as a strategy to ensure the flow of care and the resolution of cases.

All the studies analyzed indicate that the strengthening of support networks in the puerperium is a measure of great impact on maternal mental health. Joint action between

family, health services and the community is essential to welcome, protect and empower women in the process of motherhood. The integrative review reaffirms that humanized, continuous and woman-centered care is the way to prevent psychological suffering and promote family and child well-being.

CONCLUSION

The present study aimed to evaluate how the support of support networks influences the psychological and emotional well-being of women after childbirth, seeking to answer the research question: "What is the impact of support networks on the mental health of women in the postpartum period?". From the analysis of the selected studies, it was possible to understand that support networks play a crucial role in promoting the mental health of postpartum women, contributing significantly to the prevention and mitigation of emotional disorders common in this period, such as depression and postpartum anxiety.

The evidence analyzed shows that the support provided by family members, partners, friends and health professionals directly impacts the way women face the challenges of motherhood. The presence of a robust and functional support network provides greater emotional security, favors adaptation to the new maternal role, and reduces feelings of loneliness, overload, and fear. On the other hand, the absence or fragility of this network has been associated with the worsening of psychic symptoms and the impairment of the mother-baby bond.

In addition to family support, the studies highlight the importance of public policies and the qualified performance of health teams in the early identification of signs of mental suffering, humanized welcoming, and the implementation of interdisciplinary care strategies. Listening groups, home visits, educational actions and accessible mental health services constitute effective mechanisms of institutional and community support that strengthen women in their experience in the puerperium.

Thus, it is concluded that the impact of support networks on the mental health of postpartum women is profound and multifaceted. These networks not only help to cope with the difficulties inherent to the puerperal period, but also promote the psychological and emotional well-being of the puerperal woman, contributing to a healthier and safer motherhood. The strengthening of these networks, integrating family, social and institutional support, should be a priority in policies aimed at comprehensive health care for women and children.

Therefore, it is recommended that future research deepen the investigation on the different types and dynamics of support networks, especially in contexts of social vulnerability, with the aim of expanding intervention strategies and ensuring increasingly humanized and effective care during the postpartum period.

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