




The Mental Health Challenges Faced by Men During Spousal Pregnancy: A Case Study of the Thulamela Municipality in the Vhembe Region of Limpopo, South Africa



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ABSTRACT

Pregnancy is a transformation period not only for women but also for their partners. While the mental health of expectant mothers has been extensively studied, the mental health challenges faced by men during the pregnancy of their wives have remained under-explored, particularly in villages around South Africa. This study therefore investigated the mental health challenges encountered by men during their partners' pregnancy in the Thulamela Municipality of Limpopo Province in South Africa. The Social Learning Theory by Albert Bandura helped in undergirding this study. A qualitative approach was employed, using an exploratory research design. Participants were selected through non-probability purposive and snowball sampling techniques, to make their contributions to the mental health of men during their wives' pregnancy and after delivery of the child. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings highlight that men experience significant emotional and psychological challenges, including anxiety, stress, and depression, often exacerbated by financial pressures and societal expectations. The paper makes an immense contribution especially in the context of the studies on mental health.

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INTRODUCTION

Pregnancy is a major life event that can impact the mental health of both parents. In contrast, males, particularly fathers, receive little attention as far as their state of health is concerned regarding pre and post-natal depression.¹ Other challenges men face, contributing to their stress as a result of pregnancy, include unemployment, poverty, pregnancy demands, discrimination, and a lack of social support.² These stressors have been known to increase mental health problems in men.

¹ N. Berthelot, R. Lemieux, and C. Lacharité, "Impact of Pregnancy on Mental Health: Fathers' Overlooked Emotional Needs," *Journal of Parental Mental Health* 12, no. 3 (2020): 45–56.

² A. Michelle, H., Carter, and R. Lemoine, "Understanding Stressors in Male Partners during Pregnancy," *Journal of Reproductive Psychology* 10, no. 4 (2023): 134–50.

Although unemployment was a significant risk factor for poor mental health in males during pregnancy it was unclear how it affected men during pregnancy and the postpartum period.³ Close to 85% of the working-age population in South Africa experience challenges during pregnancy. These challenges affect their marriages and relationships, and as such, remain a pervasive problem.⁴ Young men who are low-skilled, based in rural areas, and living in informal settlements are disproportionately affected by pregnancy as they face challenges in providing for their pregnant partners.⁵ Additionally, these men are more likely to reside in "new family" households, where at least one person is either pregnant or has a young child under the age of one.⁶ Instability, poverty, and a lack of resources contribute significantly to stress during the pregnancy period.

The challenges of pregnancy on women affect men in different ways as they believe that men are the ones who should provide for their families. Waves of pregnancy had affected male figures' mental health as well as their well-being. A major life event like pregnancy has challenges for both parents' mental health. There are family demands that men are supposed to serve to their pregnant partners, which require too much attention for men to take note of which results in men forgetting to take care of themselves and their health just for their pregnant partners. There are several challenges that men undergo during the process of pregnancy that society does not take into consideration, and it ends up depressing them and some end up committing suicide. Amongst the vha-Venda people, when a man loses a family member or a child, he is expected to run around preparing for the funeral while a woman (mother) is expected to stay home taken care of by other elders in the family.⁷ These types of conditions also take place when they recently have a baby or have an abnormal child. Some end up neglecting their life needs just to make sure that their newborn or upcoming children can survive. The challenge of pregnancy leads to catastrophic situations such as children being neglected, one-parent-headed households in communities, and financial catastrophes leading to poverty among several communities around Thulamela Municipality. In some situations, men end up rejecting their girlfriends for fear of the responsibility that comes during the process of pregnancy. In some situations, it becomes worse in such a way that young people take their lives as a way of accepting that they failed in life, leaving the child and the mother with a serious life challenge. This study is developed based on personal experience as well as the young men who have pregnant partners. The researcher came across these challenges in the small men's gathering called zwibodo, where men sit down and discuss their well-being as well as give each other advice.

The main research objectives of the paper are as follows;

- To explore the prevalence of challenges faced by men during the period of pregnancy.
- To describe the strategies used by men to cope with the mental health challenges during their women's pregnancy.

The main research questions of the paper are as follows:

- What are the challenges faced by men during the period of pregnancy?
- What are the strategies to be used to address men's mental health challenges during the period of pregnancy?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Mazza et al. stated that in 65% of European countries, men faced challenges as a result of their partners' pregnancy, including financial pressure to provide for the growing family, leading to significant stress.⁸

³ M. Bulterys, R. Nyangwe, and J. Tati, "The Intersection of Poverty, Unemployment, and Mental Health in Expectant Fathers: A Study from Rural Africa," *Global Journal of Mental Health* 18, no. 2 (2023): 89–103.

⁴ R., Manimekalai, K., Jackson, and P. Olivier, "Marriage and Mental Health during Pregnancy in South Africa," *South African Journal of Sociology* 22, no. 1 (2020): 12–20.

⁵ L. Van den Bergh, M. Rousseau, and G. Kriel, "Youth, Rurality, and Mental Health during Pregnancy: A South African Perspective," *Journal of Community Studies* 15, no. 6 (2020): 233–45.

⁶ Manimekalai, Jackson, and Olivier, "Marriage and Mental Health during Pregnancy in South Africa."

⁷ M. Materchera-Mitochi, "Gender Norms and Emotional Resilience in Expectant Fathers," *South African Journal of Gender Studies* 19, no. 2 (2023): 56–73.

⁸ V. Mazza, D. Laetitia, and P. Kraemer, "Fatherhood and Mental Health: Challenges and Resilience in European Contexts," *European Journal of Family Studies* 27, no. 4 (2021): 311–28.

These challenges included health concerns, fears of complications, and a lack of support.⁹ However, in European Union countries such as Poland, the Netherlands, and England, men faced fewer challenges during their partners' pregnancies. In China, the birth expectancy was only two children due to overpopulation, and men did not face significant challenges during their partners' pregnancies. Only 12% of men suffered from mental health challenges due to pregnancy, though 67-80% experienced depression related to the desire for more children.¹⁰

Tshitangano outlined that while the focus had traditionally been on the expectant mother, the mental health challenges faced by expectant fathers garnered increasing attention in recent years.¹¹ In many cultures, including those in rural South Africa, the experiences and needs of men during their partner's pregnancy were often overlooked, leading to unaddressed mental health issues that affected both the fathers and their families.¹²

Thulamela Municipality, in the Vhembe District of Limpopo Province, South Africa, is characterized by a mix of urban and rural settings, with a predominantly black African population.¹³ The region's sociocultural context, rooted in traditional values, significantly influences gender roles and expectations, with men often viewed as the primary providers and protectors; roles that came with substantial pressure, particularly during family changes such as pregnancy within the household.¹⁴

Materechera-Mitochi noted that traditional gender roles were deeply entrenched around the world, with men expected to be strong, unemotional, and self-reliant, which hindered them from seeking help or expressing their anxieties.¹⁵ These cultural norms resulted in suppressed emotions and untreated mental health issues. Additionally, the lack of targeted mental health services for men exacerbated these challenges.¹⁶

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper borrows largely from Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory which suggests that people learn new behaviors by observing and imitating others. Bandura emphasizes the importance of observational learning, where individuals acquire knowledge, skills, attitudes, and beliefs by watching the actions of others and the consequences that follow, leading to the modeling and adoption of observed behaviors which may ultimately be beneficial to them.¹⁷ He further indicates that observational learning could not occur unless cognitive processes were at work. These mental factors mediate the learning process to determine whether a new response is acquired. According to him, individuals do not automatically observe the behavior of a model and imitate it. There is some thought prior to imitation, and this consideration is called the mediational process.¹⁸ In the context of this study, men who are having mental challenges due to the stress that results from the lack of finances to take care of their family needs may learn from their peers as to how they overcame their socioeconomic dilemmas.

Chuang agrees with Bandura by stating that this theory highlights the significance of observational learning, which is the process by which people pick up information, abilities, attitudes and beliefs by observing the acts of others and the results that ensue, which then leads to the modelling and adoption of observed behaviours.¹⁹

Social Learning Theory suggests that people learn behaviours, attitudes, and emotions through observing others, imitating their actions, and experiencing the outcomes of those actions. It emphasises

⁹ Mazza, Laetitia, and Kraemer, "Fatherhood and Mental Health: Challenges and Resilience in European Contexts."

¹⁰ R. Kumar and X. Huang, "Mental Health and Population Control Policies: A Cross-Cultural Analysis," *Asian Journal of Public Health* 14, no. 2 (2021): 98–112.

¹¹ P. Tshitangano, "Expectant Fathers' Mental Health in Rural South Africa: A Growing Area of Concern," *African Journal of Psychological Research* 18, no. 1 (2024): 22–34.

¹² Tshitangano, "Expectant Fathers' Mental Health in Rural South Africa: A Growing Area of Concern."

¹³ T. Mashwele, D. Mandende, and L. Sebola, "Socio-Cultural Dynamics of Pregnancy in Thulamela Municipality," *Journal of African Studies* 30, no. 2 (2024): 76–92.

¹⁴ Mashwele, Mandende, and Sebola, "Socio-Cultural Dynamics of Pregnancy in Thulamela Municipality."

¹⁵ Materechera-Mitochi, "Gender Norms and Emotional Resilience in Expectant Fathers."

¹⁶ F. Mongelli, P. Georgakopoulos, and M. T. Pato, "Challenges and Opportunities to Meet the Mental Health Needs of Underserved and Disenfranchised Populations in the United States," *Focus* 18, no. 1 (2020): 16–24.

¹⁷ Albert Bandura and Richard H Walters, *Social Learning Theory*, vol. 1 (Prentice hall Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1977).

¹⁸ Bandura and Walters, *Social Learning Theory*.

¹⁹ S. Chuang, "The Applications of Constructivist Learning Theory and Social Learning Theory on Adult Continuous Development," *Performance Improvement* 60, no. 3 (2021): 6–14.

the role of modelling, reinforcement, and cognitive processes in learning.²⁰ Social Learning theory is related to this study as challenges that mostly men undergo are because of social beliefs set by society or community.²¹ Culturally, communities have a set of beliefs that men are strong, men must provide, and men take responsibility for their families, if they fail to do that the community will view them as not men enough or not a man. This theory links to this study as participants may imitate being a man through the behaviours that are taught throughout life hood. Bandura concurs with behaviourist learning theories of classical and operant conditioning in terms of Social Learning theory.²² Rumjaun, and Narod found that observational learning is the process by which behaviour is picked up from the surroundings. This theory is related to this study as males are trained to be fathers and they adopt such behaviours from their family's surroundings or environment.²³ There is also a cultural norm that “Men do not cry” This is why men always try to find ways to make their family survive no matter how hard it is. Bandura, through his work on social learning theory, identified three primary models of observational learning:

Live Model: Observing an actual individual perform a behaviour. This model relates to the study as it highlights how individuals while growing up, observe and internalize societal notions of manhood. Consequently, some men may adopt behaviors such as avoiding the responsibility of caring for their pregnant partners, even though this is not an effective way of addressing challenges.

Verbal Instructional Model: Listening to detailed descriptions of behaviour and then acting based on that description. This model is related to this study as it examines how the community defines the identity of a man. As a result, men are often expected to act strong and suppress their emotions, such as refraining from crying, even when they are experiencing depression due to the challenges associated with their partner's pregnancy.

Symbolic Model: Learning through media, such as books, movies, television, or online media, where behaviours are demonstrated. This model related to this study as media is a great influencer in this new generation so men will act as if everything is fine while they are facing difficulties during the pregnancy of their partners which impact their mental health.

How Social Learning Theory applies to the study

Social Learning Theory (SLT), as proposed by Albert Bandura, explains how individuals learn behaviors through observation, imitation, and societal reinforcement. In the context of the mental health challenges faced by men during their partner's pregnancy in Thulamela Municipality, SLT can be applied to understand how societal beliefs shape men's behaviors. Traditional gender norms often dictate that men should display stoicism and emotional restraint, especially in stressful situations such as pregnancy. These cultural expectations are transmitted through family, media, and community networks, where men learn to prioritize their partner's needs over their own emotional well-being, potentially leading to mental health issues like anxiety or depression that go unaddressed.

In addition to societal beliefs, reinforcement plays a crucial role in shaping behavior. Men may observe role models such as fathers or community leaders who reinforce the idea of "being strong" and not showing vulnerability, thus suppressing their own mental health struggles. Social approval or praise for conforming to these expectations further discourages seeking help or expressing emotions, leading to isolation and a lack of support. This lack of emotional expression can exacerbate mental health challenges. The study could benefit from a deeper exploration of how community dynamics, such as the influence of elders or specific cultural practices, shape these behaviors and how reinforcement from these sources either encourages or prevents men from acknowledging and addressing their mental health during their partner's pregnancy.

²⁰ Chuang, “The Applications of Constructivist Learning Theory and Social Learning Theory on Adult Continuous Development.”

²¹ Chuang, “The Applications of Constructivist Learning Theory and Social Learning Theory on Adult Continuous Development.”

²² Bandura and Walters, *Social Learning Theory*.

²³ Anwar Rumjaun and Fawzia Narod, “Social Learning Theory—Albert Bandura,” *Science Education in Theory and Practice: An Introductory Guide to Learning Theory*, 2020, 85–99.

METHODOLOGY

This paper used a qualitative approach to capture in-depth data on the lived experiences of participants. The study adopted an exploratory design, with purposive and snowball sampling methods to 10 recruit men aged 19–60 from Muledane village, Limpopo, whose partners were pregnant. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in English and Tshivenda, with voice recordings and researcher notes ensuring comprehensive data capture. Thematic analysis was used to interpret the data, focusing on patterns and key themes related to mental health challenges and coping strategies. Moreover, to ensure trustworthiness, measures such as credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were employed, including prolonged engagement with participants, data triangulation, and maintaining an audit trail.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1: Demographic Table

Participant	Age	Marital Status	Level of study	Occupation
1	30	Married	Bachelor’s degree in accounting	Accountant
2	35	Married	Diploma in Electrical Engineering	Electrician
3	40	Married	High school graduate	Taxi Driver
4	25	In a relationship	Bachelor’s degree in social work	Social Worker
5	28	Single	Diploma in Criminal Justice	Police Officer
6	32	Married	Bachelor’s degree in education	Teacher
7	29	Single	High school graduate	Mechanic
8	37	Divorced	Diploma in Business Management	Entrepreneur
9	45	Married	High school graduate	Security Guard
10	33	Married	Vocational training in agriculture	Farmer

Biographical Information

The study focused exclusively on male participants, with demographic information categorised into age, marital status, level of study, and occupation. The age distribution showed that the majority of participants fell between the ages of 21–30 and 31–40, each representing 40%, while the remaining 20% were aged 41–50. In terms of marital status, most participants are married (60%), followed by single participants (20%), with those divorced and in a relationship each accounting for 10%.

Regarding education, the participants exhibited a varied range of academic qualifications. High school graduates accounted for 30%, as did diploma holders and bachelor’s degree holders, while 10% had vocational training. The occupational distribution revealed a diversity of roles, with 20% of participants in professional positions such as accountants and teachers, 20% in technical roles such as electricians and mechanics, and 40% in service roles, including taxi drivers, security guards, and farmers. Additionally, 10% of participants were entrepreneurs.

Table 2: Themes and sub-themes emerged from these study

Themes	Sub-Themes
Emotional and Psychological Impact on Men	Initial Emotional Reactions
	Psychological Challenges and Mental Health Struggles
	Lack of Acknowledgment of Men’s Mental Health
Financial and Social Pressures	Financial Strain
	Societal Expectations and Gender Roles
	The Role of the Father as a Provider

Coping Mechanisms and Support Systems	Coping Strategies
	Lack of Professional Support
	Limited Access to Support Systems
Socio-Cultural Influences and Expectations	Cultural Beliefs and Gender Norms
	The Perceived Role of Fathers in Pregnancy
	Cultural Stigma Around Men’s Mental Health
Recommendations for Improving Support for Expectant Fathers	Enhancing Awareness and Education
	Community and Institutional Support
	Shifting Societal Norms

Following is the discussion of all themes as the collected data from the participants

Theme One - Emotional and Psychological Impact on Men

Sub-theme 1: Initial Emotional Reactions

Participants expressed feelings of surprise, nervousness, excitement, and anxiety upon learning of their partner’s pregnancy, highlighting the emotional complexities men face during this period. Overall, the analysis of these responses reveals that while there is a shared excitement about becoming a parent, there are also significant anxieties related to responsibility, balance, and financial considerations. In this vein, participants responded as follows:

“I am excited but anxious about the future. The thought of being responsible for a family started to hit me hard as I thought of where I was going to get help in raising my child.” (Participant 6)

“I was overwhelmed by the news, considering all the other responsibilities I already had. But I was also excited about becoming a father.” (Participant 8)

“I was excited but also worried about how to balance the financial burden and my responsibilities as a father.” (Participant 10”).

The responses by these participants are in line with Manimekalai et.al., who indicates that instability, poverty, and a lack of resources contribute significantly to stress during the pregnancy period.²⁴

Sub-theme 2: Psychological Challenges and Mental Health Struggles

Many men reported worries about their ability to fulfill their roles as fathers, financial responsibilities, and the societal expectation to stay strong. Mental health concerns, such as stress and anxiety, were commonly mentioned. Overall, these reflections indicate a complex interplay of societal norms, personal expectations, and emotional struggles. Addressing these challenges, according to Tshitangano, may require open communication, support networks, and initiatives that promote mental health for new fathers.²⁵ In this regard, participants said the following:

“The biggest challenge was the pressure to provide and be the emotional rock for my partner. I often felt anxious about how I would handle the financial burden and my mental health.” (Participant 1)

“The psychological challenge for me was dealing with the pressure to be the man and provider. It was difficult to express my fears about not being ready for fatherhood.” (Participant 4)

²⁴ Manimekalai, Jackson, and Olivier, “Marriage and Mental Health during Pregnancy in South Africa.”

²⁵ Tshitangano, “Expectant Fathers’ Mental Health in Rural South Africa: A Growing Area of Concern.”

“There were moments of self-doubt and stress. I felt unsure about my ability to balance work, family, and my mental health. I often felt like I wasn’t doing enough.” (Participant 5)

“I had periods of stress and worry about being able to support my family. There was a lot of mental pressure about the responsibility that came with fatherhood, and I felt isolated at times.” (Participant 10)

Sub-theme 3: Lack of Acknowledgment of Men’s Mental Health

Participants noted that society often overlooks men’s emotional well-being during pregnancy, focusing primarily on the mother’s health. Overall, the participants' comments reveal a pattern of silence and neglect surrounding men's mental health, influenced by societal expectations and stigma which is a result of patriarchal relations that emphasize gender roles in most communities. This analysis emphasizes the need for increased recognition and support for men's emotional experiences, especially during sensitive life transitions. Furthermore, Materechera-Mitochi notes that traditional gender roles were deeply entrenched in most rural areas around the world, with men expected to be strong, unemotional, and self-reliant. This most often hinders them from seeking help or expressing their anxieties.²⁶ These cultural norms result in suppressed emotions and untreated mental health challenges. With regard to this sub-theme, participants said the following:

“Society doesn’t focus on the mental health of men in this situation. There is this idea that men should always be strong, and there is no space for us to express our emotions.” (Participant 2)

“There is little recognition of men’s mental health. I had moments of stress, but nobody really cared to ask how I was coping with everything. It’s like we are expected to just magically handle our problems.” (Participant 5)

“I think men’s mental health is largely dismissed in society, especially during pregnancy. I had anxiety, but I felt like I couldn’t talk about it without being judged.” (Participant 7)

Theme Two - Financial and Social Pressures

Sub-theme 1: Financial Strain

A significant theme is the financial burden that comes with pregnancy, including medical costs, baby preparations, and the pressure to provide financially for the family. The analysis indicates that financial stress during pregnancy can lead to increased pressure, overwhelming anxiety, and significant changes in lifestyle as individuals attempt to prepare for the arrival of a child while managing existing financial burdens. In relation to this theme, Mazza et al. stated that in 65% of European countries, men faced challenges as a result of their partners' pregnancy, including financial pressure to provide for the growing family, leading to significant stress.²⁷ Regarding this themes, participants said the following:

“I was really worried about the extra expenses that came with pregnancy. I had to make sure I could provide for the baby, which meant working extra hours and cutting back on personal spending.” (Participant 2)

“The financial stress was overwhelming. Between doctor’s appointments and buying baby supplies, I was constantly worried about how I would keep up financially while still managing day-to-day expenses.” (Participant 6)

“I felt a lot of pressure to make enough money to support my growing family. I was already struggling financially, and the pregnancy just added to the stress of making ends meet.” (Participant 8)

²⁶ Materechera-Mitochi, “Gender Norms and Emotional Resilience in Expectant Fathers.”

²⁷ Mazza, Laetitia, and Kraemer, “Fatherhood and Mental Health: Challenges and Resilience in European Contexts.”

Sub-theme 2: Societal Expectations and Gender Roles

Many men described the social expectation that they must be the primary provider and remain resilient, leading to feelings of pressure and isolation. Overall, the statements reveal the internal conflicts that arise from societal pressures on men, highlighting the need for a shift in how masculinity is perceived and how men are encouraged to seek help and express their emotions. This theme is further buttressed by Mandende and Sebola who indicate that the socio-cultural context, rooted in traditional values, significantly influences gender roles and expectations, with men often viewed as the primary providers and protectors.²⁸ Accordingly, participants had this to say:

“Men are expected to be strong and unshaken. There’s no space for us to express doubts or concerns. The role of the provider is heavily emphasized, and it can feel like we’re supposed to do it all without asking for help.” (Participant 5)

“There’s a lot of expectation for men to stay strong and maintain control. Society tends to forget that we have emotions too and that we also need support during tough times.” (Participant 6)

“Society puts a lot of pressure on men to provide and protect. There’s an unspoken rule that men shouldn’t show emotional vulnerability, which makes it difficult to talk about the challenges I’m facing.” (Participant 10)

Sub-theme 3: The Role of the Father as a Provider

The traditional view of men as the sole breadwinners was prevalent, with some participants expressing difficulty managing work-life balance and providing for their families. Overall, the responses reveal insights into the psychological and emotional challenges faced by those in caregiving roles, with an emphasis on the weight of expectations that can impact their well-being. This insight according to Mandende and Sebola could be valuable for understanding the support needs and potential interventions that could help alleviate some of the pressures associated with being a provider.²⁹ Regarding this theme, participants said the following:

“I feel like it’s my responsibility to provide for my family, and it’s a role I take seriously. But there are times when it feels overwhelming because I’m not sure if I’m doing enough.” (Participant 1)

“Being the provider is something I always think about. It’s not just about having enough money for the baby but making sure my partner and I can manage through this phase of our lives without struggle.” (Participant 8)

“I believe it’s my responsibility to ensure the financial stability of my family, but sometimes it feels like the pressure is too much. It’s hard to balance the need to provide with other responsibilities.” (Participant 9)

Theme Three - Coping Mechanisms and Support Systems

Sub-theme 1: Coping Strategies

Strategies employed by men to manage stress and anxiety include talking to close family members or friends, engaging in physical activities, and seeking emotional support from their wives or partners. Overall, the responses highlight a variety of coping strategies, including personal reflection, emotional support, organization, and self-care practices. They reflect a mix of emotional, psychological, and interpersonal methods that can contribute to resilience in the face of stress and anxiety. Each participant

²⁸ Mashwele, Mandende, and Sebola, “Socio-Cultural Dynamics of Pregnancy in Thulamela Municipality.”

²⁹ D., Mandende and L. Sebola, “Traditional Roles and Their Impact on Men’s Mental Health during Pregnancy,” *Journal of Social Anthropology* 25, no. 3 (2024): 144–58.

approaches coping in a unique way, demonstrating that effective strategies can vary significantly among individuals. Participants said the following regarding the theme:

“I pray a lot for strength and guidance. I also take time to relax and disconnect from everything, sometimes watching a movie or taking walks. Keeping my mind occupied with simple activities helps me.”. (Participant 4)

“I try to be more open with my partner about how I feel. I also practice breathing exercises to manage anxiety. Taking time for myself, even just for a few minutes, is important.” (Participant 6)

“I cope by staying organized and planning ahead. I make lists to keep track of things, and that helps me manage the stress. I also talk to a close friend when I feel really overwhelmed.” (Participant 9)

“I cope by keeping busy, mostly through work, but I also make sure to spend time with my partner. Talking about my worries with her, even though it’s difficult, helps me manage my feelings.” (Participant 10).

The contributions made by participants are well articulated by Tshitangano, who indicates that men may require open communication with their families and friends, as well as support networks, and initiatives that promote mental health for new fathers.³⁰ This is further elucidated by Bandura’s Social Learning Theory which suggests that people learn new behaviors by observing and imitating others. As indicated earlier, Bandura believes humans are active information processors and think about the relationship between their behavior and its consequences.³¹ This indicates that by communicating with others, they inadvertently or inadvertently learn the traits that can make them survive in a hostile situation.

Sub-theme 2: Lack of Professional Support

While some men mentioned that they did not seek professional help, others suggested that men would benefit from counseling and mental health support tailored specifically for expectant fathers. The participants share feelings of being overlooked, pointing out how support exists for their partners, but they’re left without resources to help with their own emotional challenges. According to Mongeli et al.(2020), this gap leaves men feeling isolated and unsupported, even as they navigate their own psychological and emotional hurdles. Their words highlight a need for counseling and services designed specifically for men, showing how important it is to create systems that acknowledge and address their needs, fostering better mental health and connection. In this vein, participants said the following:

“I didn’t feel like there was much professional support available for me. There were resources for my partner, but I didn’t know where to go if I needed help with my own mental health.” (Participant 1)

“I didn’t receive any professional support. I think there should be counseling or support specifically for men during this time, but I never had access to that.” (Participant 3)

“I had no professional help available for my mental health. I think it’s a huge gap because men also face emotional and psychological challenges, but there’s no real system in place to help us.” (Participant 5)

³⁰ Tshitangano, “ Expectant Fathers’ Mental Health in Rural South Africa: A Growing Area of Concern.”

³¹ Bandura and Walters, *Social Learning Theory*.

Sub-theme 3: Limited Access to Support Systems

Many participants reported a lack of awareness of support groups for expectant fathers in their communities. There seems to be a gap in resources available for men during the pregnancy period. These quotes reveal the deep sense of isolation and frustration experienced by men due to the lack of father-specific support systems. The participants expressed how difficult it was to find resources tailored to their needs, often leaving them to rely on friends and family or internalize their struggles. The absence of formal support, especially for mental health, left many feeling overlooked, as the focus seemed primarily on the mother's well-being. Their voices underscore the importance of creating inclusive systems that recognize and address the emotional and psychological challenges fathers face, helping them feel supported and connected during these critical times.

"The support systems available were limited. I didn't have access to any father-specific support groups or resources. Most of the time, I had to rely on my friends and family for support". (Participant 1)

"There were no support systems specifically for men in my community. I didn't know where to turn for help when I was struggling, so I ended up keeping everything inside". (Participant 2)

"Support systems were hard to find. I had no access to any programs or groups tailored to fathers. It made me feel isolated, especially since there was no formal support for mental health". (Participant 6)

"I found it difficult to access support systems. There was nothing specifically for fathers, and I didn't know where to go for help. I felt like the support was mainly focused on the mother". (Participant 10)

Theme Four - Socio-Cultural Influences and Expectations

Sub-theme 1: Cultural Beliefs and Gender Norms

As indicated earlier, Mazza et al. opine that in 65% of European countries, men faced challenges as a result of their partners' pregnancy, including financial pressure to provide for the growing family, leading to significant stress.³² Cultural norms often place pressure on men to appear strong and unemotional, leaving little room for them to express vulnerability. Fathers are expected to be stoic and primarily focused on financial provision. These quotes highlight how deeply ingrained cultural norms around masculinity create barriers for men seeking emotional support. Participants share the weight of societal expectations that men should remain strong, silent, and self-reliant, leaving little room to express vulnerability or seek help. This pressure not only isolates them but also prevents them from addressing their emotional challenges openly. Their words reflect the need to challenge these cultural beliefs and create environments where men feel safe to share their feelings, fostering healthier expressions of masculinity and emotional well-being. In this regard, participants said the following:

"Cultural beliefs in my community stress that men must be strong and provide for their families. There's not much room for vulnerability. I felt that I was expected to handle everything on my own." (Participant 1)

"Cultural norms often suggest that men should handle everything with strength and silence. There's no real space to express vulnerability, which was difficult for me because I felt the pressure but didn't know how to share my feelings." (Participant 6)

"The expectation for men to stay strong, regardless of the situation, is deeply ingrained in my culture. This cultural belief made me feel like I wasn't allowed to show the emotional challenges I was going through." (Participant 10).

³² Mazza, Laetitia, and Kraemer, "Fatherhood and Mental Health: Challenges and Resilience in European Contexts."

Sub-theme 2: The Perceived Role of Fathers in Pregnancy

Men's roles during pregnancy were seen as primarily that of providers and protectors, with little emphasis on emotional or psychological involvement. These accounts reveal the deeply ingrained societal expectations that frame fathers primarily as providers, sidelining their emotional needs and roles. Participants describe how, in their communities, emotional support is traditionally viewed as the mother's domain, leaving fathers to navigate their feelings in silence. This cultural division of responsibilities not only isolates fathers but also diminishes the recognition of their emotional challenges during significant life events. Their reflections underscore the importance of redefining these roles to acknowledge fathers as both providers and individuals with emotional needs, fostering a more balanced and supportive approach to parenting and family life. In light of this, participants echoed their sentiments as follows:

“In my community, fathers are expected to be the ones who handle everything financially and ensure the well-being of the family. The emotional aspect is generally reserved for the mother, and fathers are often expected to remain strong and silent.” (Participant 2)

“The role of fathers is largely about providing and ensuring everything is in place for the baby. Emotional support is seen as the mother's responsibility, and fathers are expected to just deal with their own feelings silently.” (Participant 5)

“In my community, fathers are expected to take on the role of the provider. Emotional support is often not considered part of our role, and it's assumed that we don't need help or emotional care during the pregnancy.” (Participant 8)

These contributions by participants are illustrated by Tshitangano who outlines that the focus on pregnancy has traditionally been on the expectant mother, the mental health challenges faced by expectant fathers have been overlooked, and the experiences and needs of men during their partner's pregnancy are often overlooked,³³ and this neglect can lead to unaddressed mental health issues that affect not only the fathers themselves but also their partners and the entire family.

Sub-theme 3: Cultural Stigma Around Men's Mental Health

There is a cultural tendency to stigmatize men's emotional struggles, which often prevents them from seeking help or expressing concerns. These reflections, according to Nitschke, lay bare the heavy stigma surrounding men's mental health in many communities.³⁴ Participants spoke of cultural pressures that equate masculinity with emotional strength, discouraging vulnerability and openness about mental health struggles. This stigma forces men to carry their burdens in silence, fearing judgment or being perceived as weak. The belief that mental health challenges are primarily a women's issue further isolates men, leaving their struggles unacknowledged. These experiences highlight the urgent need to challenge these harmful cultural norms, creating spaces where men feel safe to express their emotions and seek the support they deserve.

“The cultural stigma around men's mental health is huge. I didn't feel comfortable talking about my feelings because there's this belief that men should be emotionally strong and never show vulnerability. It's a burden that we are expected to carry alone.” (Participant 3)

³³ Tshitangano, “Expectant Fathers' Mental Health in Rural South Africa: A Growing Area of Concern.”

³⁴ Jonas P. Nitschke, Jens C. Pruessner, and Jennifer A. Bartz, “Stress and Stress-Induced Glucocorticoids Facilitate Empathic Accuracy in Men but Have No Effects for Women,” *Psychological Science* 33, no. 10 (October 14, 2022): 1783–94, <https://doi.org/10.1177/09567976221101315>.

“Culturally, there’s this belief that men should be strong and unemotional. Admitting mental health struggles is frowned upon, so I kept my feelings to myself because I didn’t want to be seen as weak or incapable.” (Participant 5)

“The stigma around men’s mental health in my community is strong. Men are expected to endure hardship without showing emotion, so I never felt like I could share what I was going through. We consider sharing our feelings as something more feminine.” (Participant 9)

The views of the participants are further buttressed by Nitschke who indicated that if men’s partners experience difficulties or health problems while pregnant, men feel anxious or helpless too.³⁵ Lowik further indicates that these worries can be reduced by educating and supporting prospective men on how to best support their partner’s health.³⁶ Fathers have in many cases experienced postpartum mental health issues, indicating that the journey to fatherhood does not end with childbirth. In the postpartum phase, men may feel stressed, depressed, or anxious as they learn to negotiate new parental responsibilities.³⁷

Theme Five - Initial Emotional Reactions

According to Sreenivasan et.al., men’s initial emotional reactions to their partners’ pregnancies range from excitement and joy to anxiety and uncertainty.³⁸ These responses are often influenced by various factors, including their relationship dynamics, personal readiness, and societal expectations. Many participants expressed feelings of pride and anticipation, particularly when the pregnancy was planned. However, unplanned pregnancies often elicited mixed reactions, such as shock or apprehension about the responsibilities ahead. These initial emotions highlight the complex interplay between positive anticipation and the fear of the unknown, as men navigate their role in supporting their partners. In this respect, participants said the following:

“ I was so highly excited when my wife told me that I was pregnant. Never did I question the material and emotional support that I needed as the father of the child who was about to be born.”(Participant 1).

“ I was not ready for the pregnancy. But I pretended to my wife that I was ready and that I was going to support her all the way. But the harsh reality was that I was not paid a decent salary at work and never knew how I was going to survive with an extra mouth to feed in the family.” (Participant 3).

Theme Six - Psychological Challenges and Mental Health Struggles

Sreenivasan et.al., indicates that men face significant psychological challenges during their partners’ pregnancies.³⁹ Participants frequently mentioned stress related to financial pressures, balancing work and family responsibilities, and concerns about their partners’ health. Feelings of inadequacy and the fear of failing as a partner or father were also prevalent. In this light, participants reported experiencing anxiety and depression, though these symptoms were often undiagnosed or unaddressed. This finding underscores the need for mental health support tailored to men’s experiences during this transitional period, as the lack of formal acknowledgement and support exacerbates their struggles. In this light, participants said the following:

³⁵ Nitschke, Pruessner, and Bartz, “Stress and Stress-Induced Glucocorticoids Facilitate Empathic Accuracy in Men but Have No Effects for Women.”

³⁶ A. J. Lowik, *Trans People and the Choreography of Reproductive Healthcare: Dancing Outside the Lines* (Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 2023).

³⁷ Tshitangano, “ Expectant Fathers’ Mental Health in Rural South Africa: A Growing Area of Concern.”

³⁸ Sunitha T Sreenivasan et al., “‘So What If I Use Tobacco or Alcohol? It Won’t Hurt Me!’ How Women Perceive Substance Use: Insights from a Community Study in India,” *Archives of Women’s Mental Health* 25, no. 1 (2022): 129–36.

³⁹ Sreenivasan et al., “‘So What If I Use Tobacco or Alcohol? It Won’t Hurt Me!’ How Women Perceive Substance Use: Insights from a Community Study in India.”

“ It was difficult to get some support from my friends and family members. When I asked for some help, I would be ignored and some of my colleagues would ask what kind of a man I was for going around asking for help.” (Participant 3).

“My stress levels were uncontrollable to the extent that I consulted a doctor who prescribed anxiety medication. I was always feeling so lonely and depressed especially if I did not have the money to buy my child’s clothes or food. I really felt like I was a failure.”(Participant 5).

Materechera-Mitochi states that traditional gender roles are deeply entrenched. Men are often expected to be strong, unemotional, and self-reliant, which can hinder them from seeking help or expressing their fears and anxieties.⁴⁰ These cultural norms can result in suppressed emotions and untreated mental health issues. Additionally, there is a lack of targeted mental health services and support structures for men in our respective communities.

Discussion Summary

Pervasive lack of acknowledgement of men’s mental health needs during pregnancy. Societal norms and traditional gender roles often position men as stoic and resilient, discouraging them from expressing vulnerability or seeking help. Many participants felt overlooked by healthcare providers and societal support systems, which primarily focus on the mother and child. This lack of recognition not only marginalizes men's experiences but also reinforces harmful stereotypes that hinder their ability to seek assistance. The findings highlight an urgent need to challenge these norms and create inclusive support frameworks that consider men's mental health during pregnancy.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that mental health support services be integrated into prenatal care to address men’s mental health needs. This could include routine screenings, counseling, and interventions for men experiencing anxiety, depression, or stress. Policymakers should also consider revising paternity leave policies to help fathers bond with their newborns and manage mental health challenges. Awareness campaigns should encourage men to seek support, and future research should explore the long-term effects of these challenges.

CONCLUSION

This paper has shed some light on the mental health challenges faced by men during their partner's pregnancy, an area often overlooked in research. The findings emphasized that pregnancy is a transformative period for both women and men, who grapple with unique emotional, psychological, and social pressures. Financial pressures, societal roles, and fears of inadequacy contributed significantly to men's psychological struggles, including stress, anxiety, and depression. However, these challenges were exacerbated by the lack of support and acknowledgment of men’s mental health during pregnancy. Traditional gender norms and societal expectations silenced men’s struggles, hindering their ability to seek help. The findings underscore the absence of targeted mental health resources for men, further marginalizing their experiences. The paper highlights the need for inclusive policies and interventions that address the mental health challenges of expectant fathers, including education programs to destigmatize men’s mental health, tailored support systems, and a more balanced focus on both partners' well-being during pregnancy.

Limitations of the Study

The study’s geographical focus on Thulamela Municipality limits its generalizability to other regions. The sample size may not fully capture the diversity of male experiences, and self-reported data may have been influenced by cultural stigma. Future research should explore long-term mental health challenges and the effectiveness of various coping strategies.

⁴⁰ Materechera-Mitochi, “ Gender Norms and Emotional Resilience in Expectant Fathers.”

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