

# Role of Islamic Religious Figures in the Success of Exclusive Breastfeeding in Padangsidempuan: Qualitative Study

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## ABSTRACT

**OBJECTIVE:** Breast milk is considered the best nourishment for babies because it contains essential nutrients for their growth and development. In the Islamic faith, mothers are encouraged to breastfeed their children for two years, as stated in Al-Quran surah Al-Baqarah verse 233: "Mothers should breastfeed their children for two full years for whoever wants to complete the breastfeeding period" This study aimed to investigate the role of Islamic religious leaders in promoting exclusive breastfeeding in Padangsidempuan.

**METHODOLOGY:** The research utilized a phenomenological design and involved selecting four participants used purposive sampling technique. Data was obtained through comprehensive interviews and analyzed using Braun and Clarke method. The data data was taken in July in Padangsidempuan.

**RESULTS:** The study identified five themes: (1) Knowledge of Islamic religious figures about exclusive breastfeeding, (2) Motivation of Islamic religious figures to provide information about breastfeeding, (3) Etiquette of providing breastfeeding, (4) Targets of providing information about breastfeeding (5) Expectations of Islamic religious figures regarding exclusive breastfeeding.

**CONCLUSION:** To promote exclusive breastfeeding in Padangsidempuan, we propose a comprehensive approach involving counseling sessions, educational modules, and regional regulations mandating Islamic religious leaders to provide information about exclusive breastfeeding. This strategy aims to increase awareness and encourage the adopting of exclusive breastfeeding practices among new mothers and families by engaging religious figures for a broader impact.

**KEYWORDS:** Al-Qur'an, Islamic Religious Figures, Exclusive Breastfeeding, Mother, baby

## INTRODUCTION

Exclusive breastfeeding (called "ASI" in Indonesian) is recommended by the World Health Organization and the United Nations Children's Fund for every mother who gives birth<sup>1</sup>. Breast milk as a reservoir of essential nutrients: breast milk is often called "liquid gold" due to its incredible composition of essential nutrients tailored to meet an infant's growth and development needs. It contains many vitamins, minerals, proteins, fats, and carbohydrates that support the baby's overall health, significantly contributing to brain development.

In Islam, it is recommended for mothers to breastfeed their children until they reach the age of two, as stated in the Quran, Al-Baqarah 233: "Mothers should breastfeed their children for two full years for those who wish to complete the breastfeeding period"<sup>3</sup>. Breast milk is considered a gift from God to mothers

for their babies. Many women, especially those of the Muslim faith, believe they have a responsibility to provide breast milk to their babies as an obligation to God. They fear not fulfilling this obligation may result in punishment<sup>4</sup>.

In the 2023 profile of the Padangsidempuan City Health Office, it was revealed that the exclusive breastfeeding coverage for infants under six months is at a low of 37.79%. This data was collected from 10 Community Health Centers in Padangsidempuan and the entire work area of the community health center, indicating a persistently low rate of exclusive breastfeeding<sup>5</sup>. The advantages of breast milk for infant growth and development are well-documented. However, exclusive breastfeeding rates in Indonesia remain low. It is common for mothers to introduce solid foods to babies at a very young age, such as mashed rice or bananas<sup>6</sup>. It is crucial for various stakeholders, including families, communities, and healthcare professionals, to provide support and actively promote exclusive breastfeeding in order to improve the situation<sup>7</sup>.

The primary reason for the minimal success of breastfeeding among mothers is their limited understanding of the significance of breastfeeding during the first six months of a baby's life. This lack of knowledge results in mothers unaware of breast milk's nutritional benefits and advantages<sup>6</sup>. In order to encourage exclusive breastfeeding, mothers must

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receive support from community health workers and religious leaders. Knowledge from religious leaders is particularly effective in motivating pregnant and breastfeeding mothers<sup>3</sup>. Religious leaders need to undergo training in breastfeeding counseling following the standards set by the Indonesian Ministry of Health<sup>8</sup>.

In a preliminary study, 2 Islamic religious figures were interviewed about exclusive breastfeeding. The findings revealed that they were unfamiliar with the concept of exclusive breastfeeding. They only knew about giving breast milk to the baby until they were two years old. According to their experience they noted that many mothers were unaware of the benefits of breast milk for babies and often chose formula milk based on recommendations from health workers. Additionally, they were not aware of the Islamic recommendation to breastfeed babies until they were two years old.

Based on the data and the situation mentioned above, the research team has undertaken the initiative to investigate the influence of Islamic religious leaders in promoting exclusive breastfeeding in Padangsidempuan. This study aims to examine in depth the strategies and efforts employed by Islamic religious leaders to advocate for and support exclusive breastfeeding practices within the community.

## METHODOLOGY

### Study Design

The research used a qualitative study with a descriptive phenomenological approach, aiming to elucidate the concept and fundamental meaning of a phenomenon experienced by an individual. Descriptive phenomenology involve the direct exploration, data analysis, and detailed description of a specific phenomenon, seeking to derive maximum insight from individual experiences, including those that are observed, felt, remembered, believed, decided, and enacted<sup>9</sup>. The descriptive phenomenological design was selected to facilitate an in-depth exploration of the influence of religious figures on the successful implementation of exclusive breastfeeding in Padangsidempuan.

### Partisipant

In phenomenological research, an in-depth dialogue is conducted with a limited number of participants, typically fewer than 10. The selection of participants is guided by the criterion that each individual possesses the requisite experiential knowledge and the capacity to articulate their lived experiences<sup>10</sup>. The study involved four Islamic religious figures in Padangsidempuan. These individuals include preachers and staff at the Padangsidempuan, Religious Affairs Office.

### Data Collection Method

In this study, the researcher assumes the role of the primary instrument. The data collection methodology employed in this study entails conducting in-depth interviews using audio recording. The interview guide uses 1 question, namely whether you know what

exclusive breastfeeding is. After that, using questions generated from the answers expressed by the participants, which is called probing.

### Data Analysis.

The process of thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke, consists of six stages: 1) familiarizing oneself with the data, 2) coding, 3) grouping related codes into themes, 4) reviewing the themes for coherence, 5) defining and naming the themes, and 6) writing a report and presenting the analysis, providing adequate data summaries to the reader<sup>11</sup>.

## RESULTS

### Characteristics of Participants

Four Islamic religious figures in Padangsidempuan participated in this study. Participants' characteristics included age, gender, and education and position. (Table I).

**Table I: Characteristic Participants**

Characteristics	F	%
Gender		
Male	4	100
Age (Years)		
36-45	2	50
46-55	2	50
Education		
Bachelor	4	100
Position		
Islamic religious leader	2	50
Islamic religious preachers	2	50

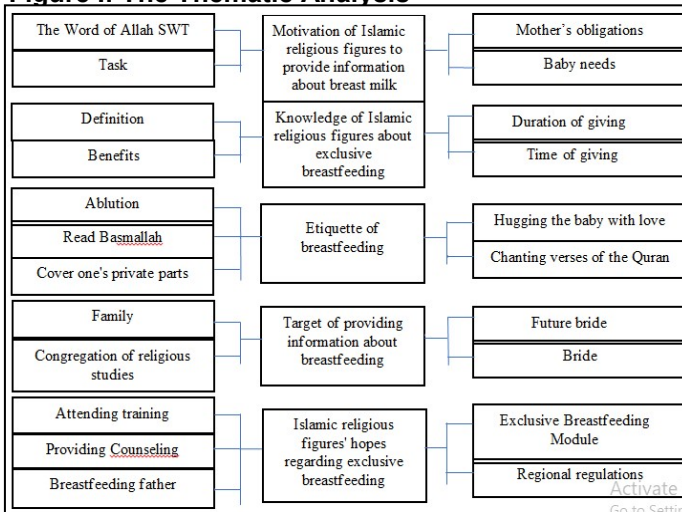
### Results of the Thematic Analysis

The thematic analysis yielded 22 codes that are associated with five determinants of the role of Islamic religious figures in promoting exclusive breastfeeding. The interview results revealed five themes explaining the role of Islamic religious figures in promoting exclusive breastfeeding in Padangsidempuan. These themes include: 1) the Motivation of Islamic religious figures to provide information about breastfeeding, 2) Knowledge of Islamic religious figures about Exclusive Breastfeeding, 3) Etiquette for providing breastfeeding, 4) Targets for providing information about breastfeeding, and 5) Expectations of Islamic religious figures regarding exclusive breastfeeding in Padangsidempuan (Figure I).

#### **Motivation of Islamic religious figures to provide information about breastfeeding**

*"In the Al-Quran, Al-Baqarah verse 233, it tells mothers to breastfeed their children until they are two years old. So that's what I tell mothers to breastfeed their children until the age of two".*

*"I work in a religious affairs office so it is my job to convey to prospective brides and grooms so that they*

**Figure 1: The Thematic Analysis**

know that breast milk should be given to newborn babies up to the age of two years"

"Breastfeeding is an obligation for mothers who have babies and this is stated in the Qur'an that mothers must breastfeed their children until they are two years old."

"Participants emphasized that breast milk is a source of nutrition that is very much needed by newborns obtained from a mother and is very beneficial for the survival of the baby"

"he source of nutrition for babies comes from the mother through breast milk, so don't use formula milk. God has given breast milk to mothers"

#### **Knowledge of Islamic religious figures about exclusive breastfeeding**

"Exclusive breastfeeding, yes, as far as you know, exclusive breastfeeding means that the mother directly gives the baby breast milk, why not in a package or anything until two years old?"

"Source of baby food because in fact from a perspective, the child is weaned within 2 years so that he/she becomes closer to his/her mother, so that he/she becomes smarter."

"According to Islamic law, giving breast milk will increase the health of the baby, so the baby will be strong."

"According to the practice in the field, sometimes 1 year, sometimes 2 years, some don't arrive"

"Breast milk can be given to babies at any time, especially newborns. Usually, if the baby is sleeping, it is not wrong to wake him up to give him breast milk every two hours"

#### **Etiquette of breastfeeding**

"even told my wife that if you give breast milk, you have to perform ablution first, so the child cries, performs ablution first and then gives breast milk"

"If we are at home like that, it means that when we eat, we definitely pray by saying bismillah. Of course, when we breastfeed a baby, we also pray first as a mother before breastfeeding."

"Your private parts must be covered, your breasts

cannot be seen when breastfeeding, you don't have to be embarrassed like that and you don't understand religion"

"When breastfeeding, a mother must hug her child, so that it becomes closer and the child can feel the love that the mother gives when breastfeeding."

"When breastfeeding, it is better for the mother to recite the holy verses of the Qur'an... this is better so that when her child grows up, he will love the Qur'an."

#### **Target of providing information about breastfeeding**

"I told my wife to only give breast milk, not formula milk or anything else, and I recommended breastfeeding until the baby is 2 years old"

"I conveyed the obligation to provide breast milk during the study at home. There is a study every Saturday. Many of the congregation members who come are young mothers"

"Yes, from the spiritual aspects, I would say, for example, prospective brides and grooms in the office are given advice, "You will be given a child later, how to take care of the child, one of which is to give them breast milk, not formula milk"

"If I am invited to a wedding reception or party, I will tell the bride and groom to take care of the child together, then I will tell them to give the baby breast milk, not canned milk, give breast milk until the baby is two years old."

#### **The hopes of Islamic religious figures regarding exclusive breastfeeding**

"This means don't stop at one movement, this is new information too, we are lucky, we are invited to a seminar or training, I am willing to attend the seminar, if necessary we will facilitate it"

"The method of giving exclusive breast milk has never been specifically conveyed, I don't think there is exclusive breast milk in my Islamic perspective, but it would be good if there was this material when giving material to prospective brides and grooms, and also in religious studies"

"I wish there was a book about exclusive breastfeeding specifically for religious figures, so it would be easier for me to talk about exclusive breastfeeding"

"I hope that husbands will support and help their wives before and after giving birth and also help their wives to be able to breastfeed their babies well"

"if possible, all religious figures, both Islamic and other religious figures, are required to participate in conveying information about exclusive breastfeeding to the community, especially to the congregation"

## **DISCUSSION**

#### **Motivation of Islamic religious figures to provide information about breastfeeding**

All participants were inspired to share information about breastfeeding with the community, drawing from the teachings of Allah SWT in the Qur'an, specifically Surah Al-Baqarah verse 233. This verse emphasizes the importance of mothers breastfeeding their children

for two years, highlighting the significance of proper nurturing. It underscores that breast milk provides essential nutrition that other foods cannot substitute. By adhering to this guidance, mothers fulfill their duty and uphold their children's rights<sup>3</sup>. Surah Al-Baqarah, verse 233, conveys the value Islam places on maintaining health for normal human development, as it instructs mothers to breastfeed their children for up to two years<sup>12</sup>.

The participants expressed another motivation: working as a marriage registrar at the Office of Religious Affairs (called "KUA" in Indonesia). In this role, they provided guidance and assistance to community members preparing for marriage<sup>13</sup>. One of the topics covered was the obligation of mothers to provide breast milk to their babies. The goal was to raise awareness in the community about the importance of breast milk for babies. Preaching is essential for increasing public awareness<sup>14</sup>. Therefore, the Islamic religion brought by the Prophet SAW provides about human nature what Islam commands must greatly benefit humans and their lives, likewise, prohibitions in Islam will harm development and life<sup>15</sup>. Preaching offers guidance and instruction, steering individuals from the wrong path toward the right one. When it comes to providing spiritual nourishment, preaching aims to nurture a generation deeply rooted in the teachings of the Qur'an and Hadith. This generation is characterized by steadfast faith, knowledge, physical strength, and a resilient mentality<sup>16</sup>.

#### **Knowledge of Islamic religious figures about exclusive breastfeeding**

The study found that all participants were familiar with recommendations from the health sector and Islamic teachings regarding the benefits of breastfeeding for two years for both children and mothers, as well as the appropriate timing for breastfeeding. However, the participants were unaware that exclusive breastfeeding should be practiced for the first six months without any additional food for the babies. They mentioned that they had never received information about exclusive breastfeeding before. Their knowledge was limited to the practice of breastfeeding for up to two years, as per the Word of Allah SWT in Surah Al-Baqarah verse 233<sup>17</sup>. Participants who know the importance of breastfeeding can be crucial in educating prospective brides, pregnant women, and breastfeeding mothers about the significance of exclusive breastfeeding. The lack of knowledge among mothers is the primary reason for the low success rate of breastfeeding. This lack of information can be attributed to the breastfeeding mother not receiving adequate knowledge about exclusive breastfeeding<sup>18</sup>.

In order to promote successful breastfeeding, it is essential to enhance maternal knowledge and enlist the support of religious leaders. Religious figures can significantly increase awareness, educate, and advocate for breastfeeding. To ensure that mothers

exclusively breastfeed for the first six months, it is crucial to provide them with support and encouragement from religious leaders. It is more effective for health workers and religious leaders to motivate pregnant and breastfeeding mothers through counseling<sup>8</sup>. Therefore, religious leaders who will be providing counseling should receive training on exclusive breastfeeding<sup>19</sup>. Islamic religious figures are clerics who possess deep knowledge of their religion and are highly trusted by the surrounding community; thus, their societal role is incredibly influential<sup>20,21</sup>. Religious leaders should possess the necessary skills to offer ongoing guidance on breastfeeding. These skills include proficiency in breastfeeding counseling, effective communication, knowledge of the medical aspects of breastfeeding, understanding the socio-cultural context within their community and religion, and awareness of government-supported breastfeeding programs to promote optimal child health<sup>3</sup>.

#### **The etiquette of giving breast milk**

The Islamic religion provides guidelines for breastfeeding etiquette, which, when followed in daily life, is believed to bring pleasure from Allah SWT. Research shows that participants discussed the etiquette of breastfeeding, including performing ablution before breastfeeding, reciting "Basmalah" (Bismillahirrahmanirrahim), covering intimate parts, showing affection to the baby, and reciting verses from the Quran<sup>22</sup>. Ablution before breastfeeding is essential as it helps clean the mother's body parts from microorganisms and prevents the baby from getting infected with germs. The hands, elbows, face, hair, feet, and the bottom of the calves are the most exposed body parts. Washing hands before breastfeed helps eliminate bacteria and germs<sup>19</sup>. According to Shari'a, these germs hide in large numbers between the fingers, so ablution should be performed five times daily<sup>15</sup>.

In Islam, it is recommended to recite Basmalah before engaging in any activity, including breastfeeding or providing nutrition for a baby<sup>18</sup>. This practice is considered noble in Islam and involves invoking the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful. By reciting Basmalah in every activity, a mother is believed to be involving Allah in the act of breastfeeding her baby. The recommendation to say "Basmalah" is based on the following hadith: "From Wahb bin Kaisan, he heard from Umar bin Abu Salamah, he said, 'The Messenger of Allah (SAW) told me to recite Basmallah, eat with your right hand, and eat what is in front of you'. In this hadith, it is emphasized that the significance of Basmalah is profound in every aspect of a Muslim's life<sup>15</sup>. For example, when a mother initiates breastfeeding, it is recommended to commence by reciting Basmalah. Furthermore, breastfeeding necessitates dedication and effort, which deeply resonates with a mother's soul. Embracing the meaning of "basmalah" can fortify the commitment to sustain breastfeeding and refine

the nursing process for children<sup>18</sup>.

The act of concealing the private part is an essential practice for mothers during the act of breastfeeding their infants. Regrettably, instances of mothers exposing their breasts while nursing are still prevalent in the vicinity of Padangsidempuan. According to Islamic teachings, women are required to conceal their private part as stipulated by the command of Allah SWT. This practice is indicative of a woman's modesty and propriety. Furthermore, breastfeeding engenders a profound emotional bond between mother and child and is considered a significant moral responsibility for mothers to fulfill<sup>23</sup>. Breastfeeding is a cherished moment between a mother and her baby. Some mothers choose to recite verses from the Quran during this intimate time, believing it beneficial for both the mother and the child. This close bonding opportunity enables mothers to instill a love for the Quran in their children by softly reciting verses and soothing the child during breastfeeding<sup>24</sup>. Research has indicated that listening to the recitation of the Quran can have a calming and relaxing effect, eliciting a positive response and stimulating the release of endorphins, which can help reduce stress and promote a sense of happiness<sup>14</sup>.

#### **Target of providing information about breastfeeding**

The study findings revealed that participants shared information about breastfeeding with various groups, including families, religious study groups, and prospective brides and grooms. Wives, being the primary caregivers within families, obtained breastfeeding information from the participants and referred to Al-Quran Surah Al-Baqarah verse 233 as a source for meeting the nutritional needs of babies from birth to 2 years<sup>3</sup>. Religious figures, such as preachers, also provided breastfeeding information to mothers at religious study groups. Furthermore, information about breastfeeding was offered to prospective brides and grooms at the KUA and couples getting married<sup>17</sup>.

#### **The expectations of Islamic religious figures regarding exclusive breastfeeding**

To enhance knowledge and attitudes and help participants effectively convey information about exclusive breastfeeding, participants are eager to attend seminars or training sessions on the topic. Religious figures can be valuable targets for educational efforts to improve community nutrition. By integrating knowledge from health science and religion regarding exclusive breastfeeding, it is hoped that the prevalence of exclusive breastfeeding in Padangsidempuan can be increased<sup>8</sup>. Religious figures should provide education to individuals preparing for marriage, expectant mothers, and breastfeeding mothers from an early age. Religious figures are influential agents of change who can help modify people's behavior, thereby promoting the establishment of healthy and harmonious families<sup>25</sup>. Religious leaders play a crucial role in shaping

harmonious families. These leaders, who guide the community, particularly expectant and nursing mothers, should have the correct knowledge and understanding of exclusive breastfeeding. It is vital to ensure that religious figures receive training in line with the breastfeeding counseling standards set by the Indonesian Ministry of Health<sup>8</sup>.

In order to successfully provide exclusive breastfeeding, husbands and wives must collaborate in meeting the nutritional needs of the baby. Husbands are encouraged to support their wives actively in household responsibilities, enabling the mothers to breastfeed their babies for the first six months exclusively. The husbands' support plays a significant role in the success of exclusive breastfeeding<sup>18</sup>. Spouses play a crucial role in providing emotional support to their partners by offering praise, encouragement, and pride in their decision to breastfeed exclusively. This support has been shown to enhance the self-confidence and motivation of the breastfeeding partner, ultimately contributing to the continuation of breastfeeding<sup>8,14</sup>. Research indicates a need for a specific book on exclusive breastfeeding tailored for religious figures. This book will be promotional material for the community's exclusive breastfeeding campaign. Successful health promotion relies on preparing and delivering the message to the audience in a well-planned, effective, and efficient manner using the appropriate methods<sup>26</sup>. To ensure the successful empowerment of Islamic religious figures, health workers need to propose health programs and conduct socialization and empowerment activities focused on exclusive breastfeeding<sup>27,28</sup>. Participants are urging the Padangsidempuan government to speed up the process of advocating for the implementation of regulations that would mandate the involvement of religious leaders in promoting awareness about exclusive breastfeeding.

#### **CONCLUSION**

One of the contributing factors to low rates of exclusive breastfeeding is the lack of knowledge among mothers. Mothers can gain knowledge about exclusive breastfeeding from various sources, including health workers and Islamic religious leaders. It is believed that Islamic religious leaders can significantly contribute to enhancing mothers' understanding of exclusive breastfeeding and influencing their attitudes and behaviors toward breastfeeding. To achieve this, religious leaders who offer counseling to the community, particularly to prospective brides, pregnant women, and breastfeeding mothers, need to be equipped with accurate knowledge and understanding of exclusive breastfeeding. It is crucial to provide training to Islamic religious leaders following breastfeeding counseling standards. These leaders can integrate the concept of exclusive breastfeeding with health and Islamic teachings, as both the Quran and Hadith strongly

endorse breastfeeding, as mentioned in Surah Al-Baqarah verse 233.

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## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

Siregar GT: Conceptualized and designed the study, analyzed and interpreted the results

Siregar HR: Collected data, analyzed and interpreted the results

Ramlan: Conceptualized and designed the study

Antoni A: Analyzed and interpreted the results, prepared the draft manuscript

Batubara NS: Conceptualized and designed the study, prepared the draft manuscript

Simamora AA: Analyzed and interpreted the results

Harahap MA: Collected data

Sagala NS: Prepared the draft manuscript

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