

A Qualitative Comparative Study: Coping Strategies Among Food Secure and Insecure Pregnant Mothers During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Serang District

Studi Perbandingan Kualitatif: Koping Strategi diantara Ibu Hamil yang Tahan dan Rawan Pangan selama Pandemi COVID-19 di Kabupaten Serang

Gloriana Seran^{1*}, Dwi Nastiti Iswarawanti^{2,3}, Diana Sunardi¹

¹ Department of Nutrition, Faculty of Medicine, Universitas Indonesia- Dr. Cipto Mangunkusumo General Hospital, Jakarta, Indonesia. Email: gloriseran@gmail.com, diana_sunardi@yahoo.com

² Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization Regional Centre for Food and Nutrition (SEAMEO RECFON)-Pusat Kajian Gizi Regional Universitas Indonesia (PKGR UI), Jakarta, Indonesia. E-mail: diswarawanti@seameo-recfon.org

³ Kuningan Health Science Institute -STIKes Kuningan, West Java, Indonesia. Email: iswarawantidn@stikku.ac.id

*Korespondensi:

Department of Nutrition, Faculty of Medicine, Universitas Indonesia-Dr. Cipto Mangunkusumo General Hospital, Jl. Salemba Raya No. 6, Jakarta Pusat, Indonesia. Email: gloriseran@gmail.com

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Abstract

Introduction: COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the food security dimension, from the macro to micro level. Households dealt with the crisis by implementing coping strategies, led by mothers. Consequently, these impacted on their health and nutrition status, notably during pregnancy. This unfavorable condition was due to their primary role in maintaining household food security. This study aimed to explore the perceptions of pregnant mothers of food secure and insecure about their household coping strategies. **Methods:** This study used phenomenology with purposive sampling, and a total of 33 informants (21 pregnant mothers, and 11 other informants) in Serang district from May to October 2022. In Depth Interviews (IDIs) were used during data collection, and the transcripts were verbatim. Respectively, data was analyzed using thematic coding with N-Vivo Version 12 Plus and Microsoft Excel. **Result:** Twenty-one pregnant mothers from food secure (n=7) and insecure (n=14) households revealed adopting the food-based coping strategies: rationing, scratching; seeking, and sharing. Not centered on food: sought new job and side hustle, sold assets, borrowed money. Differentiation was the barter which were solely adopted by the food insecure pregnant mothers. **Conclusion:** Both food secure and insecure households implemented the 2 types of coping strategies, whilst the severe coping strategies were implemented by food insecure pregnant mothers.

Keywords: Food Security, Household, Food Focused, Non-Food Focused, COVID-19

Abstrak

Pendahuluan: Pandemi COVID-19 memperburuk kondisi ketahanan pangan, dari tingkat makro hingga mikro. Rumah tangga menghadapi krisis dengan menerapkan strategi koping, yang dipilih oleh ibu. Akibatnya, akan berdampak pada status kesehatan dan gizi, terutama pada masa kehamilan. Sebaliknya, kondisi ini merugikan, dikarenakan peran mereka sangat penting dalam menjaga ketahanan pangankeluarga. Tujuan penelitian ini mengeksplorasi persepsi ibu hamil yang berasal dari keluarga tahan dan rawan pangan tentang strategi koping. **Metode:** Studi ini menggunakan fenomenologi dengan total 33 informan yang dipilih purposif (22 ibu hamil dan 11 informan lainnya) di Kabupaten Serang sejak Mei-hingga Oktober 2022. Pengumpulan data melalui wawancara mendalam dan dilanjutkan transkrip verbatim. Secara berurutan, analisa koding tematik dengan N-Vivo 12 dan Microsoft Excel. **Hasil:** Total 21 ibu hamil yang terlibat studi ini berasal dari keluarga tahan (n=7) dan rawan (n=14) pangan. Mereka menyatakan strategi berfokus pangan: penjatahan, menghemat; mencari, membagi pangan. Strategi berfokus non-pangan: mencari pekerjaan pengganti dan tambahan, menjual aset dan meminjam uang. Perbedaan koping yang hanya diimplementasikan ibu hamil rawan pangan ialah barter. **Kesimpulan:** Ibu hamil dari keluarga rawan maupun tahan pangan menerapkan 2 tipe strategi pangan, namun strategi koping paling berat diterapkan oleh ibu hamil dari keluarga rawan pangan. **Kata Kunci:** Ketahanan Pangan, Rumah Tangga, Berpusat Pangan, Tidak Berpusat pada Pangan, COVID-19

Introduction

The COVID-19 Pandemic had affected global food security, including in Indonesia. It also exacerbated the macro until the micro economy condition at the whole level of the community through spiked food prices, laid-off, lowered earnings among employees, and increased poverty, notably in rural areas (FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, 2021). Consequently, food security dimensions, such as access, availability, utilization, and stability, were disrupted (Guiné et al., 2021). Households should implement coping strategies to fulfill their necessities, notably food (Chaudhuri et al., 2021). Despite implementing coping, the vulnerable group, including the pregnant mother, would be more impacted amid the food crisis, due to the tendency to prioritize decreasing food (quantity and fewer variety), and the discrimination of distributed food compared to other household members (Ahoya et al., 2022). A previous study revealed the important factor in maintaining a healthy pregnancy; households should be provided with proper food both in quantity and quality (Zinga et al., 2022). Conversely, adverse pregnancy outcomes would occur if these requirements were not fulfilled.

These conditions led to unfavorable conditions for pregnant mothers, who played a primary role in maintaining household food security and managing all aspects to fulfill the necessities within the family (CARE, 2020). In addition, during pregnancy, mothers are vulnerable to food insecurity conditions such as Deficiency Energy Chronic (DEC) and Iron Deficiency Anemia (IDA) due to increasing nutritional requirements (Ecker & Van, 2017). Hence, these conditions would hinder the growth and development phase within the first 1000 years, contributing to the stunting risk (Moafi et al., 2018).

Banten was a province in Indonesia with a high number of *Tingkat Pengangguran Terbuka* (TPT). Serang was one of the districts in Banten and ranks third in the poverty rate (BPS, 2021). These conditions are prone to influence the risk

of household food insecurity and stunting (Etana & Tolossa, 2019; Sleet, 2020). Likewise, Serang district was chosen as the stunting focus area due to suffered by various health problems wherein the prevalence was higher than in the previous year such as DEC, and low birth weight (LBW), in which food security is a nutrition-sensitive intervention focusing on pregnant mothers (Kemenkes RI, 2021; Pemkab. Serang, 2021).

Previous studies have used online, broad-scope, and quantitative methods to assess coping strategies during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Thus, it was referred to depict the condition in an urban area than in a rural area and filled by the husband as the head of the household. (Putri et al., 2021). This study would use qualitative study, notably the phenomenology approach, to fill in the research gap from the previous study. To our knowledge, studies on coping strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic have not yet been conducted in the Serang District, particularly involving households with pregnant mothers as the "gatekeeper", who had the major responsibility to maintain household food security and were the most affected by the food insecurity condition. The qualitative research was suitable for a deep understanding of the different perceptions of pregnant mothers who suffered from different food security statuses in their households. It would depict their situations in a naturalistic and realistic setting, thereby helping us to deeply understand their coping strategies during COVID-19 (Chakona & Shackleton, 2017; Sugiyono, 2014).

Methods

This comparative study was conducted in some villages in Serang district from May to October 2022. The personal protective equipment was used following the COVID-19 health protocol during the data collection (*Gugus Tugas Percepatan Penanganan COVID-19*, 2020). During the selection, the researcher also performed COVID-19 screening.

The main informants were pregnant mothers who were domiciled in Serang District from 2020 and registered at health service facilities. The proponent informants were their

husbands, parents, and community health volunteers. The key informants were the village midwife who were purposively selected. These informants supported the trustworthiness in the qualitative research by the triangulation with the multiple source informants (Sugiyono, 2014).

In-depth interviews (IDIs) with semi-structured questionnaire guidelines were done to interview the key informants. Before conducting the data collection, we did the pre-testing of the guideline to 4 people (2 pregnant mothers, 1 husband, and 1 village midwife) at the stunting focus area that had the resemble characteristics of the study area to evaluate the transition every question, the eligibility question with the field context, and the duration of the interview. The number of pretesting respondents fulfilled the minimum number of the pre-testing in the qualitative research which was 3-6 persons (Howard, 2018).

Total informants were 33 persons (21 pregnant mothers, 1 husband, 1 mother-in-law, 2 mother, 4 community health volunteers, 4 village midwife) rely on the aim of the research, the maximum variation of informant characteristics (education, age, occupation, gestational age, type of the family, and birth order) and the data saturation (Utarini, 2020).

The household food security status assessment was done using the Food Insecurity Experience Scale, Survey-Module (FIES-SM) (FAO, 2020). The eligibility of the informants was based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Before data collection, the researcher confirmed the informants through the Community Health Volunteer to ask about their willingness in the IDI session. The voice recorder and camera were used to document the data through interviews before the informed consent approval.

The data transcript is verbatim and analyzed by N-Vivo (Version 12 Plus) QSR International Pty Ltd. (2018) for Windows and Microsoft Excel. Microsoft Excel, used for tabulating the result of the research coding, checked the similarity and distinction within and between food security group status (Nurbaya, 2017). began from the 1st level (open coding), 2nd level (axial coding), 3rd level (emerged theme from the emerging categories on the previous level) (Tolley et al., 2016).

This study was approved by FKUI Ethical Committee on May 23rd, 2022, no: KET-497/UN2.F1/ETIK/PPM.00.02/022, and permitted by Health Office of Serang District on May 30th, 2022, No: 870/2024/SDK/2022.

Result and Discussion

Informants Characteristic

There were 21 pregnant mothers as the key informants who came from food secure (7) and insecure (14) households, with a range age is 20-35 years old, the food secure pregnant mothers had higher monthly income (\geq Rp 4,152,887) than food insecure one ($<$ Rp 4,152,887). The education attainment of food secure mothers is the high level (senior high school-bachelor's degree), whilst food insecure is the low level (elementary school-junior high school). Most of both food secure and insecure mothers live with their extended family, having the 2nd trimester of pregnancy, and birth order more than 1 time.

Food Focused Coping Strategies

Based on our findings, all the pregnant mothers both coming from food security status revealed that they implemented the coping strategies. Table 1 depicts the 4 types of coping strategies focused on food that implemented them. The distinction was the barter, which was implemented by the food insecure pregnant. Based on our findings, food secure households face more constraints on food access during the pandemic than the pre-covid than the food insecure mothers. Their yearly accumulation income of food secure households was categorized as the middle (Rp 60,000,000- Rp 120,000,000), as such they were still vulnerable to inflation impact on the volatility purchasing power during the COVID-19 Pandemic (Deloitte Southeast Asia, 2015; ILO, 2022). Nevertheless, their impact would be lighter than food insecure pregnant mother who had a monthly income lower than the maximum regional wage (ILO, 2022; UNICEF et al., 2022). The choice of coping strategies relied on pregnant mothers, as their task in the household was to manage their income and maintain food security in the household. Accompanied by their husband, as the

Table 1. The Similarities and Differences of Coping Strategy focused Food

Type Of Coping	Similarities	Differences	
		Food Secure	Food Insecure
Sub/Categories: Food Based			
Food Rationing	-Skip mealtimes & prioritize children which was conducted by spouses & mothers in law -Diminish meal portion size	-	-Skip mealtime in a day and just drink mineral water -Husband alleviates his meal frequency and portion it to his pregnant wife
Food Stretching	- Purchased less expensive food, lower quality food, preserved food, and frozen food - Purchased in a small amount	Bought cheaper food in last week of the month when money almost finish	Eating less preference food
Food seeking	- Purchased food by credit - Borrowed money from relatives	-	- Sent their children to their relative - Use the formal assistance
Food sharing	Shared food within big families and neighborhood	-	Shared food related to the work-relation

main breadwinner (Harris-Fry et al., 2022). In the extended family, the elderly person would do the same thing to make sure other members keep feeding. This finding was consistent with previous qualitative research findings in Bangladesh that the vital role of the mother-in-law is to be involved in the decision-making within the household including choosing to skip mealtime, then other members could keep taking the meal (Pike et al., 2021). Additionally, the aging process for instance decreasing gut mobility and gastrointestinal tract disturbance made their food appetite lower than usual. Furthermore, they tend to skip their mealtime (Adriani & Wiratmadi, 2012).

Food insecure pregnant mother faces unfavorable facts due to their instability income. Additionally, with the broader number of household members and minimal contribution to adding to the food budget, consequently, pregnant mothers and the whole family members should skip mealtime for an entire day. This finding was also revealed by a recent qualitative study in South Africa that low education levels will contribute to adverse coping strategy decisions of the household (Militao et al., 2022). This study also found a unique pattern on the importance of nutrition knowledge among the spouses to switch the usual coping strategy by

the man to prioritize their wife during pregnancy time. The previous findings emphasized that the sacrifice of food, tend to be adopted firstly by the women who had a lower contribution for income than man in the household (ADB, 2013). The role of nutrition knowledge, notably the increasing of the nutrition requirement amid the husband influenced their decision to sacrifice mealtime and prioritize their wife. This links to the actualization of the knowledge in terms of practice (Notoadmojo, 2011).

Hereinafter, the coping strategy that directly impacted the quality and quantity among the food secure and insecure pregnant mothers was decreasing the variety of food wherein the severity condition for instance lack of the source, risen food price faced by the food insecure status than food secure. Therefore, they could not access a greater variety of food types and were merely stagnant to purchase cheaper food with the same ingredients, low-quality food for instance fish salted, and frozen food in a small amount, and not based on their food preference. This result resembled the previous qualitative study wherein mothers would purchase the same ingredients for a week due to money constrain during rising food prices (Van Der Velde et al., 2019). Whilst food secure pregnant mothers had other options to keep purchasing a greater

variety of foods at cheaper prices by surveying several food stores to compare the prices before deciding to purchase in July 2022 for instance beef meat, fish, egg, and fruit. This is in line with the previous research that the shifting of the purchasing method during the food price hike to keep access to the same variety of foods (Dickler, 2023; Zinga et al., 2022). Food secure pregnant mothers also purchase cheaper food but not as frequently as food insecure mothers, notably in the end of the month to stretching their money until the next month (Nielsen et al, 2015).

The rural community had plenty of solidarity values among family and neighborhood including informal network social support. This type of support helped both food secure and insecure pregnant mothers during the money hardship for instance sharing food, begging for food, purchasing food on credit, and taking loans (O'Connell, R. and Brannen, 2021; Sohel et al., 2022). The strong relationship between family and neighborhood, perceived facing the same hardship of the risen food prices and financial constrain made the responsibility to help each other (Nederveld et al., 2021; Shorthouse, 2013). Besides this assistance, pregnant mothers with food insecurity were relying on formal assistance from the government such as *Bantuan Pangan Non-Tunai* (BPNT), *Program Keluarga Harapan* (PKH) notably staple food (rice), and animal-based food source to fulfill the variety of foods (Hastuti et al, 2020; TNP2K & Australia Government, 2020). Nevertheless, they still faced a food shortage due to their high number of household members. As such, all the household members would utilize the food, and consequently, the food stock run out rapidly (Bayu & Handoyo, 2016). Additionally, the irregular schedule of aids impacted the severity among food insecure pregnant mothers.

Likewise, food insecure pregnant mothers were implementing barter and the food reciprocal exchange during the dry season and crises impacted by the COVID-19 Pandemic besides seeking formal and informal network social support. This type of coping was merely found in the homogeneous characteristics, for instance, the main occupation as the smallholder farmer. Previous qualitative studies in several districts among smallholder farmers found that to reduce the severity due to dry season they

implement various types of strategies besides depending on social assistance from the government (Hamado et al, 2019; Amul, 2022). They took these copings were due to the amount of the assistance fund being too small and high households' expenditure particularly those with school-age children. It is in line with the finding of the UNICEF report (UNICEF, 2020). Besides these stated reasons, they learned from their tradition in which barter is a common practice done by the previous "generation" that being the habit of this community also played a key role (Igwe et al., 2020).

Non-food Focused Coping Strategies

Our finding revealed that there were 4 types of coping strategies that focused on non-food, which nevertheless direct or indirect would influence the well-being of the household and health of the pregnant mothers (table 2). Firstly, seek a new job and additional work to generate money. Previous studies both quantitative and qualitative in several countries found this common coping strategy when the household loses their previous job and increases the money expanses to fulfill the necessities during the COVID-19 Pandemic (Palma & Araos, 2021; Putri et al., 2021). These studies' findings resemble ours which was the household with broader assets (poultry livestock, land, savings, jewelry, and vehicle); higher level education attainment was more endurant to the income shock for utilizing their assets amid the crisis. The outstanding finding which is the distinction between food secure and food insecure mothers was the utilization of the assets. Among the husband of pregnant mothers with food secure status, as the head of the household, played a prominent role in exploiting these assets to open a new business in order to obtain continuous income. This relies on the availability of assets and analysis of the business sector that is implemented by the household. A previous study revealed that higher education (senior high school bachelor's degree) had the analytical level of thinking to manage their assets being the new business (Hurst & Lusardi, 2011). Differentiation with food insecure pregnant mothers, utilize their assets for short-term necessities such as fulfilling their basic needs. Consequently, this condition would exacerbate their conditions

Table 2. The Similarities and Differences of Coping Strategy non-Focused Food

Type Of Coping	Similarities	Differences	
		Food Secure	Food Insecure
Sub/Categories: Non-Focused on Food			
Seek new job and side hustle	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- The pregnant mother did the side hustle- Husband looking for a job and side hustle		<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Father-in-law: residential area cleaner- Mother-in-law: being a seasonal farmer- Pregnant Mother's Mother: Village food peddler
Sold assets	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Sold car, jewelry- Sold egg and rice if the crop abundance	-	-
Borrowed money	Borrowed money from the roving bank (informal bank)	-	-
Limited expenditure on service and good	-	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Limited the purchased snack- made the food list	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Restricted to medical check- Restricted the purchased goods

when their savings assets were run out, furthermore, the household is prone to ruin in severe poverty than previous conditions (Sa'diyah & Arianti, 2012). Pregnant mothers with food secure and insecure were limited money expenditure on goods and health services. The food insecure pregnant mothers were restricting their expenses and prioritizing prominent things such as food and children's necessities. Previous studies also revealed a resemble finding wherein besides fulfilling food necessities as the basic needs, others were restricted due to the alteration of the priority in terms of purchasing (Mahmud & Riley, 2021).

Additionally, pregnant mothers should restrict their expenditure on health service utilization while suffering from illness since they need to prioritize their children's necessities and purchase food. Recent qualitative research found the same pattern, pregnant mothers would neglect their routine check-ups in ANC (Antenatal Care) due to financial constraints. Consequently, that would directly influence both the pregnant mother and fetus' health status (Ochieng & Odhiambo, 2019). Pregnant mothers with food secure status rely on limiting expenditure on such as snacks and could prioritize using that money for purchasing fruit. Mothers prepared a food list before purchasing the food. The type of purchased food depends on the pregnant mother's choice. Here they are the main decision-makers for purchasing food, as such she able to

decide and fulfill their food preferences (Renzella et al., 2020). The food list was one of the financial managements implemented by the household to limit their expenditure merely on their priority rather than unplanned necessities. Hence, they were more prone to financial shock due to mitigating the prediction of the consumptive activity (Gundersen & Garasky, 2012; Dimitri & Rogus, 2014).

The household that did not have assets would seek a new job to replace their lost job. For who had the work should seek additional hustle due to the perceived instability of work in the informal sector and higher expenditure to conform to the necessities. A previous study in D.I. Yogyakarta found the same result wherein the informal worker who had not been laid off would seek the side hustle. The employee who had been laid off would seek a new job as a consequence of the work termination during the COVID-19 Pandemic (Pitoyo et al., 2021). However, the implementation of social restriction during the COVID-19 Pandemic, age, and low skill which relies on the construction and daily labor among the head of households with food insecure status, made them difficult to acquire the proper occupation (Pitoyo et al., 2021). Furthermore, pregnant mothers and the other household members including their parents-in-law should work to obtain additional income from both nuclear and extended family. Counted on the informal social support such as

family, work relations, and neighborhood contributed to new job accessibility. This finding is in line with previous qualitative research in several countries that the social support network would assist and help others through the work vacancy information and utilize the skill of the household to acquire the job (Igwe et al., 2020). Added to the skill of cooking by pregnant mother and their mothers to utilize their money for household income (Harsanyana, 2019).

The last coping strategy that was adopted by food secure and insecure mothers was taking a loan from a roving bank (informal bank). The distinction between them wherein the food secure took a loan to open a new business due to a lack of assistance from the informal and formal social network, shifting the role as the main breadwinner in the household and living in the nuclear family with 3 children. Conversely, with food insecure pregnant mothers took the loan due to the higher expenditure on their children's necessities and the broader number of household members. Both Pregnant mothers chose the roving bank due to high accessibility in terms of administration requirements and distance. Moreover, the borrowed money would be disbursed rapidly (Fahrudin et al., 2023). The habit of borrowing money from the roving bank would have a negative impact, for instance, they would prefer to get the money from the loan rather than by looking for a job this habit will indirectly add to the total household's expenditure due to interest and the prolonged duration to repaid (Fahrudin et al., 2023; Mukhtaliana, 2020).

Conclusion

The conclusion from this research was found that pregnant mothers from food secure and insecure households experienced decreased purchasing power due to income shocks, job loss, and rising food prices during the COVID-19 pandemic. To cope, they used various strategies, including rationing and stretching food, which negatively impacted their nutrition status. The limited health service utilization among food insecure pregnant mothers also affected their health. The study suggests local government strengthen financial training for young spouses and pregnant mothers. Likewise, the community

health center nutrition education needs to involve the husbands and other household members which had decision-making authorities so that food priority, notably food can be given to pregnant mothers at any circumstances.

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