

# Enhancing Postpartum Recovery: Insights from South Korean Postpartum Care Centers

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## ABSTRACT

This research examines the complexities surrounding postpartum care in South Korea, with a focus on Sanhujoriwons, the popular forms of postpartum care centers in the country. As society has changed the structure of the family unit, traditional postpartum care practices have been traded in for a privatized version of this care. This care attempts to adhere to traditional South Korean beliefs while balancing modernity. The underlying reason for the popularity of Sanhujoriwons comes from the relief they provide new mothers and their families. Sanhujoriwons provide sanctuaries for physical and mental recovery, a luxury generations before did not have. While these care centers are often viewed as ideal environments for maternal recovery, recent research presents several concerns regarding the impact of these centers on the health and well-being of both mothers and infants. Drawing upon recent studies and literature, this research explores the challenges and implications for maternal and infant health in the context of postpartum care centers. This research aims to contribute to the ongoing discussions surrounding postpartum care practices and offers insights for enhancing the quality of care provided for new mothers and their infants.

## Introduction

The weeks following birth, known as the postpartum period, lay the foundation for mothers' and infants' long-term health and well-being. The postpartum period has been deemed the "fourth stage of labor, highlighting the intensity of this phase" (Romano et al., 2010, p. 22). This period generally lasts six to eight weeks, during which the mother's body undergoes significant changes ranging from recovery to emotional stability (Kalra et al., 2017, p. 1452). During these changes, mothers require a routine with "meticulous awareness of the medical and social needs of the mother" (Thung & Norwitz, 2010, p. 1). For mothers, this time of adjustment is facilitated by having support for tasks such as feeding, bathing, infant bonding, and general housekeeping. However, the postpartum care recommended by physicians is not always feasible, especially in nuclear families where external support is limited. Society has shifted from the "it takes a village" mindset in child rearing, posing the question of how new mothers are expected to balance these new responsibilities.

Postpartum care is deeply ingrained in South Korean culture, where tradition dictates the form of care new mothers receive. The practices observed during this period are called *Sanhujori*, "a compound of *Sanhu*, which is 'after childbirth' (postpartum) and *Jori*, which means 'taking care of the weakened body and mind so as to restore them to their previously healthy state'" (Yoo, 1998, p. 116). This pattern of care is typically provided by family members, specifically mothers and mothers-in-law. However, as modern society moves from the extended family models to nuclear families, South Korean mothers increasingly lack access to this traditional support, impeding their ability to fully heal.

To accommodate changing cultural demands, Sanhujoriwon has emerged as the default form of postpartum care in South Korea. These are "health care centers for postpartum women and newborn[s]" that manage physical, emotional-psychological, educational, and environmental needs (Jung & Yoo, 2002, p. 313). The privatization of postpartum care has made Sanhujoriwon a widespread phenomenon across South Korea. These

centers relieve husbands and family members from the responsibility of providing primary care to new mothers, greatly reducing the anxiety surrounding motherhood—yet it is a model that is not prevalent globally. Postpartum centers play a crucial role in providing maternal care, with the majority of South Korean mothers opting to use these services. However, there is a need for critical evaluation to assess their efficacy in addressing maternal health needs. This review aims to analyze the effectiveness of *Sanhujoriwon*, their impact on maternal health outcomes, and the hesitancy around them.

## Cultural Considerations and Effectiveness of Postpartum Centers in South Korea

Sanhujoriwons, *as an extension of the traditional Sanhujori practice*, are meant to follow the original belief system and practices to ensure full recovery to the mothers. The belief system is built upon six principles: “invigorating the body by augmentation of heat and avoidance of cold; resting without working; eating well; protecting the body from harmful strains; keeping cleanness; and handling with the whole heart” (Yoo, 1993). The six principles outlined—enhancing bodily warmth, promoting rest, nutritional well-being, protection from physical strain, cleanliness, and wholehearted care—serve not only as health guidelines but also encapsulate a holistic approach to healing. This philosophy emphasizes the interconnectedness of physical and emotional health in postpartum care, aligning with traditional Korean values that view recovery as a comprehensive process. Failure of a Sanhujoriwon to adhere to these principles can critically undermine the efficacy of the care provided, leading to incomplete recovery and potentially long-term health issues for the mother. Such lapses can also be seen as deviations from the cultural heritage, affecting the trust and satisfaction levels among new mothers and impacting their overall postpartum experience. Mothers satisfied with their experiences in these centers reported enjoying “the variety of the food menu, gaining confidence through various programs and education, having a good rest, and exchanging a lot of useful information with other women at the center” (Yoo, 2014, pp. 86-87). Satisfaction does not come from a single aspect but encompasses physical, emotional, and social factors to account for overall well-being during the postpartum period. Despite expectations to adhere to cultural traditions, many Sanhujoriwons fall short in performing traditional postpartum care (Park & Kim, 2002, p. 520). The positive feedback from mothers often highlights aspects unrelated to the original cultural context, raising the questions: do these centers fail if they deviate from tradition? The measure of success for every family is different, as some may prefer traditional postpartum routes while others may prioritize postpartum practices that promise long-term effectiveness over tradition.

Sanhujoriwons are designed to prioritize the mother’s health, facilitating their postpartum recovery process. The environment, systems, and services of a Sanhujoriwon are specifically structured to ensure mothers can rest adequately, significantly aiding their recovery process (Song et al., 2023, para. 31). This emphasis on a restorative environment within Sanhujoriwons underscores the critical role such settings play in enhancing postpartum recovery. By prioritizing rest, these centers directly address one of the key challenges new mothers face: the need for physical recovery after childbirth. This facilitated rest not only supports physical healing but also provides mental relief, crucial for emotional well-being during the postpartum period. The acknowledgment by mothers that their recovery was aided by the environment and services of the Sanhujoriwon highlights the importance of a tailored, supportive setting in postpartum care. Such environments allow mothers to focus on bonding with their newborns without the stress of managing everyday tasks, fostering a healthier transition into motherhood. Research has shown that “women who are satisfied with the postpartum care they receive have higher parenting efficacy, start breastfeeding earlier and more effectively, and experience fewer health-related problems within themselves and their babies” (Song et al., 2023, para. 3). Comfort with the postpartum center environment and with the healthcare professionals working is associated with higher levels of maternal

confidence. This satisfaction from the beginning will have a greater impact onwards on both infants and mothers, as there is an established level of contentment. Postpartum centers provide an environment that new parents seek for help and adjusting. Simply providing them with the space and help sets parents up for quicker recovery, overall beneficial for the entire family.

## Impact of Postpartum Centers on Maternal Health

Postpartum depression (PPD) is a well-known disorder that new mothers can experience, lasting up until a year after birth. Symptoms of PPD may include difficulty bonding with the baby, loss of appetite, intense irritability, and feelings of worthlessness (Mayo Clinic, 2022). PPD “has a worldwide prevalence of 10-15%,” but this number is suspected to be “25%...based on a commonly used screening tool” (Lee & Hwang, 2015, p. 361). This is a significant portion of the global population at risk of developing PPD, yet there are no significant international safeguards in place to support affected women. Countries must devise their own solutions to help their populations try and combat these intense rates of PPD, particularly those with significantly higher rates than the global average. In South Korea, the rate of prenatal and postpartum depression is notably higher than in many Western cultures, with 42.5% of mothers experiencing postpartum depression (Park et al., 2015, p. 222). This high rate might be attributed to factors, such as complications related to cultural expectations of women’s roles, increased employment pressure, and the cultural stigma surrounding mental illness (Park et al., 2015, p. 223). Understanding the cultural, societal, and individual factors contributing to the prevalence of PPD in South Korea is essential to addressing the unique needs of mothers and developing targeted support systems within these postpartum centers to make them as effective as possible.

Efforts to address psychosocial well-being and prevent PPD through various programs directly tackle one of the largest issues concerning postpartum mothers. For psychosocial recovery and a PPD prevention program, 44% of postpartum centers provide information on PPD, 56% provide support and consultations, 41% provide recreational activities (such as making mobile toys for infants) to reduce stress, and 15% offer physical activities (Kim, 2003, p. 114). Postpartum centers take a comprehensive approach to recovery and prevention, combining informational, supportive, and recreational activities to help mothers navigate postpartum challenges. When Korean mothers in care centers performed kangaroo mother care, a skin-to-skin contact method, 10 times over 2 weeks, “depression significantly decreased and attachment significantly increased” (Cho & Jeong, 2021, p. 5). With direction from healthcare providers in postpartum centers, PPD prevention remains a priority, necessary in a nation, such as South Korea, with such high rates of PPD. The integration of comprehensive psychosocial recovery programs and encouraged mother-infant contact holds promise for promoting maternal mental health and well-being within postpartum centers in South Korea.

Sanhujoriwons also provide mothers with space for physical recovery alongside efforts to boost mental health. After giving birth, many mothers experience a “breakdown of the body and mind,” reporting feelings of fatigue and exhaustion (Lee et al., 2022, p. 13). For a mother without postpartum help, there is no opportunity to sleep in order to mitigate these feelings. The opposite is true for mothers in postpartum care centers with people there to take the baby out of the room and care for them while the mother is allowed to fully relax. Sanhujoriwons help physical recovery through protocols such as “nutritional management, breast care, massage, [and] postpartum exercises” (Kim, 2003, p. 111). Not only do new mothers get to sleep without a newborn in the room, but a physical regimen is implemented to help their bodies recover quicker to reflect their pre-pregnancy state. These protocols are likely made by professionals who can tailor physical recovery to the mother as well. The provision of physical recovery measures within Sanhujoriwons in combination with mental measures offers a holistic approach to supporting maternal health and well-being.

## Challenges in Postpartum Care

While Sanhujoriwon seems to be the natural next step postpartum for South Korean women, several issues have emerged concerning the well-being of both mothers and infants in these centers. Despite being regarded as the perfect place to receive postpartum care, concerns have been raised regarding the health of newborns, with reports indicating that “newborns with weak immune systems are still infected, as they reside in group environments,” and that “babies...find it even more challenging to adapt to breastfeeding” (Choi, 2023, p. 138). This is indicative of a gap in understanding the purpose of these postpartum centers. While they are often perceived as a sanctuary for mothers, the health and well-being of newborns must also be prioritized throughout the duration of their mothers’ stay.

Newborns with compromised immune systems should be housed in more isolated locations for their protection, even if it means restricting their mothers from accessing these facilities. Additionally, the majority of these centers offer breastfeeding-based services for mothers that urge mothers to produce before breastfeeding via bottle, to ease the transition to the breast (Choi, 2023, p. 138). This can complicate the natural flow of mother-infant feeding routines. Many mothers view Sanhujoriwon as an opportunity for recovery without the typical newborn parent responsibilities, however, this causes issues in mother-infant bonding later as “only 3% of postpartum women using Sanhujoriwon ‘roomed in’ with their infants for 24 [hours] and the average daily time spent with infants was only 4.2 [hours]” (Song et al., 2020, p. 2). The complications of infant-mother separation in Sanhujoriwon raise concerns about the potential disruption of early, necessary bonding experiences and remove the importance of promoting positive maternal-infant interactions within postpartum care settings. While Sanhujoriwon may offer mothers a temporary break from immediate parental responsibilities, the findings suggest the need for greater observation of the implications on infant health within these facilities.

## Methodology

In its exploration of South Korea’s unique approach to postpartum care, this research project seeks evidence of the factors driving the widespread utilization of these centers. This study draws from journal articles, relevant statistics, scholarly essays, and medical reviews. This research project asks the following questions: 1) How do cultural beliefs influence the operation of postpartum centers? 2) How effective are these facilities and how do they directly impact maternal health? 3) What are the unexpected challenges mothers face in postpartum centers?

While providing valuable insight into the role and impact of postpartum centers in South Korea, this study must acknowledge its limitations. Firstly, the research relies on secondary sources, which may not capture all the nuances and developments surrounding the postpartum experiences of new mothers and infants. Secondly, the scope of the research does not explore the cultural and regional differences, nor does it address generational variations within South Korea. Lastly, the perspectives of healthcare professionals and policymakers, who play pivotal roles in regulating and delivering postpartum care, are not addressed. Incorporating their insights could offer a more comprehensive understanding of postpartum center practices and functions. Future research could extend beyond these limitations by delving deeper into the experiences and perceptions of healthcare providers and policymakers to offer a holistic understanding of postpartum care in South Korea. Another avenue for further research could be conducting longitudinal studies. Since Sanhujoriwons are a relatively recent phenomenon, there are no studies tracking the long-term effects of postpartum center on maternal health, infant development, and family dynamics over a significant period of time. Additionally, comparative studies across different cultural contexts could shed light on whether the concept of postpartum centers is universally applicable or unique to South Korea.

## Conclusion

“After giving birth, it is a period of great crisis with the burden and difficulty of childrearing as one must adapt to the role of mother according to the formation of a new family” (Kim et al., 2021, para. 1). The postpartum period is a time of great adjustment, marked by the challenges of transitioning into motherhood alongside a new family structure. Provisional care and assistance from Sanhujoriwons can facilitate a smoother transition for mothers during this critical phase. The programs offered by these facilities are designed based on evidence-based findings to enhance the recovery of the mother and newborn. Sanhujoriwons adhere to traditional beliefs and practices, highlighting their foundational role in ensuring mothers' recovery through culturally rooted postpartum care. Through comprehensive support services that address both physical recovery and mental health challenges, postpartum care centers positively impact maternal health. However, institutionalized postpartum care presents complexities and unintended consequences, including issues related to infant health and mother-infant bonding, which suggest the need for a more nuanced approach to postpartum care practices. Postpartum centers are crucial hubs for maternal care and support. They have proven to be immensely beneficial for mothers, but is that what's best for the newborn?

## Acknowledgments

I appreciate my advisor, John, for providing a strong foundation of support and guidance throughout the entirety of my research project.

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