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## **A qualitative analysis of the experience of becoming mothers during or after a breast cancer diagnosis**

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**Background:** Breast cancer is the most frequent oncological disease in women between 25 and 49 years old. Given the rising trend of delaying pregnancy, the number of women diagnosed with breast cancer during pregnancy or with desire for pregnancy after cancer is increasing and this may be related to unique and complex psychological and relational challenges.

**Methods:** 8 women with breast cancer diagnosed during pregnancy, 8 with diagnosis before pregnancy and 8 pregnant women without cancer history were interviewed during the third trimester of their pregnancy. The semi-structured interview explored maternal representations and motherhood experience. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was performed independently by three researchers.

**Results:** The main themes that came out from the interviews were emotional state, partner's support, mental representation of the foetus, and active coping strategies. Both patients with current or previous diagnosis experienced contrasting feelings, joy and worry, and perceived higher levels of partner support compared to controls. Patient's mental representation of their child was less defined and rich

in details, and their narrative was intertwined with the illness experience. Women with current breast cancer referred a fighting spirit to safeguard their health and that of their child, while the pregnancy after breast cancer group lived the pregnancy as a gift and a moment of rebirth of their status as women.

**Conclusions:** Knowledge about these experiences might help understanding the cognitive and emotional aspects of women who have to cope with a concomitant or previous diagnosis of breast cancer. These results will help in developing evidence-based interventions.