



Birth Companions during Childbirth-Indian and International Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

Birth companionship during childbirth is a valuable and beneficial practice, both in India and Internationally. This review article is aimed at recognizing the Indian and International perspectives on Birth Companions during Childbirth. A literature search was conducted utilizing general search engines like CORE, Semantic Scholar and Google Scholar. Further, several electronic databases, such as Science Direct, Web of Science, PubMed, MEDLINE, CINAHL, Scopus, UpToDate, Embase, Cochrane and ProQuest were used. The systematic review was conducted meticulously by reviewing various literatures, applying both the systematic approach and the snowballing approach. The birth companion practices described here pertain to “WH” questions, like “When and Where was the Origin of Birth Companion”, “Who can be a Birth Companion?”, “What are the benefits of having a birth companion?”, “What are the Challenges in implementation?”, “How to overcome the challenges”. A multidimensional strategy is needed to address these challenges in order to effectively introduce the highest standards of birth companion implementation, this includes change in the policies, education and training for healthcare professionals and birth companions, and scaling up successful models for wider use both in India and worldwide. Having considered all things a birth companion may help women have a more pleasant and joyful childbirth experience; thus, this is a programme that should be promoted and supported globally.

Keywords: Birth Companion, Childbirth, Continuous Support during labour, Doula, Labour Companion, Companion of Choice at Birth, Emotional Support during Childbirth

INTRODUCTION

Though the biology of childbirth remains generally the same across history, location, and culture, nevertheless the practices that influence how women experience childbirth change over time and place in response to shifting medical practice and prevalent culture emphases. One such practices is presence of the birth companion during childbirth. Various terms have been given to the birth companion, like labour companion, companion of choice at birth, continuous support during childbirth, emotional support during birth and doula (1). In the realm of childbirth, having continuous support from the birth companion while the woman is labouring and delivering can have a significant impact on the overall birthing experience (2). The World Health Organization's vision for high-quality care for expectant mothers and infants has acknowledged birth companionship as a crucial component of care to enhance health. So, the part of interventions to promote newborn health, the regional plan of action for maternal and neonatal health care supports the presence of a birth companion to offer support throughout labour and delivery (3). The role of birth companion is to provide emotional, physical, and informational support to individuals during childbirth (4). The presence of the skilled birth partner helps to lower stress and shorten labour, boost the mother's sense of empowerment, and minimize interventions and caesarean sections. Furthermore, it promotes the newborn's outcome, boosts positive emotions regarding the birth, nurtures parent-child bonding, stimulates partner participation, and reduces postpartum depression (3).

While the concept of birth companions is universal, there are few similarities in the services rendered by birth companions across our country and globally, and there are also many identified differences based on training, cultural practices, healthcare systems, and individual preferences (5). This review article is aimed at recognizing the Indian and international perspectives on birth companions during childbirth, based on “WH” questions

METHODOLOGY

A literature search was conducted utilizing general search engines like CORE, Semantic Scholar and Google Scholar. Furthermore, several electronic databases, such as Science Direct, Web of Science, PubMed, MEDLINE, CINAHL, Scopus, UpToDate, Embase, Cochrane and ProQuest were used. This systematic review was conducted meticulously by reviewing various literatures, applying both the systematic approach and the snowballing approach. The search targeted specific keywords such as birth companion, labour companion, companion of choice at birth, continuous support during childbirth, doula, and emotional support during childbirth. The number of authors that carried out the initial review of the study was two, in order to perform intuitively and concurrently. The inclusion criteria comprised journals including both qualitative and quantitative research, such as clinical trials, randomized controlled trials (RCTs), descriptive studies, systematic reviews, and narrative reviews then books, book chapters, and documents, as well as press reports, articles published until January 2024 with full text available but limited to the English language. The selected articles underwent scrupulous evaluation by a research team, with incongruities resolved by a third evaluator. After in-depth exploration of the final set of papers pertaining to research interests, a treasure of factual information on birth companions during childbirth - Indian and International perspective was carefully organized based on the relevant thematic sections and classified according to the scientific content.

When and Where? When and Where was the Origin of Birth Companion:

The concept of the birth companion supporting a woman giving birth was believed to have originated in prehistoric times based on anthropological research and archaeological discoveries of stone sculptures and statues (6).

In India, Birth Companion is an Emerging concept, in 2002, the Christian Medical College, Vellore Hospital, a leading non-governmental hospital in Tamil Nadu launched a service for birth companions (7). This concept ultimately came into practice at Chennai Municipal Corporations at two Emergency Obstetric Care (EmOC) facilities (24-hour, seven-day), despite initial resistance from medical professionals and staff nurses who thought family members could interfere with work of health care team members during childbirth. In July 2004, the Government of Tamil Nadu issued an order to expand this Birth Companion Programme (BCP), which permits a birth companion to accompany a pregnant woman during labour to assist mothers emotionally during childbirth at government hospitals, in the entire state of Tamil Nadu. Also, medical professionals and nursing personnel were made aware of the concepts. To combat resistance to the plan, a one-day sensitisation workshop for the labour-ward nursing personnel and doctors was conducted at each hospital (8).

The Indian Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW) made the bold decision and announced in a press release on February 25, 2016, at 14:45 IST, that the Health Ministry permits birth companions to accompany patients during childbirth at public health institutions to lower the rates of maternal and infant mortality. Although the Ministry has implemented several efforts over the years to lower Maternal Mortality Rate (MMR) and Infant Mortality Rate (IMR). The Government of India (GOI) have suggested Birth Companion as an evidence-based, low-cost, helpful intervention for all women throughout labour and delivery. To achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, this will be a crucial step (2).

Internationally, birth companion is an Existing concept, in 1960, the modern-day "doula" term emerged in the grassroots natural birth movement that developed in the United States, when women began to request low-intervention, unmedicated births which commenced in searching for friends along with other people with formal or practical experience of childbirth to support the birthing women during their Labour (1). In 1997, Students interested in doula care, the Birth Companion Programme was established at the Johns Hopkins Bayview Medical Centre. Students gave on-call doula services, and faculty members provided the training. Doulas are a popular option to cover the void left by nursing and can offer labouring women ongoing assistance during their labours. Labour support is a critical component in reducing the incidence of primary caesarean procedures, according to medical organisations like the Society for Maternal-Fetal Medicine and the American College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (ACOG) (3). In 2002, the World Health Organisation (WHO) advocated for labour companionship, as a fundamental component of care to enhance the health of expectant mothers and newborns. Various countries such as Brazil in 2005, Sri Lanka in 2011, and other countries like Argentina, Belize, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Kenya, Mexico, Paraguay, Peru, Tanzania, Trinidad and Tobago, Uruguay have laws and regulations regarding Birth Companion (4).

Who? Who can be a Birth Companion?

In India, there are guidelines for who could be a birth companion for women. The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare allows female relatives, preferably the ones who have labour experience to accompany a birthing woman in the public health facility. In areas where privacy is well maintained the husband of the birthing woman can be a birth companion. Any birth companion should be free of communicable diseases and must adhere to cleanliness. Importantly the birth companion should not interfere with the work of the healthcare workers at hospital. In India, birth companions are generally family members, such as the mother, mother-in-law, husband, sister or sister-in-law who have a deep understanding of the cultural practices surrounding childbirth. Birth companions mainly include one of the family members or close friends who play a significant role in supporting the birthing person. They usually assist in household tasks and offer guidance based on cultural, and traditional practices. In general, the birth companion will provide traditional support, emotional support, and physical assistance. They offer advocacy (assisting the woman in expressing her wishes to others), comfort measures (soothing touch, providing massages, encouraging adequate fluid intake and output), information about labour progress and advice regarding coping mechanisms, and emotional support (continuous reassurance) (2) (9).

The World Health Organisation (WHO) promotes the idea that every woman has the freedom to choose her partner during labour and delivery on a global scale. A birth companion is found to be an essential component of care that can enhance the mother's and the baby's experience with childbirth and health

outcomes. In many international settings, birth companions are professional doulas or midwives who have undergone specialized training in childbirth support. They often work independently or as part of a team and provide continuous support throughout the labour and delivery process. They focus on providing physical comfort measures, advocating for the birthing person's preferences, and offering evidence-based information to help individuals make informed decisions. Birth companions are the ideal person to satisfy the requirement of labouring mother because nurses are unable to give continuous labour assistance for each patient due to staffing patterns and duties that frequently take nurses away from the labouring mother (5). International birth companions are skilled in various pain management techniques like breathing exercises, relaxation techniques, and massage therapy. The birth companions provide evidence-based information to help the woman to make informed decisions about her birth preferences (9).

What? What are the benefits of having a birth companion? (10) (11) (12) (13)

- Provides respectful care: Throughout the entire birthing process, a birthing woman's needs and wishes can be well communicated by a birth companion who would voice out and make sure she is being treated with respect and dignity.
- Enhances maternal outcomes: Research has demonstrated that providing continuous support throughout labour improves health outcomes of mother and newborn, making childbirth experience safer and healthier.
- Empowers women's independence and autonomy: Having a birth companion can help woman feel that she is in charge of her birthing process by empowering and strengthening to make an informed decision by her own choice.
- Shortens the duration of childbirth: Research indicates that having a birth companion can shorten labour time, probably because of the presence of birth companion who offers continuous emotional and physical support.
- Guarantees more favourable health indices for newborns: Babies delivered with a birth companion often have higher Apgar scores and other favourable health indices.
- Increases the probability of vaginal deliveries: Having a birth companion with a birthing woman have been reported to increase the chances of a vaginal delivery, which also means it lowers the need for surgical interventions.
- Lowers the requirement for vacuum or forceps delivery: Constant support from the birth companion have resulted in fewer assisted births necessitating the use of instruments like vacuums or forceps.
- Reduces the need for caesarean sections: Studies have demonstrated that women who receive continuous care throughout labour have reduced caesarean births, which results in less surgical procedures.
- Helps women in having an enhanced maternity experience: A birth companion's physical, psychological and practical assistance have improved and created an enormous positive impact in a woman's entire child birth experience.
- Boosts positive feelings around the birthing process: Having a birth companion during the process of labour has revealed to help people including the birthing woman, her partner, their family and health care professionals. They feel happier and more satisfied with the whole process.
- Augments partner's involvement: A birth companion can encourage the involvement of the partner, fostering a collaborative and supportive environment that facilitates greater contribution of partner in the process of birthing.
- Promotes parent-child connection: Early bonding between a woman and her newborn is very essential for the child's development, and it may be facilitated by birth companion with immediate and ongoing assistance.
- Reduces postpartum depression: A mother's psychological wellness has been better by receiving emotional support throughout labour and delivery, which in turn was found to have significantly reduced the prevalence of postpartum depression.
- Ultimately, both mother and newborn will be having an optimal physical and mental health after the stressful birth process because of the presence of birth companion.

What? What are the Challenges in implementation?

Gap between Policy and practice:

In India, though the Government of India recommends the presence of a birth companion, there was no policy allowing them in some hospitals (14). A country with 28 states and 8 Union Territories there are reports on implementing Birth Companion during delivery only in few states like Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Uttar Pradesh and Punjab (8) (15) (16) (17).

Internationally, while the World Health Organisation advocates having a birth companion, several facilities do not have a policy that permits them. Despite being legally compelled to provide birth companions to women for the purpose of supporting the labouring woman during delivery, a Brazilian study found that birth companions are still not widely utilised in public hospitals (18).

Infrastructure and Resource Allocation:

One of the biggest hindrances to the successful adoption of birth companionship in India has been reported to revolve around a lack of standards and procedures, along with space restrictions, inadequate privacy, a high patient workload, and employees' shortage (17) (19) (20).

Countries with high income have adequate resources and infrastructure worldwide, whereas low and middle-income nations struggle to allocate resources and infrastructure for implementation of birth companionship (10).

Awareness among Healthcare workers:

Healthcare workers play an important role in developing the awareness about birth companions. According to a survey conducted in India, majority of healthcare professionals recognised the concept of a birth companion, while most of them were aware about WHO's recommendation and more than half knew about the Government of India's approval regarding birth companionship during labour (19). Whereas, another study finding revealed that during interviews, it was found that health care providers were not very much aware of the government policy of allowing birth companions in labour rooms (17).

The Pan American Health Organisation (PAHO) and the World Health Organisation (WHO) released the results of a study that revealed medical professionals were mostly unaware of the laws and rules that currently regulate birth companionship (4).

Awareness among Birthing Women:

Data about knowledge regarding the birth companionship among Indian mothers giving birth were not found.

On the other hand, women who gave birth in a medical institution had ignorance about the benefits of having a birth companion resulting in lesser opportunity of having a birth companion during labour and delivery, according to data from a study done at Bangladesh. The major contributing factor to this was identified as women's unawareness (21).

Cultural Sensitivity:

There are several practices that pertain to maternal and child care among Indian women. As with all cultures, there are few cultural predispositions and their negative consequences associated with pregnancy and its outcome. These practices keep impacting the lives of many women for whom western practices are unfamiliar or unacceptable. Cultural preferences and facility-related limitations can make it difficult to incorporate birth companions into the labour process (11) (22).

The East Gojjam Zone community still values its traditional, cultural, and religious customs around conception, labour, and the postpartum phase. Common cultural, traditional, and religious behaviours in the study region include drinking holy water, praying to God, using herbal remedies, avoiding certain foods, spending a period of time in a dark room, and participating in other cultural rites. To ensure that pregnancy, delivery, and the postpartum period are healthy and happy, it is essential to recognise the detrimental habits and promote the beneficial, healthy ones (23).

Education and Training:

Indian birth companions, often being relatives or friends, lack adequate information due to limited medical knowledge about the labour process and how to support the labouring woman effectively. They may rely on their cultural knowledge and personal experiences. The birth companions do not know the process of labour and its process. Except for their physical presence, they do not have adequate knowledge and skills regarding their roles and responsibilities of a birth companion in the labour room (14).

On the other hand, international birth companions have professional training that includes extensive training and certification processes. Due to their familiarity with medical terms and protocols, international birth companions facilitate efficient communication with medical professionals. In Tanzania, trained on-call birth companions were preferred over desired birth companions (24).

Healthcare Provider Attitudes:

Healthcare professionals may be apprehensive about the birth companion's involvement and how it might affect medical procedures or the labour process (10).

In an observational study it was identified that only few midwives in South Africa gave physical care (touching, massaging, or stroking) because they had other labouring mothers to attend and take care. This demonstrates that improving mother's happiness requires one-on-one care which can be achieved by the presence of a birth companion (25).

Affordability:

In India, the involvement of family members as birth companions during childbirth is a low-cost intervention (2).

Globally, birth companions are generally more accessible. The cost associated with hiring an international birth companion may be high and varied depending on the location and level of experience (16).

How to overcome the challenges:

A multidimensional strategy is needed to address the identified issues in order to effectively implement the birth companionship, this includes change in the policies, education and training for healthcare professionals and birth companions, and scaling up successful models for wider use.

Gap between Policy and practice:

Policies supporting the participation of birth companions during labour and delivery are lacking in many Countries, and Institutions. Creating institutional guidelines that uphold privacy norms and facilitate the participation of birth companions as well as administration should take necessary actions and measures to modify institutional practices. Nations should establish National policies that may always support the implementation of the birth companion of choice during labour. The creation of birth companion guidelines, the establishment of standards, and a shift in institutional culture will help in bridging the gap between policy and practices (14).

Infrastructure and Resource Allocation:

A significant barrier to implementation of the birth companion is allocating ideal physical space that safeguards the privacy of women, strategies to provide adequate space and provision of basic necessities such privacy partitioners or curtains and chair which might enhance the presence of birth companion that could in turn benefit the birthing women (10) (19) (26).

Awareness among Healthcare workers:

To address concerns regarding the hospital's adoption of birth companion, a sensitization training for medical staff should be held. If medical staff members are more aware of the needs of birth companions and create a supportive environment, birth companions can have a far better birthing experience and achieve greater outcomes (14) (27).

Awareness among Birthing Women:

It is essential to promote labour companionship as an integral part of compassionate care for pregnant women, in order to bridge the knowledge gap regarding birth companion among birthing women. This necessitates informing women of their legal rights, preparing medical professionals to encourage the implementation of birth companions, and having the laws in place that encourage the birth companion programme. Having a reliable companion throughout labour and delivery improves the experience of giving birth and the health of the newborn and mother. In addition to being given the freedom to choose her birth partner wisely and to emphasise courteous and encouraging care during this life-changing experience, expectant mothers should be made aware of the advantages of having a birth companion of their choices (13) (14) (27) (28).

Cultural Sensitivity:

Studies have indicated that consistent assistance from a birth companion can enhance the quality of life for both the mother and the child. But the birth companion's role and the kind of assistance offered need to be culturally sensitive. This implies that birth companions need to be aware of the woman's cultural traditions and norms as well as any particular preferences she may have for her childbirth experience. At the same time recognising harmful behaviours and encouraging positive, healthy ones is crucial to ensuring a happy and successful pregnancy, birth, and postpartum period (10) (14) (16) (27).

Education and Training:

According to an Indian article, training sessions for desired birth companions are essential in the local language, and the materials should include the psychological requirements, physical needs, process and outcomes of labour. The creation of training materials should be simple and basic enough for a birth companion to comprehend. A Brazilian study that measured maternal satisfaction in comparison to trained versus non-trained birth companions, it was determined that the satisfaction levels of the women in the intervention group (trained birth companions) were higher. The benefits of having a trained birth companion include better emotional, psychological, and physical support, a lower rate of postpartum depression among mothers; and a higher percentage of mothers who report feeling confident in oneself after giving birth. Furthermore, offering direction to birth companions may improve their function and guarantee that their presence is beneficial throughout the birth process (14) (27) (29) (30).

Healthcare Provider Attitudes:

Improving healthcare professionals' favourable attitude towards birth companions is essential to provide considerate and encouraging care throughout labour and delivery. A few techniques for encouraging a positive outlook among healthcare personnel are offering continuous and on-going education and creating awareness programme emphasising the integral role of birth companions, having specific guidelines, establishing the distinct roles and duties, examining the effective models from the facilities that have set the highest standards for Birth Companion implementation (27) (31).

Affordability:

To enhance birth companion support, addressing expense and implementing evidence-based strategies into practice is crucial step. We can enhance the experience of birthing for women and their partners by taking individual requirements into account and encouraging respectful care (31).

Conclusion

In conclusion, having a birth companion during childbirth is a valuable and beneficial practice, both in India and Internationally. However, there are some differences in the views and roles of birth companions in these two contexts. In India, the concept is still evolving, and there is a need for more awareness and standardized training programs for birth companions. Overall, having a birth companion can make the birthing experience a more positive and empowering experience for women, and it is a trend that should be encouraged and embraced universally (32).

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