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Labor Companionship: A Concept of Doula Care

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Abstract

A labor companion is a person who offers consistent individualized support to laboring women. Doula care is defined as the care which an individual provides of physical, social, and emotional support during pregnancy, labor, birth, and the postnatal period (1). Doulas help women ease their anxiety, and pain and address their concerns with comfort, care, and respect. Doulas help in cherishing a mother and child bonding helps in initiate breastfeeding and provide an emotional bond throughout the birthing time. It helps in reducing cesarean sections, and high-risk pregnancies and minimizes infant and maternal mortalities. The purpose of the study is to highlight the role of doula care in positive maternal and child health outcomes and recommendations to overcome the barriers and promote a safe and comfortable birthing experience for laboring women by opting for doula care.

Keywords: *doula, maternal health, birth outcomes*

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Introduction

According to World Health Organization, 287,000 women died during pregnancy and childbirth in 2020 and 95% of the maternal deaths were reported in low and middle-income countries. The major factors leading to maternal mortalities are poverty, lack of skilled birth attendants, and disrespect of childbearing women in healthcare facilities (2). Reduction of maternal mortalities and ensuring the quality of women's life is addressed through sustainable development goals. Target 3.1 of Sustainable Goal Number 3 is to lower maternal mortality to less than 70 per 100,000 live births (3). To reduce the maternal mortality and morbidity rate promoting the presence of a labor companion is an effective intervention since it is an essential component of better newborn and maternal health and makes the women

feel safe and confident. Labor companionship is a term used to describe the assistance provided to a pregnant woman by a family member, partner, or doula throughout labor and delivery (4). It has numerous beneficial impacts on the client's emotional and physical health as well as her journey throughout the birth process. In fact, according to the World Health Organization, there is no evidence of any negative effects of labor companionship on the client's health (5). Labor companions are beneficial in multiple ways. They can communicate the women's wishes to the healthcare staff. They can provide massages and other physical relief and support to the patient. They render emotional support and comfort to the women, and they can advocate for women in different circumstances. Also, by doing these tasks

they alleviate the work burden of the health care workers.

Concept of Doula Care

Doula is known as a professional labor assistant who provides support to women emotionally and physically throughout their prenatal, birthing, and postpartum periods (6). According to a study, mothers who were unaccompanied during labor were more likely to experience preterm labor, an emergency cesarean section, spinal anesthesia or general anesthesia, and shorter labor, and they were at more risk to develop postpartum depression. Their newborns were underweighted at birth and were more likely to experience developmental issues (7). In such circumstances, where it is not possible for family members to accompany the laboring woman due to any reason, they can opt for doula care. Many people use the term "doula" interchangeably with midwives; however, both are distinct professions. Doulas are non-medical professionals that provide emotional, informational, and physical support to pregnant women throughout their prenatal, intrapartum, and postpartum periods, which results in positive birth outcomes. Whereas midwives, who are trained medical professionals, may give the same care as an obstetrician independently in cases of a low-risk pregnancies. we can imply that doulas are an important chunk of the birth team rather than a replacement (8).

Role of Doulas in Labor

According to Lori Bregman who is a doula and the author of *Mamaste* "Nurses will come and go, doctors and midwives come towards the end to catch the baby, but a doula is a familiar, trusted person that can help you birth your baby."(9) A study in Brazil suggests that doula care is significantly associated with a shorter labor and an increased number of vaginal births, women who are delivered with the companionship of

a doula were more likely to come from a middle to low-income background and opt for non-pharmacological methods of pain relief. The findings of this study also suggest that women with doula support had a high understanding of evidenced based practice (10). Having a higher understanding and insight into evidence-based practice can contribute to patients' safety and reduce the workload of the healthcare staff. Moreover, the support of doulas is also linked with lower use of oxytocin and epidural in women (11). Knowledge of evidence-based practice and lower use of pharmacological methods can also help us to achieve the SDGs by reducing maternal mortality rates. Doula-supported mothers also had a four-fold lower risk of giving birth to low-birth-weight infants, a two-fold lower risk of experiencing any complications, and a higher chance of starting breastfeeding (12). Initiating breastfeeding immediately after birth is an important aspect of motherhood; it initiates the bond between the mother and the child, and doulas are the professionals who can assist the mother in developing this bond early with their guidance. Women who are primi parous or pregnant at an early age can also benefit from doulas. According to a study, 8% of all women in Pakistan become pregnant before the age of 19 and they usually suffer from anxiety (13). To alleviate the levels of their anxiety doulas can play a major role and because of which they can have a safe and comfortable birthing journey. In addition to offering emotional and physical support, doulas treat every group with respect regardless of race or religion. Doulas offer essential advocacy and support, particularly for those who are vulnerable to bias and discrimination, such as Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and people of color (8). They address the fears, anxieties, and concerns of the mothers during their pregnancy and birthing process. A study among Medicaid recipients in California

states that women who are Medicaid recipients or who belong to minority groups are more likely to encounter racism, but doulas treat them with respect (14). Moreover, In the US people who belonged to areas with high levels of poverty were more likely to experience poor birth outcomes however with doulas numerous perinatal outcomes have been shown to improve (15). This indicates that women who belong to a minority group and receive doula care have a more comfortable journey as compared to what they usually experience. Doulas help new mothers during their antenatal period by implementing non-pharmacological therapies such as massage, Kegel exercises, aromatherapy, etc. They create a comfortable environment as a birth companion who helps new mothers undergo a safe physiological birth. All these advantages of doula care can help in reducing the chances of complications

Low socio-economic status

Also, in Asian countries, early marriages are very common in low socioeconomic areas, and the depression and anxiety levels of women during teenage pregnancy are more intense (16). The application of doulas can become a crucial factor to ease their journey as first-time mothers. According to a study in Iran, the presence of doulas has shown a clinically significant reduction in the anxiety and pain levels of primiparous women (17).

Recommendations

1. Through social media and other channels, awareness about this niche should be spread to support and promote this idea. People should be aware of how doulas affect the likelihood of healthy births; this will help them see the advantages and it will ultimately help in the growth of this concept.
2. Government should encourage and fund the organizations that are working on promoting this concept. Additionally,

which will ultimately decrease the number of maternal mortality and child morbidity rates.

Despite all this evidence, the concept of doula care is uncommon in many countries including Pakistan. People are unaware of this terminology even though it can prove to be very beneficial for people. Doula care can be advantageous in several circumstances.

Conservative culture

In countries with conservative cultures, such as Arab and Asian countries, doulas can make a meaningful difference. In hospitals where male birth companions i.e., husbands are not allowed due to cultural barriers, women can choose doulas to accompany them throughout their journey, and since they are professionals, they can provide effective care to the women.

Lack of knowledge about evidenced based practice.

Moreover, doulas educate women about evidence-based practice, which is highly important to promote patients' safety. In low-socioeconomic areas of countries where educating women is not encouraged, hiring a doula for this period is a cost-effective yet safe method to promote safe delivery.

- official doula training programs should start to promote female participation in this initiative and guarantee qualified professionals.
3. Brochures and pamphlets should be provided to the women in their prenatal stage. Especially women who are at risk with comorbidities should be recommended doulas to ensure their safety.
4. Only skilled doulas must be assigned to the women to ensure the safety of the mother and the child.

5. Finally, this program should be accessible in low-socioeconomic countries as well, just like it is in other

Conclusion

Having companionship during labor is essential for the physical and emotional well-being of the mother. Doulas are professional labor companions that provide complete support to women not only in the intranatal phase but also in the prenatal and postnatal phases. Yet, this concept is uncommon in many countries. Promoting the concept of doulas as labor companions in those countries can provide women with physical, emotional, as well as informational support. Doula support results in healthy birth outcomes, and they can also assist women

countries, so that women from such backgrounds can benefit from it.

from low socioeconomic areas in giving birth safely and affordably.

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