

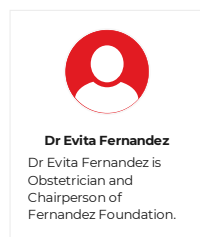


THE TIMES OF INDIA

LIFESTYLE

Midwifery: The fulcrum for humanising childbirth in India

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Dr Evita Fernandez
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For 20-year-old Varuna, birthing her first child was a traumatic experience that scarred her for life. As she lay on her back in the shared labour room, exposed from the waist down, her cries of pain were met with abuse. Stripped of her dignity, Varuna is not keen on repeating that experience, and she is not alone.

The stories of trauma are very real as obstetric violence becomes an epidemic in its own right. Disrespectful and abusive care, patient-blaming, purposeful neglect, verbal, and physical abuse, etc., are common across labour rooms. According to a recent study of 95 new mothers in South India, 52.6% had a negative childbirth experience, and 73.6% of them met the criteria for probable post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

We are perhaps the only species that has managed to corrupt a natural process that is meant to be joyful and wholesome. Instead of making our women feel safe and supported, we traumatise them for life. I strongly believe that childbirth in India is facing a crisis, and we need a radical change in our childbirth practices.

Childbirth: Medical emergency or natural process?

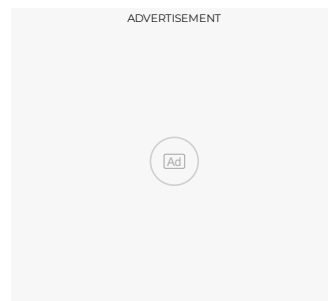
The biggest deterrent to humanizing childbirth is the way the process is viewed today – as a medical emergency. Across public and private facilities with high patient volumes, the intent is to speed up birthing and free up beds. As a result, caesarean sections (C-sections) have increased at an alarming rate, above the WHO prescribed limit of 10-15% of all births. According to the National Family Health Surveys of 2019 (NFHS-5), C-sections were 60.7% of all births in the past five years. The fear induced by the Covid-19 pandemic has only boosted these numbers.

The intent of getting women to hospitals for childbirth was to make it safe for every pregnant woman. But is safety only about preventing maternal and child mortality? I don't believe so. Safety is also about creating a safe and respectful space for the mother, with consideration for her choices and providing a birthing experience that she can cherish. This is the basic human right for every childbearing woman. The question is: how can we ensure that this right is upheld?

Midwifery's promise: Turning the tide to natural birthing

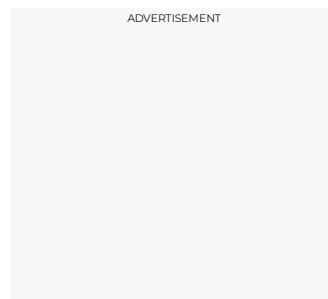
A majority of women have low-risk, uncomplicated pregnancies and should be cared for by professional midwives trained to global standards. These women do not require an obstetrician. They need to be supported with their birth choices which include a birth companion, mobility during labour, to birth in a position that is comfortable. All of this forms the essence of midwifery care – childbirth practices based on evidence. Research has shown that healthy women with uncomplicated pregnancies are safe in the hands of well-trained midwives who offer high-quality care on par with their obstetric colleagues.

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According to Lancet, midwifery care can help avert 83% of all maternal deaths, stillbirths and new-born deaths. Midwives in Telangana have been creating ripples in birthing rooms of district hospitals where they are posted. They support would-be mothers at an emotional and physical level, advocating for them during labour. Their approach is much appreciated, and women today ask for midwives before they ask for an obstetrician. That is the change we need! Professional midwifery needs to form the backbone of maternity services in India. And this indeed is a win-win situation for all.

- Safer, supported, humanized childbirth experience for women

- Timely interventions by specialists when needed

- Less strain on the overburdened medical community

Making midwifery mainstream in India

Despite a lack of interest from the medical community, the Government of India (GoI) has already taken laudable steps to accelerate midwifery training in India. Working with NGOs, the GoI has set up 14 training centres and committing to add an additional 85,000 midwives to the existing workforce by 2023. However, to make midwifery mainstream, we need to push along three vectors:

1. Change the mindset around midwifery and make it a preferred choice – Midwifery is often wrongly associated with suboptimal care. We need awareness and advocacy campaigns to change this perception and highlight the advantages of this approach. Most women birthing for the first time don't know their rights or even what to expect. They need to be made aware of their options, and as we see in Telangana when they know they have a choice, they might just prefer having a midwife.

2. Create acceptance in the obstetric community – We obstetricians need to unlearn a lot of what we were taught and open our minds to change. We need to use evidence-based practices. In addition, we need to embrace midwives as colleagues and learn to work with them collaboratively in the best interests of the mother and her baby.

3. Make midwifery a more aspirational career path – Create more options for women across the country to train as midwives via direct entry into a more rigorous course. Incentivize women to take up professional midwifery courses and create more acceptance for them in the medical community.

Birthing is the most significant, almost sacred event in a woman's life. Countries worldwide are actively taking initiatives to humanize childbirth and it's time we do too. Our mothers deserve better. Our mothers deserve midwives.



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