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Exploring perceptions of companionship during labour: A qualitative and systematic review of maternal and clinical perspectives

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Abstract

Introduction: Companionship during labour involves the presence of a supportive individual to provide emotional, physical, and informational support to a woman during childbirth. Despite its well-established benefits, its implementation in India remains inconsistent due to cultural, infrastructural, and policy-related barriers.

Methods: This qualitative and systematic review explored the perceptions of women, healthcare providers, and the general public regarding companionship during labour. A total of 190 participants, including women who had normal deliveries, general public members, nurse administrators, clinical nurses, and obstetricians, were surveyed through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and systematic literature reviews. Thematic analysis was used to identify key insights.

Results: Findings indicate that companionship during labour improves maternal satisfaction, reduces anxiety, and enhances neonatal outcomes. Key facilitators include supportive healthcare environments and social support networks, while barriers include cultural norms, lack of awareness, hospital policies, and concerns about privacy and infection control. Healthcare professionals recognize the benefits but cite logistical challenges, particularly in government hospitals.

Discussion: While international studies confirm the positive impact of companionship, India faces unique challenges in its widespread implementation. Training for healthcare providers, policy changes, and infrastructural improvements are necessary to integrate this practice effectively.

Conclusion: The study highlights the importance of companionship during labour in improving maternal and neonatal outcomes. Systematic policy reforms, public awareness campaigns, and institutional support are needed to ensure its successful adoption across diverse healthcare settings.

Keywords: Companionship during labour, maternal support, childbirth experience, healthcare policy, India, systematic review, qualitative study

Introduction

The concept of companionship during labour refers to the presence of a supportive individual, such as a partner, family member, friend, or professional doula, to provide emotional, physical, and informational support to a woman during childbirth. This practice has gained recognition for its positive impact on childbirth experiences and outcomes.

The practice is well-integrated into the healthcare systems of many high-income countries while India is still in the process of incorporating it more widely. Efforts to promote awareness, change policies, and improve hospital infrastructure are essential to ensure that all women can benefit from the presence of a supportive companion during childbirth.

Background of the Study

According to WHO guidelines, companionship during labour is considered a key component of high-quality, respectful, and supportive maternal care. As a part of the WHO's broader initiative to promote respectful maternity care and improve maternal and neonatal outcomes, integrated concept of companionship during labour in the modified partograph.

One of the key components of LaQshya, Labour Room Quality Improvement Initiative is the promotion of respectful maternity care, which includes the provision of companionship during labour to enhance maternal satisfaction and improve birth outcomes. The successful implementation of these guidelines requires commitment from healthcare providers, facility administrators, and policymakers to ensure that every woman has a positive and empowering

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childbirth experience.

One important component of National Quality Assurance Standards (NQAS) by Ministry of Health & Family Welfare, is the provision of companionship during labour, which is recognized for its positive impact on maternal and neonatal outcomes.

Need of the study

The practice of companionship during labour in India is evolving, influenced by historical practices, cultural norms, healthcare policies, and emerging research. While challenges remain, there is growing recognition of the benefits of having a supportive companion during childbirth. Continued efforts to improve infrastructure, change policies, and raise awareness are essential to ensure that more women in India can experience the positive impact of companionship during labour.

Recent studies and pilot programs in India have started to highlight the benefits of companionship during labour, aligning with global research findings. Key points include:

- **Improved Maternal Outcomes:** Presence of a companion is associated with reduced anxiety, lower rates of medical interventions, and shorter labour durations.
- **Enhanced Maternal Satisfaction:** Women with companions during labour report higher satisfaction with their childbirth experience, feeling more supported and empowered.
- **Health Benefits for New-borns:** Companionship can lead to better neonatal outcomes, such as higher Apgar scores and more successful initiation of breastfeeding.

Recognizing the importance of companionship during labour, more evidence-based research needs to be conducted to advocate for and implement programs to support this practice. These initiatives aim to develop and implement standardised guidelines for hospitals and healthcare providers to facilitate the presence of companions during labour and implement training for doctors, nurses, and midwives on the benefits of companionship and how to integrate companions into the birthing process effectively and recognizing both obstacles and enablers can help in designing interventions that promote the practice of companionship during labour in various healthcare settings. Evaluating the impact of companionship can provide evidence to support policy changes and encourage healthcare facilities to adopt and promote this practice.

Objectives

- To explore and document the perceptions, experiences, and expectations of women, hospital staff and General public regarding companionship during labour.

- To identify the barriers and facilitators to the presence of a companion during labour from the perspectives of women, their families, and healthcare providers.
- To examine how cultural, social, and familial factors influence the acceptance and practice of companionship during labour
- To assess the perceived impact of companionship during labour on maternal and neonatal health outcomes, including emotional well-being, labour progression, and breastfeeding initiation.

Methodological Considerations

Qualitative Approach

Based on the aim and objectives of the study Qualitative: exploratory approach was adopted for the study.

Sampling

Purposive sampling to ensure diverse representation of women, companions, and healthcare providers from various demographic and socio-economic backgrounds.

65 women who had normal delivery, 50 general public, 21 Nurse Administrators, 45 Clinical nurse and 9 Obstetricians voluntarily participated in this study. Total participants from all category were 190. Further samples were not enrolled as data saturation achieved for the study.

Data Collection method

Semi structured interview was conducted at Gynae OPD and Women's screening and education camp conducted at unit level to gather opinion of women regarding companionship during labour.

Public opinion was collected interacting personally and recorded their opinion with permission

Questionnaires was circulated among the experts in the subject. Based on their response in-depth interviews offline/online mode conducted to explore the finest version of the themes. Focus group discussions are conducted to gather opinion of subject expert.

Systematic Review

Systematic review was carried out to analyse the current evidence in public and private settings at national and international level.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis to identify common themes, patterns, and insights across the collected data.

Results

Data collected were divided into themes and subthemes and compared to derive evidence as per objectives.

Category	Perception /Experiences/ Expectations	Facilitators Identified	Barriers identified	Evolving themes
Women who had normal delivery	Emotional and psychological support Enhanced coping mechanism Positive birth experience Providing water helping in change positions, walking, offering massage and other comfort measures under the guidance of midwife	Social Support Networks: Women with strong social support networks are more likely to have positive views about companionship during labour. The support from family and friends can reinforce the benefits of having someone present. Supportive Healthcare	Cultural Norms: Cultural expectations and norms play a significant role. In some cultures, labour is considered a private experience, and the presence of a companion, particularly a male partner, may not be traditional or welcomed. Disruption and Anxiety: Some women may find that the presence of a companion,	Encouragement: Women who had positive experiences with companions during labour often encourage other expectant mothers to consider having a support person present. They emphasize the emotional and practical benefits. Preparation: Women may advise that companions be well-prepared and educated about the labour process. They suggest that companions attend childbirth classes or read relevant materials to understand their role better. Personal Choice: Ultimately, many women

		Environment: Women who had supportive healthcare providers facilitating the presence of companions generally have more positive experiences. They appreciate when medical staff are welcoming and accommodating	especially one who is anxious or not well-prepared for the labour process, can be distracting or even stressful. Preference for Privacy: A few women might prefer to labour alone or with only medical professionals present, valuing privacy and minimal distractions over companionship.	emphasize the importance of personal choice. They recommend that expectant mothers make decisions based on their comfort levels and preferences, rather than feeling pressured by others' opinions.
General Public Opinion	Increasing acceptance to provide emotional support for the wife	Age, Education, occupation Urban population Increased awareness of global practices through media	Cultural norms: Child birth is considered as women's domain and men are excluded Lack of Awareness regarding benefits Belief of intrusion in privacy of a lady during labour Fear and anxiety to witness invasive procedure Hospital Policy of not to permit companionship in labour room, even not permitted to give a phone call	Changing role of husband as an active role in parenting and house hold responsibilities which can extend to be as companion during labour with psychological preparedness programme and ensuring the companion is present during all antenatal visit
Nurse Administrators	Improved maternal outcomes: Reduction in anxiety and stress Positive coping pattern Increase in maternal satisfaction Education and guidance to be provided to companions to get prepared to attend labour and consent to be taken	Staff collaboration: Companion can assist in non-medical tasks such as giving back massage and diversion therapy. Hence staff can focus on more clinical care Need for educating companions on their role during labour to ensure they are helpful rather than disruptive Aim to provide patient-centred care, and they often support practices that enhance the childbirth experience while ensuring safety and efficiency.	Space and privacy in labour room especially in crowded Govt hospital facility. Not feasible to establish labour suit like corporate hospitals in all the Govt hospital Setting as the treatment is of free of cost. Infection control and maintaining sterile Zone Disruptions potential: Companions may become overly anxious or disruptive interfering with medical procedures and staff efficiency Support companionship in hospitals with established policies and guidelines	Corporate hospitals have well equipped private delivery suit with hospital fees in lakhs. May not be feasible to set delivery suits in Govt hospital where more than 10 deliveries in a day Advocate Training and Support for both staff and companionship to understand their roles and responsibilities during labour
Clinical Nurse	Positive impact of Emotional and psychological support provided by companions Improved communication Enhanced coping mechanisms Assistance in non-medical procedure	Training and Preparation: Clinical nurses express the need for better training and preparation for companions so that they understand how to support the mother without interfering with medical procedures. Continuous Support: While nurses have multiple patients to attend to, a companion can provide continuous, one-on-one support to the intranatal mothers	Potential for Disruption: Some companions may become anxious or distressed, which can disrupt the labour process. Nurses might need to manage not only the patient but also an emotional companion. Space and Resources: In some settings, space and resources can be limited, making it challenging to accommodate companions without compromising the quality of care for other patients Hospital Guidelines: Clinical nurses' opinions are often influenced by hospital policies and guidelines. In institutions where companionship during labour is encouraged, nurses are more likely to support and facilitate this practice.	Training and Preparation: Clinical nurses might express the need for better training and preparation for companions so that they understand how to support the mother without interfering with medical procedures
Obstetricians	Enhanced maternal outcomes Emotional support Improved Communication Patient centred care	Hospital policies that encourage companionship during labour, obstetricians are more likely to support and facilitate this practice.	Infrastructure: Limited space, privacy concerns in labour room Infection control practices Potential for disruptive, potentially interfering with medical procedures or the labour process Cultural sensitivity	Individualized Care: Many obstetricians strive to provide individualized care, assessing the suitability of a companion on a case-by-case basis, considering the mother's preferences, the companion's preparedness, and the clinical situation. Promoting Best Practices: Obstetricians who support evidence-based practices often advocate for the benefits of companionship during labour, citing studies that demonstrate improved

				<p>outcomes and patient satisfaction.</p> <p>Changing Attitudes: There is a growing trend among younger obstetricians and those working in urban or private hospitals to support and encourage the presence of companions during labour, influenced by global best practices and increasing patient demand for family-centred care.</p> <p>Professional Development: Continuous professional development and exposure to international guidelines and practices can influence obstetricians' opinions, making them more open to the idea of companionship during labour.</p>
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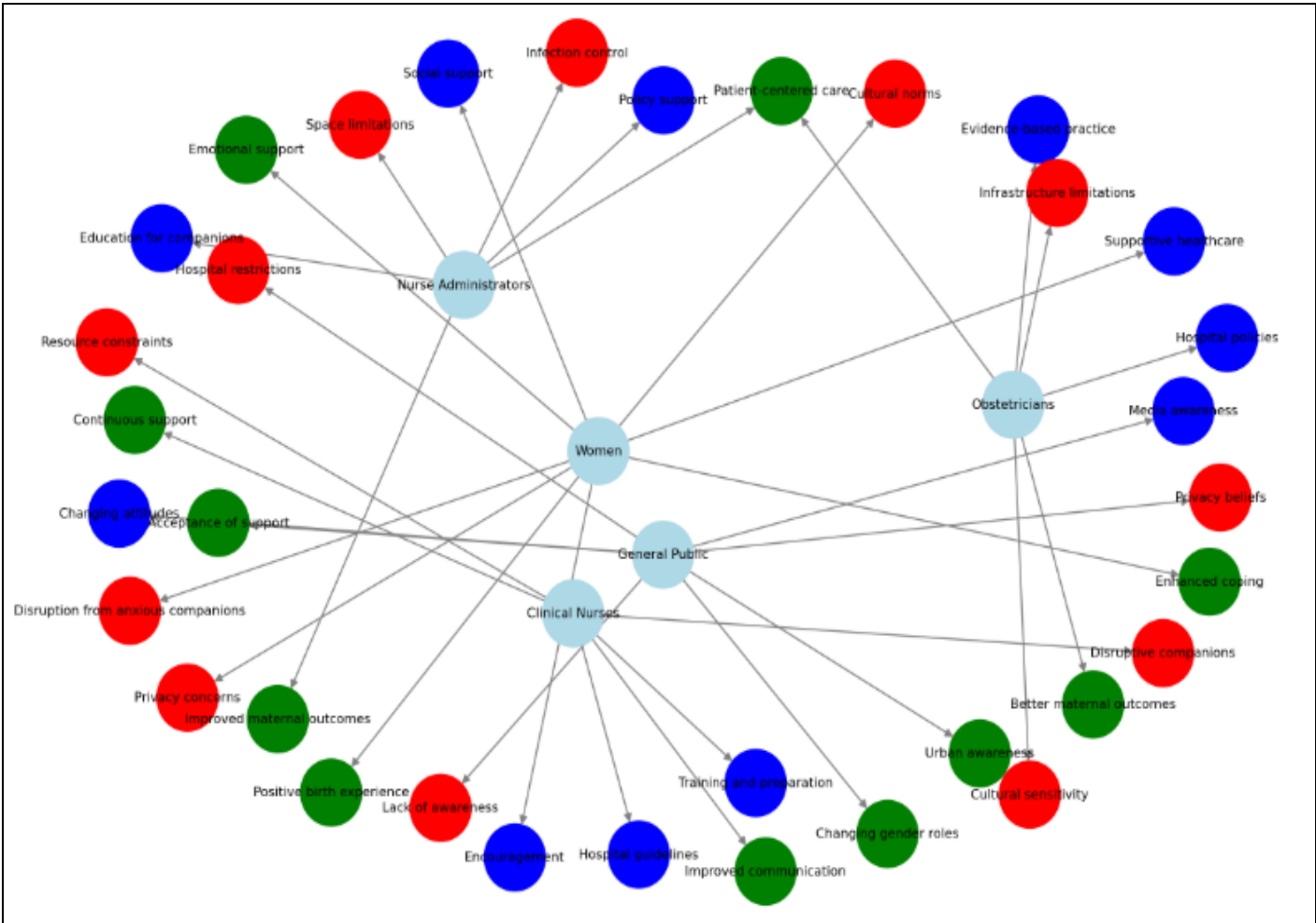


Fig 1: Network Diagram of Stakeholders and Factors Influencing Companionship During Labor

The network diagram showing the relationships between stakeholders (Women, General Public, Nurse Administrators, Clinical Nurses, Obstetricians) and their perceptions, facilitators, and barriers regarding companionship during labour.

- Green nodes represent perceptions.
- Blue nodes indicate facilitators.
- Red nodes highlight barriers.
- Light blue nodes are the stakeholders.

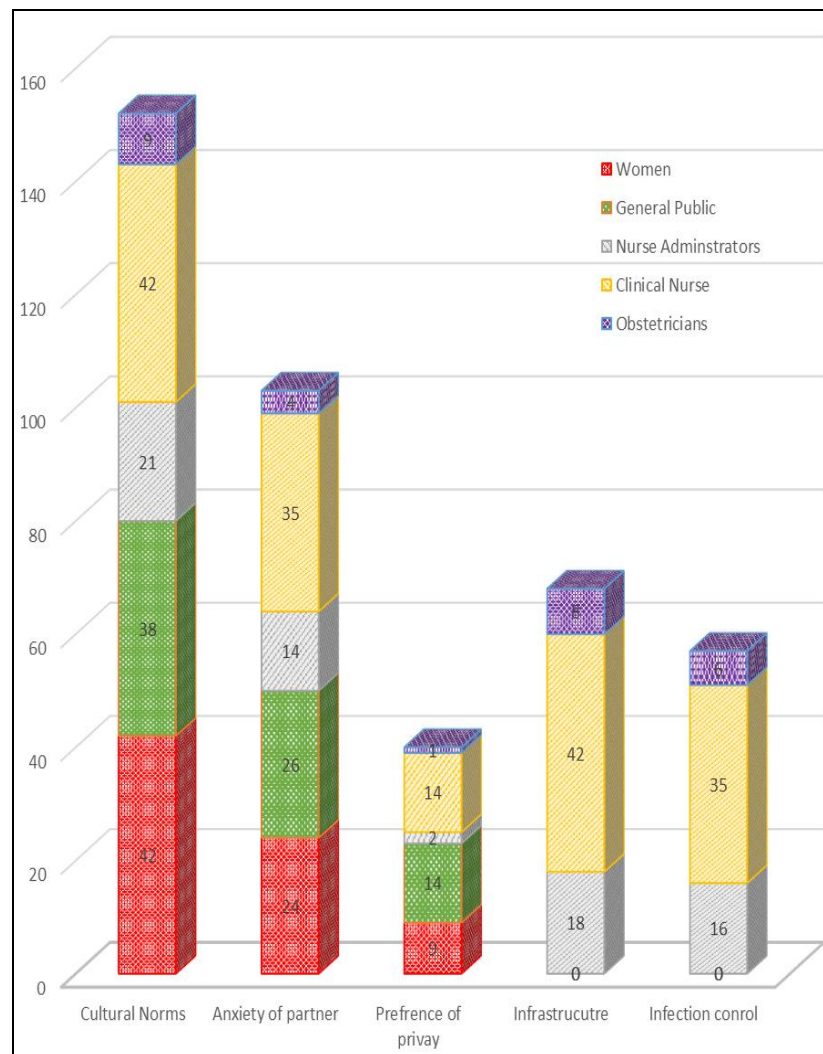


Fig 2: Barriers Identified for Companionship During Labour

The graph highlights the major societal and systemic barriers preventing companionship during labour. The graph identifies key barriers to companionship during labour, with Cultural Norms being the most significant (160 total), where Women (42; 26%) and the General Public (38; 24%) contribute the most. Anxiety of Partner (104 total) follows, with Clinical Nurses (35; 34%) and the General Public (26; 25%) highlighting this concern.

Preference for Privacy (47 total) is moderately acknowledged, mainly by Obstetricians (9; 19%) and Nurse Administrators (14; 30%). Infrastructure (68 total) is a notable issue, emphasized by Clinical Nurses (42; 62%). Infection Control (57 total) is the least concerning, but Clinical Nurses (35; 61%) report it as a barrier.

Systematic Review on Companionship during labour

The presence of a companion during labour has been widely studied and shown to have positive impacts on maternal and neonatal outcomes. This systematic review aims to synthesize the available literature on the effects of companionship during labour.

A comprehensive search was conducted in databases such as PubMed, Cochrane Library, Google Scholar, and Embase. The search terms included “companionship during labour,” “doula support,” “labour support,” and “maternal outcomes.” Studies were included if they focused on the presence of a companion during labour and reported on

maternal or neonatal outcomes. Both randomized controlled trials (RCTs) and observational studies were included.

Results

1. Emotional and Psychological Outcomes

- A recent mixed-methods systematic review by Evans *et al.* (2023) ^[14] explored the experiences of birth companions, women, and midwives regarding support during labor. The study found that companions who felt involved and had a defined role—providing physical or emotional support—contributed positively to women's birth experiences.
- Thomson *et al.* (2022) ^[15] examined the impact of lay birth companions on childbirth experiences and the incidence of postpartum post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The findings suggested that the presence of a lay birth companion can positively influence women's childbirth experiences and may reduce the risk of developing PTSD postpartum.
- Hodnett *et al.* (2013) ^[5] conducted a Cochrane review of continuous support during childbirth, including companionship. The review included 22 trials with over 15,000 women and found that women with continuous support were more likely to have spontaneous vaginal births and less likely to use pain medications. Women also reported higher satisfaction with their birth experiences and fewer negative feelings about

childbirth.

- Bohren *et al.* (2017) ^[6] expanded on this work, analysing 26 studies involving over 16,000 women. The study confirmed that women with continuous support were less likely to have a Caesarean section, instrumental birth, or need for pain relief. They also experienced shorter labours and higher Apgar scores for their babies at one and five minutes.

2. Physical Outcomes

- McGrath and Kennell (2008) ^[7] found that continuous support from a doula resulted in a 25% decrease in the risk of a Caesarean section and a 31% decrease in the use of synthetic oxytocin. Their study highlighted the benefits of doula support in reducing medical interventions during labour.
- Hodnett *et al.* (2011) ^[8] reported similar findings, indicating that women who received continuous labour support had lower rates of epidural or spinal analgesia and higher rates of spontaneous vaginal delivery.

3. Neonatal Outcomes

- Klaus, Kennell, and Klaus (2012) ^[9] demonstrated that babies born to mothers who had continuous support during labour had higher Apgar scores, which are indicative of better immediate health status of the newborns.
- Campbell *et al.* (2006) ^[10] conducted a study in South Africa and found that continuous support was associated with improved breastfeeding initiation rates and duration, which is crucial for neonatal health.

4. Maternal Satisfaction and Birth Experience

- Mottl-Santiago *et al.* (2008) ^[11] showed that women who had doula support reported higher levels of satisfaction with their birth experiences and felt more empowered and informed during childbirth.
- Kabakian-Khasholian and Portela (2017) ^[12] emphasized the importance of respectful maternity care, including the presence of a companion, in improving maternal satisfaction and reducing the likelihood of postpartum depression.

The evidence consistently supports the positive impact of companionship during labour on various maternal and neonatal outcomes. Continuous support is associated with reduced rates of medical interventions, shorter labours, improved neonatal health indicators, and higher maternal satisfaction. The presence of a supportive companion can provide emotional reassurance, physical comfort, and effective communication with healthcare providers, contributing to a more positive birth experience.

Current Practices and Challenges

Despite the increased rate of institutional deliveries, the practice of allowing companions during labour is not uniformly adopted across India. Several factors contribute to this variability:

a. Healthcare Infrastructure

Public Hospitals: Often overcrowded and under-resourced, public hospitals may not have the facilities or policies to accommodate companions during labour. Privacy concerns and space limitations are common barriers.

Private Hospitals: More likely to allow companions, especially in urban areas and among higher socioeconomic groups. However, this is not guaranteed and varies by institution.

b. Cultural Norms and Beliefs

In many parts of India, childbirth is still considered a private and sometimes taboo subject, limiting the involvement of non-medical personnel. Some cultural beliefs may also restrict the presence of men in the labour room.

Family dynamics and gender roles can influence whether a woman feels comfortable or supported in having a companion present.

c. Policy and Awareness

There is a lack of consistent national policy mandating the presence of companions during labour. Awareness campaigns and advocacy efforts are needed to educate both healthcare providers and families about the benefits of companionship during childbirth.

d. Healthcare Provider Attitudes

Attitudes of healthcare providers towards companions can vary. Some may view companions as a potential disruption, while others recognize their value in providing emotional support and facilitating better communication between the patient and medical staff.

Major Findings

a. Positive Impact on Birthing Experience

Women who had companionship during labour reported increased emotional support, enhanced coping mechanisms, and a more positive overall birth experience. However, preferences varied based on cultural norms and individual choices.

b. Changing Role of Men in Childbirth

Traditional gender roles in India are gradually evolving, with more men actively participating in parenting, including being present during childbirth. However, acceptance varies significantly across different regions and social backgrounds.

c. Psychological Preparedness is Crucial

The effectiveness of companionship during labour depends on the psychological preparedness of both the expectant mother and the companion. Proper training and guidance for companions and hospital staff can enhance the overall labour experience.

d. Institutional and Medical Perspectives

While many healthcare professionals recognize the benefits of companionship, institutional policies and logistical challenges influence their level of support. Urban and private healthcare facilities show greater acceptance compared to government and rural hospitals.

e. Growing Acceptance of Labour Companionship

The acceptance of companionship during labour is increasing in India, particularly in urban settings where patient-centered and evidence-based practices are emphasized. However, barriers remain in traditional and resource-constrained environments.

f. Need for Training and Support

To maximize the benefits of companionship during labour, comprehensive training programs for both healthcare providers and companions are essential. This would ensure proper support for expectant mothers and improve overall childbirth experiences.

Conclusion

Integrating companionship during labour with the use of the modified partograph can significantly enhance the quality of maternal care. The combination of continuous support and systematic labour monitoring promotes better maternal and neonatal outcomes, timely interventions, and a positive childbirth experience. Healthcare facilities should prioritize training, infrastructure, and policy development to successfully implement this integrated approach.

The systematic review underscores the importance of implementing policies and practices that promote companionship during labour. Healthcare facilities and policymakers should consider integrating continuous support into standard maternity care to improve outcomes for both mothers and babies. Further research should explore the long-term benefits of companionship during labour and the most effective ways to implement this practice in diverse healthcare settings.

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