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COMPANION OF CHOICE DURING LABOUR AND CHILDBIRTH FOR IMPROVED QUALITY OF CARE

Supporting the presence of a companion of choice during labour and childbirth is an effective intervention that promotes respectful care, including but not limited to enabling women's autonomy and agency and improves maternal and perinatal outcomes. A woman's experience of childbirth can also improve with a labour companion of her choice, by facilitating access to trusted emotional, psychological and practical support.

WHY IS A CHOSEN COMPANION DURING LABOUR AND CHILDBIRTH IMPORTANT?

- Helps them to feel safe, strong, confident and secure
- Bonding experience
- Their presence made a positive impact on their relationship with the woman and new baby
- Providing information about childbirth, and facilitating clear and respectful labour and childbirth communication
- Provide practical help, too, including to facilitate non pharmacological pain relief
- Encourage women to move around, and offer massage or hand-holding
- Also give emotional support using praise and reassurance to help women feel in control
- The potential prevention of mistreatment
- less fear and distress during labour.

- *labour companionship improves maternal and perinatal outcomes*
- *Shorter duration of labour*
- *Iincreased rates of spontaneous vaginal birth*
- *Decreased caesarean section*
- *Decreased intrapartum analgesia*
- *Increased satisfaction with childbirth experiences*

For the babies of women given continuous support, they are less likely to have low 5th-minute Apgar scores

WHO recommends labour companionship under three topics of guidance :

- Intrapartum care for a positive childbirth experience
- Health promotion interventions for maternal and newborn health
- Augmentation of labour

Raising awareness

health workers may talk to women during pregnancy about whom they may want to bring as a companion. Information shared in communities about the potential benefits of companions may also help.

Influencing the attitudes of health workers and managers

Holding discussions with health workers to help them understand the benefits of labour companions, to discuss their concerns and how to address these, and to raise the profile of labour companionship as an evidence-based intervention helps to counter views that companions are less important than other aspects of care.

Orientating women, companions and health workers

Orientation sessions help women and companions to prepare for effective companionship, but also help to outline roles and avoid any disturbance to care by the companion's presence.

Creating an enabling policy environment

An enabling environment may mean making formal changes to existing national or institutional policies to allow labour and childbirth companions of choice in facilities.

Optimizing physical infrastructure

Health-care facilities need to ensure that privacy can be maintained for all women, including curtains or partitions where feasible.

These factors have been identified as helpful to the implementation of policies that facilitate labour companions

The way forward

Global actors, including WHO, should continue to advocate the benefits of labour companions. International actors should also support policy, programme and research initiatives to implement labour companionship. Professional organizations – such as international and national associations of obstetricians and midwives – can also play important roles during all phases of implementing labour companionship programs, and they can be critical in the sustainability of the practice at the facility level. At national and subnational levels, policy changes may be needed to recommend labour companionship.

When labour companionship is introduced in a health facility, programmes should be monitored to capture successes and identify any persistent barriers. All women have the right to high-quality, respectful maternity care, and supporting them to have a companion of choice during labour and childbirth can help to ensure this right and can improve health

Example of labour companionship design and implementation in practice

A mixed-methods, quasi-experimental design was used to evaluate the impact of the companionship implemented, with the following findings.

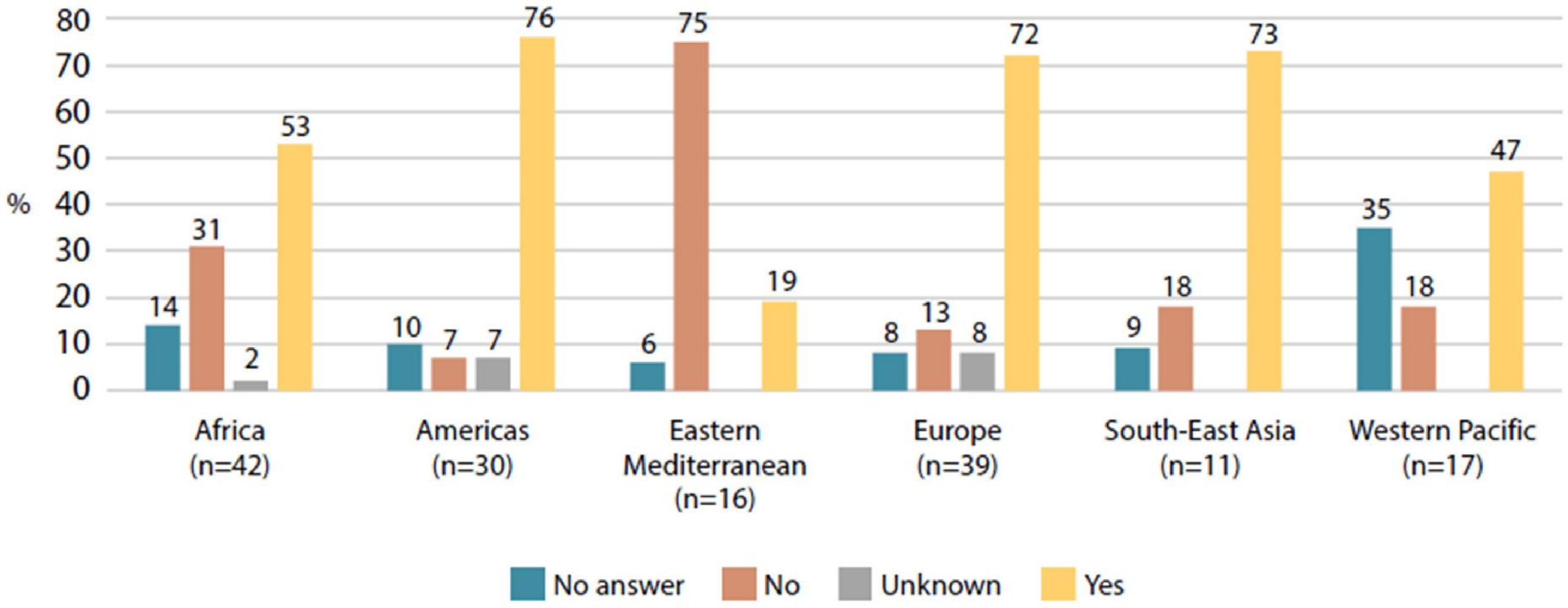
Acceptability. The labour companion model was compatible with women's needs for support, and provided an opportunity for family engagement in maternity care. Health-care providers' scepticism towards labour companionship changed after experiencing the intervention, as they felt that companions reduced their workload and supported women well.

- **Feasibility**. The participatory approach fostered ownership and empowerment among junior health-care providers and midwives, addressing their needs throughout the design.
- **Effectiveness**. There was a decrease in caesarean births and in low Apgar scores – and an increase in women's satisfaction with childbirth care and perceptions of control.
- **Cost**. The cost–benefit ratio showed benefit in all three countries: for every US$ 1 spent on developing and implementing the labour companionship model, the benefits were as high as US$ 29.86 in Egypt, up to US$ 11.79 in Lebanon,

Figure 1: National policies recommending labour companionship

"Does the national policy/guideline recommend the presence of a companion of choice during labour and birth?"

Percentage of countries in WHO region answering yes, no or unknown



Source: WHO reproductive, maternal, newborn, child and adolescent health policy survey 2018 *(12)*

I wish good health to all pregnant women in Iran, and I wish you, dear midwives, honor and pride.

Thank You

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