



Interdisciplinary Action Research: Conversations with Emerging Leaders

A collaborative initiative of Centre for Financial Accountability (Delhi) and Environment Support Group (Bangalore)

In this climate of despair induced by COVID-19, various young researchers and activists have been working on emerging trends in Interdisciplinary Action Research which address some of the most pressing issues of our times, and that from various sectors: urban planning, public health, sociology, ecology and environment, digital commons, public education, migration studies, entrepreneurship, informal economy, and more. CFA and ESG collaborate to bring to focus various exciting explorations by such young researchers, who conscientiously draw attention to some of society's biggest challenges through their interdisciplinary efforts.

Webinar 9: Midwifery is the Past, Present and Future of Birth

Introduction

According to WHO, Worldwide, an estimated 140 million births take place every year. Most of these occur without complications for women and their babies. Yet, over the past 20 years, practitioners have increased the use of interventions that were previously only used to avoid risks or treat complications, such as oxytocin infusion to speed up labour or caesarean sections. And the entire birthing experience has become filled with anxiety, fear, trauma and more for many. Childbirth is a normal mammalian process and studies have shown that increased medicalisation has undermined this natural process and a woman's capability to give birth resulting in negative experience. Studies also reveal that a substantial proportion of healthy pregnant women are often subjected to needless and potentially harmful routine interventions.

In this context, many women today are opting for natural birth in the presence of a loved one, in a safe place, not just in terms of medical safety, but also emotional and mental well-being. Women are beginning to express the need for someone who is trustworthy, someone who listens to their need and understands their feelings and can help them to tap into their powerful natural instinct during childbirth and enjoy the moments of this beautiful journey. This is so important for a mother as it has a deep personal significance.

In this regard, it is important that every pregnant woman is educated on every aspect of pregnancy and birthing, it is important for her to understand her body and feel empowered. So with increase in awareness, women have started asking the right questions that are driving change. Women know that they can say no to an epidural or episiotomy. It's important for women to know their rights, to give or withhold consent for anything, knowing fully the risks, benefits and alternatives that are available.

Chetana Kulkarni and Mallige who will share with us the two different worlds of maternal health from their diverse experiences in the world of maternal health.

Discussants

1. **Chetana Kulkarni** has been a birth worker for the past 8-9 years. As the co-founder of The Birth Home, Midwifery Care and Birth Centre, she has been working in prenatal, labour, birth, postpartum care and breastfeeding support. She is passionate about providing families with another option to give birth using their natural, in built abilities with the right environment, support and care; outside of hospitals.
2. **Mallige** is working with a people's movement called Karnataka Janashakthi as an Activist. Janashakthi works on a variety of issues with youth, urban and rural poor in collaboration with many organisations.



Opening the discussion, **Chetana Kulkarni**, Cofounder of The Birth Home, questioned the overuse of diagnostics, instruments and interventions in obstetrics centers. The C Section procedure was one particular intervention she drew attention too. Although the WHO recommends the C Section to be used in not more than 10 - 15% of births, some Indian states such as Telangana use it in over 50% of cases. Another aspect of mainstream birthing which concerned her was how, in many cases, the mother and child are separated immediately after the birth. In many cases, the mother anxiously waits several hours before she can finally see her baby.

Wanting to offer mothers a more humane process, Chetana founded The Birth Home, a natural birthing center which is centered around the philosophy of midwifery. At The Birth Home, skilled midwives provide an option to women who prefer to give birth away from a traditional obstetrics ward. Attempting to make the birthing process as humane as possible, individualised care is offered to expecting mothers.

Several weeks before the birth, prenatal guidance is offered to the mother and her partner. During the period of labour, the partner is encouraged to be with the mother to support her through the process. At the prenatal stage fitness classes are offered to build stability, stamina and strength which the mother would need during labour. The Birth Home strives to leave no stone unturned when it comes to offering maternal care. As Chetana put it, "We pay attention to the emotional, physical and nutritional needs of the mother. We even offer physio-therapy to the mother during labour."



Mallige, a social activist, spoke about the concept of midwifery and how it has been eroded with time. Globalisation and liberalisation being the causes for this and have shifted the birth process away from the community and into the hospital. She goes on to throw light on how the maternal mortality rate is very high in India. Karnataka is way behind in dealing with this challenge. Superstitions about menstruation and

childbirth, prevalent in several communities do not help the above cause either. In one community, pregnant women are compelled to stay in separate, poorly-ventilated rooms, a practice that is paradoxically encouraged by government policies.

Mallige claims stigmas related to childbirth and casteism are major problems, ASHA workers and healthcare workers are often guilty of discriminating against people from lower castes. Going back to midwifery would first require deep conversations between different sections of society.

Chetana Kulkarni responded to a question from a member of the audience saying ,The Birth Home is a low volume center. They only handle around 5 births a month. Their individualised care requires a high amount of human resource. The reality of our model is that it is only available to those who can afford it. They're hoping to get the Government's support to make it accessible to all. In Cochin, Hyderabad and Goa there are similar organizations offering natural birthing and we all should make midwifery care so accessible that a pregnant woman can stay in her community and be cared for by someone from her community.

“Current protocols imported from affluent countries do not suit the diverse socio-economic conditions of India because they do not address the diverse needs of India with its myriad of communities. Customised protocols need to be written for each community”, **Mallige** asserted. She concluded the session by saying “I don't see any model of birthing as inherently progressive or regressive. But in a country and society that is extremely patriarchal, casteist and communal everything has to be looked at within that context”.

ESG and CFA continue the **“Interdisciplinary Action Research: Conversations with Emerging Leaders”** series next Thursday, 22nd October 2020 (5:00 - 6:30 pm on Zoom and Facebook) addressing the theme: **Perspectives from a Young Farmer** with Kabir Cariappa and Manjunath of the **School of Farming**. More details on this webinar series can be accessed on www.esgindia.org and www.cenfa.org. Recording of the webinar is accessible at:

[This report has been prepared by Ashwin Lobo, Research Associate, Karthik Anjanappa, Research Associate and Malvika, Sneha and Siri, Interns, at ESG. Bhargavi Rao, Trustee, at ESG provided inputs.]

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