

INTERNATIONAL

DOULA

DOULA-ING IN THE UAE

PLUS

DONA's statement on
racism and birth, part 1

One man's journey
into doula work



DONA
INTERNATIONAL

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DOULA-ING



IN THE UAE



By Shereen Zarroug, CD(DONA), LCCE

What is the current state of birth outcomes in your country or region?

We are seeing an increase in positive birth experiences in the UAE. This may be due to women choosing to be more educated around birth and having numerous options for a birth doula. Sadly, we still do have a very high induction and cesarean rate — around 40% in the UAE and up to 60% in the region. This is mainly due to hospital and doctor liability, diverse cultural backgrounds and attitudes toward inductions and cesarean births, and the fact that the majority of birthing hospitals in the region are private institutions.

How do you see doulas affecting birth outcomes where you live?

We have come to a point where many birthing women are opting for doula support. The relationship between a couple and their doula opens the door for women to explore evidence-based resources that, in turn, prompt informed conversations with their care providers and informed choices for their births. With a strong community of DONA trained and certified doulas in the region, I am also looking into organizing conferences for birth professionals. I hope to facilitate conversations among all the birth professionals on a woman's birth team, so we can work cohesively in support of the birthing woman.

Do many people know what a doula is and what we do?

We are getting there! Certainly, many more women/couples in our region are more aware today of a doula's role than they were five years ago. With a growing regional population of trained doulas, there is an awareness shift and change in perception of our role in

the birthing community. To some extent, there is still some confusion between doulas and midwives but, through social events and social media, we are spreading the word about what doulas do and the collaborative role we play (with midwives and obstetricians) to support the birthing couple.

How many DONA doulas are in your area?

Currently, in the United Arab Emirates, we here are about seven certified DONA doulas. We also have 30-plus trained doulas working on certification through three DONA training workshops I have hosted in Dubai with Elena Carrillo.

Are care providers receptive to doula support in your country?

It's amazing to see that many midwives are aware of — and supportive of — our role. There are also a select few obstetricians that know of and support what we do, and it is an absolute pleasure to have the WHOLE birth team aligned and working well together. Yet, sadly, this is not yet the majority or typical. While the major hospitals in our region know what we do and are very welcoming, many others have no clue and will not allow us in. Convincing them is usually a struggle, but we are slowly working on it.

Culturally speaking, is birth something that's managed in your country, or is it viewed as spontaneous?

The UAE is a melting pot of 200-plus nationalities, with citizens (UAE nationals) accounting for less than 11% of the total population. This diversity means that birth is viewed in many different ways, depending on the cultural and educational background of doctors, midwives and





IN THE UAE, I AM THRILLED
TO SAY, OUR DOULA
COMMUNITY IS THRIVING,
WITH THE MAJORITY (30-PLUS)
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birthing parents. There is definitely a tendency for births to be managed, but we certainly see less intervention when couples are educated and supported by a doula and/or midwife. We are also currently seeing a slow and steady rise, among a few hospitals and doctors, of granting more autonomy to midwives during labor. Yet, the issue remains where we also see a large number of women being recommended medically unnecessary inductions and cesarean births.

Are doulas in your country/region admitted into the OR to support cesarean birth?

Yes! One support person can attend a cesarean birth in the UAE, and they can be anyone the birth parent selects. However, this also depends on the hospital, as many are still not allowing even a single support person in the OR during COVID-19.

How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected doula support?

Initially, when the pandemic first hit, doulas were not allowed into the birth rooms and water birth facilities were no longer an option. Many of us started to offer



virtual doula support, which has worked out quite well for clients that could not have their families fly in due to travel restrictions. Until late last year, doulas were allowed into most hospitals; some only allowed one support person, others allowed two, and most required us to take frequent PCR tests before arriving. I also do realize that we are privileged in some way. I am aware doulas are still not allowed back into hospitals in several countries.

What is your favorite comfort measure to use to support your client in labor?

My hands and eyes! When I first started working as a doula, I carried a large doula bag that contained pretty much everything but the kitchen sink. With time and experience, I learned to only carry essentials (items most of my clients preferred), but my hands remain the favorite tool I use for massage, acupressure, help with labor and birth positions, and to simply hold their hand for comfort. Especially during COVID-19, when our clients can really only see our eyes, it has been vital for me to make constant eye contact and maintain a warm, assuring, trusting gaze, so clients know they are safe.

How has being a DONA certified doula supported you on your doula path?

Since becoming DONA certified, I have had a nagging passion to get more doulas in the country certified, all with the goal to offer more doulas for women. Elena and I hosted three training workshops together in Dubai, which eventually led me to become the regional DONA International Ambassador. I am absolutely humbled and excited by this role! With the DONA Scope of Practice & Ethics documents, I approached a major hospital in Dubai that had a ban on doulas and presented how trained and certified doulas work ethically and professionally to serve birthing couples. This led the hospital to lift the ban, and, to date, DONA doulas are one of the leading organizations that are welcomed in this particular hospital, as well as others.

What do you wish doulas in North America knew about birth and/or postpartum and being a doula in your country?

The profession of a doula in our region only came to life about eight years ago, and it can be a challenging one, as many hospitals and doctors are still unaware of our profession. Due to this, we often find ourselves in certain clashes as people presume that we believe we are medical professionals that advise and coerce moms into making certain decisions. We work in a medical

system that primarily involves private institutions and insurance which, in turn, treats maternity care like a business. Sadly, the work of a postpartum doula isn't very prominent here. Many residents have the luxury of live-in home help and believe that is sufficient to support them in the early postpartum period. Postnatal home visits by midwives are not part of standard maternity care in our region, and while we do have a few private clinics that are offering this as a paid service, many are not aware of this option.

How can DONA International best serve and support you and other doulas in your area?

It has been great to be elected as the region's DONA International Ambassador. Through this role, I feel more connected to a growing doula community that I passionately love to support and work with(in). I am looking forward to organizing meetups, holding discussions and sharing experiences across — and inspiring all within — this community. In the future, I would love to deepen this support by training and qualifying as a DONA trainer and hosting regular regional DONA Doula training workshops. I have already been





let's doula this

asked about this quite a few times. With time, I would also love to work together with DONA to produce Arabic content and material for training workshops in our predominately Arabic speaking regions.

What have you enjoyed most about being a DONA International Ambassador?

Having only recently been given the role of DONA International Ambassador (Gulf region), I am excited to actively support the local doula community. I am looking forward to meetups, other professional events, mentorship opportunities and engaging with other DONA trained doulas as their ally. I want them to know that they can always come to me, for anything they may need. I feel I have always been an active doula in the birth community in Dubai, and so having the official title just makes it ... official!

How do most of your clients hear about you and find out about your doula services?

I am one of the longest-standing doulas in the UAE, so most of my clients come from word of mouth, my childbirth education classes and, pre-COVID, through regular in-person events I used to host. I am also pretty active on Instagram and, more recently, I have had a few doctors recommend me to their patients. This is always great because it seems that we are starting to bridge the gap.

How has COVID-19 impacted postpartum families in your region?

The majority of UAE residents are expats with families in their country of origin. During COVID-19, many families were counting on their own mothers and families to fly over for their births and, especially, to help and support them during the postpartum. Many flights were suspended, and families (and partners) stuck abroad, which created a lot of anxiety for birthing moms here. I am glad that the doula community was able to offer help and support (including pro bono care) whenever and wherever possible. Thankfully, the UAE has opened up pretty quickly and moms are slowly able to organize small meetups and playdates. This is a blessing, because of the support it offers to these families.

What is the state of postpartum mental health in your country?

Generally, culturally, postnatal mental health is something we just do not speak out about. In some cultures, it is almost taboo to visit a mental health therapist or believe that you suffer a mental health disorder. I believe there are many undiagnosed cases of postpartum health issues in our region, possibly due to the limited number of maternal health professionals and hefty prices for consultations that are usually not covered by insurance. I also think that prenatal professionals can put more effort into addressing postpartum health when working with clients and, more generally, through childbirth education classes. These tend to focus on the prenatal period, leaving unprepared couples to cope with the harsh reality and challenges of parenting and breastfeeding.

Tell us about your doula community and how you stay connected and supportive of each other.

In the UAE, I am thrilled to say, our doula community is thriving, with the majority (30-plus) being DONA trained and/or certified. We have about three doula collectives in the country, which works great in terms of supporting, debriefing and serving as backup for each other. We also have a couple of Facebook and WhatsApp communities through which we connect, enquire and share. Pre-COVID, we hosted monthly doula meet-ups, and I look forward to hosting more in the near future. I truly believe that the more the doula community comes together, the more we can all work cohesively to achieve our common goal — supporting the birthing couple. Let's doula this!



Shereen Zarroug, mom of three, lives in Dubai and is originally from Sudan. Her passions are birth doula, childbirth education and birth coaching work. She is the founder of Belly Baby Mom.

