

The Birth of the European Doula Network

by Mary Kalau

Inspired by a need to connect with other doulas across Europe and to establish quality standards for doula formation and practice, in 2005 a vision began in the hearts of a few European doulas. A European Doula Network (EDN) was initially discussed at various birth-related conferences in Graz, Austria (2005/2006), in Bad Wildbad, Germany (2006 and 2008) and in Paris, France (2007). The vision led these doulas to build strong relationships between each other and then to reach out to women they knew doing the same work in other parts of Europe. Their primary goal was to create a network of support, and information between the various doula training providers and associations in Europe.

Much like birthing a baby, that journey took a lot of effort, focus and determination. Over the next six years the vision slowly became a reality.

The French Association “Doulas de France” set up a Yahoo site in 2006, with the idea of generating a focal point where doulas could network. They also created a European doula web page and published a brochure that included portraits of a number of European doula organisations. This provided the first insight into the real scale and breadth of the doula movement across Europe.

At the Midwifery Today conference in Bad Wildbad in 2008, a group of German-speaking doula trainers took the first steps to create a framework for unity and equal standards among German-speaking doula associations and training organisations. Over the next two years the expanding group added a Swiss representative and agreed on a document that proposed an open European network to all doula associations willing to develop and improve quality.

In 2011, the European Doula Network was founded. In 2020, EDN membership comprised of 45 doula associations and training organisations that span 23 European nations, as well as many individual “friend” memberships.

The founders decided at their 2011 meeting on an annual gathering of doula representatives of the various training organisations and associations, hosted by a different member country each time. The aim would be for participants to exchange information and learn from each other in order to gain a deeper understanding of the various endeavours to remedy challenges faced by birthing communities in each nation. Since the first official gathering in 2012, meetings have evolved to include not only representatives from doula associations and training providers across Europe, but all doulas—especially local doulas in the host country. They are encouraged to participate, with the primary goal of connecting, supporting, and informing each other.

In 2013, EDN statutes were written and during the 2015 EDN annual general meeting in London, members created a code of ethics. Lawyer, charity trustee, and breastfeeding counsellor Johanna Rhys-Davies assisted EDN representatives with creating a document that was translatable both in terms of the language used and with cultural sensitivity. It was crucial to create a document that not only clearly stated the role of a doula, but one that was sensitive to each nation’s diversity in birth traditions, customs, and laws. The discussion was long and involved, and a code of ethics was established in English that all of the international members could proudly support and which could also be easily translated into each member language.

The EDN leadership team rotates on a regular basis, which keeps the network full of new energy and fresh ideas.

The EDN shares information and connections on doula activities across Europe through its newsletter; and members regularly exchange knowledge and experience in an online forum. The EDN also provides scholarships for members to participate in various birth-related events across Europe and donates to organisations that offer birth services to those in need. It also supports doulas and midwives who are suffering discrimination in their countries, while raising awareness via their media presence.

The EDN celebrated its 10th official birthday in 2020 in the first online EDN conference. Although the network is still young, the vision that began in the hearts of a few doulas continues to grow exponentially. Not only have the lives of hundreds of doulas been touched by that vision, but so too have those of the many young families with whom they have worked in Europe and beyond.

A community of birthkeepers, regardless of borders, distance, or language, is well worth nurturing! As Japanese writer Ryunosuke Satoro said, "Individually, we are one drop. Together, we are an ocean."