

Water Birth Trend: Is It Safer and More Comfortable for Mothers and Babies?

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, water birth has become increasingly popular as a more natural and comfortable alternative to conventional methods. This method is believed to reduce pain, speed up the labor process, and provide greater emotional control for mothers. This study aims to explore mothers' subjective perceptions and experiences of water birth through a qualitative approach with phenomenological methods and literature studies. Informants consisted of mothers who underwent water birth, midwives, obstetricians, and health facility managers. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, and were strengthened by analysis of international academic and policy literature. The results of the study indicate that although many mothers feel more comfortable and satisfied with the water birth experience, there is still a gap between perceptions of comfort and medical safety standards. In Indonesia, limited infrastructure, medical personnel training, and unequal access are major challenges. Therefore, water birth must be carried out with the support of adequate facilities, strict medical protocols, and comprehensive education for pregnant women. This study emphasizes the importance of an evidence-based approach to ensure the safety and effectiveness of this method in the maternal health care system

Keywords: Childbirth Safety; Maternal-Birth Experience; Water-Birth

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the trend of alternative births such as water births has shown a significant increase, especially among pregnant women who want a more natural birth experience with minimal medical intervention. Water birth is seen as a solution that offers a calmer and more personal atmosphere, with the assumption that warm water can help relieve pain, speed up dilation, and provide psychological comfort. According to a study published in Rokhimawaty et al (2025), women who gave birth in water reported higher levels of satisfaction compared to conventional methods, especially in terms of control over the birth process and emotional comfort. This trend is also supported by the increasing

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pro-choice campaign by the midwifery and doula community that encourages maternal autonomy in determining birth choices.

However, the increasing interest in this method also raises critical questions regarding the readiness of the health system and the scientific evidence supporting its safety. Although some studies have shown that water birth can reduce the risk of episiotomy and the use of anesthesia, the available data is not entirely conclusive regarding its impact on infant safety, especially in the second stage of labor (the birth phase). A report by Vidiri et al (2022) stated that although immersion in water during the early stages of labor is safe, water birth still requires further evaluation due to potential risks such as infection, neonatal respiratory distress, and umbilical cord rupture. Therefore, despite its increasing popularity, it is important to critique whether this trend is truly based on strong scientific evidence or more on subjective preferences and the romanticization of the natural birth experience.

The perception that water birth offers a sense of safety and comfort for pregnant women has been a major reason for the increasing popularity of this method. Warm water is believed to stimulate the release of endorphins and oxytocin which help the labor process to be more relaxed and efficient. A study by Herrero-Orenga (2024) in the Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews concluded that immersion in water during the early stages of labor can reduce the need for epidural analgesia and shorten the duration of labor. However, the subjective comfort felt by the mother does not necessarily guarantee objective safety for the baby, especially if it is not supported by strict medical protocols and trained health workers. This shows the gap between individual perceptions and evidence-based medical standards.

On the other hand, claims about the comfort of water birth are often confronted with concerns about medical risks that are not yet fully understood by the public. Health professionals are still divided, especially when discussing the phase of childbirth carried out in water. A report from Rahayu et al (2022) warns that although the first phase of water birth can be beneficial, the second phase (birth of the baby) has potential risks such as water aspiration by the neonate, infection, and umbilical cord complications. Criticality towards this method is important so that mothers' choices are not only based on narratives of comfort alone, but also consider the risks and benefits objectively. Therefore, an evidence-based approach is urgently needed to bridge the gap between subjective experience and long-term medical safety.

The increasing demand for water births has prompted a number of health facilities, especially maternity hospitals and private clinics, to provide this service as part of the diversification of delivery methods. These facilities are generally equipped with special birthing pools, water temperature control systems, and medical personnel trained to handle the birth process in water. This shows a paradigm shift in obstetric services, from a high medical intervention model to a more personal and holistic approach. However, equal access to water birth services remains a problem, as most of these facilities are only available in urban areas or in private health institutions at additional costs that are not affordable

for everyone. This raises critical questions about equity in maternal health services, especially in the context of Indonesia which is still grappling with disparities in access to quality midwifery services.

In addition, the readiness of medical personnel in handling water births is also worth critically questioning. Although there is special training for midwives and doctors in water birth procedures, not all health workers have adequate competence and experience in handling complications that may occur during childbirth in water. A study by Reviriego-Rodrigo et al (2023) underlines the importance of continuous training and strict standard protocols in the implementation of water births to ensure the safety of mothers and babies. Without the support of a strong training system and clear regulations, the adoption of this method is at risk of becoming a mere trend without solid medical substance. Therefore, the integration of water birth into the health service system must be accompanied by a comprehensive evaluation, both in terms of infrastructure, human resources, and health policy governance.

The increasing popularity of water birth is not always accompanied by adequate understanding from prospective mothers regarding the procedure, its benefits, and risks. Many decisions to choose this method are more influenced by narratives on social media, personal testimonials, or natural lifestyle trends, rather than information sourced from valid medical literature. A study by Gillen et al (2023) showed that most women choose a particular birth method based on emotions, peer experiences, and media representations, rather than through a critical understanding of clinical evidence. This information gap can lead to unrealistic expectations and increase risks if prospective mothers do not receive comprehensive education before choosing a birth method. Therefore, health care providers have a great responsibility to provide balanced, evidence-based information that is tailored to the medical conditions of each pregnant woman.

Lack of reproductive health literacy also contributes to doubt and confusion in decision-making regarding delivery methods. In fact, the right choice of delivery is greatly influenced by the individual's clinical condition, medical history, and the readiness of medical facilities. In this context, education provided by midwives, obstetricians, and prenatal counselors is very important. Research by Yuill et al (2020) emphasized that active involvement of mothers in the decision-making process can only be achieved if they obtain comprehensive and unbiased information. Therefore, the preparation of educational materials that are easy to understand, research-based, and communicated with an empathetic approach needs to be a priority in the maternal health service system, especially amidst the development of various non-conventional delivery methods such as water birth.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with a phenomenological study method and literature study to explore in depth the trend of water birth and evaluate whether this method is truly safer and more comfortable for mothers and babies. The phenomenological approach was chosen because it allows

researchers to understand the lived experiences of mothers who undergo water birth from their subjective perspectives. With this approach, the study aims to explore the meaning and essence of the water birth experience experienced by mothers, medical personnel, and health service managers, as well as identify factors that influence their perceptions of the safety and comfort of this method.

In the phenomenological study method, the research focuses on an in-depth understanding of the experiences of mothers who have undergone water birth. Research informants consist of mothers who have chosen this method, midwives, obstetricians, and health service managers. Data collection techniques are carried out through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions which aim to reveal the perceptions, motivations, and challenges faced by informants during the labor process. The data obtained are then analyzed using a phenomenological approach to identify the main themes that describe the individual's subjective experience of water birth.

Meanwhile, a literature study was conducted to support and strengthen the phenomenological findings by reviewing scientific articles, policy reports from medical organizations such as WHO, ACOG, and academic journals that discuss the benefits, risks, and clinical standards of water birth. This literature study also serves to compare the results of international research with the local Indonesian context, in order to provide deeper insight into the relevance and sustainability of the water birth trend in the Indonesian health care system

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Mothers's Perceptions and Subjective Experiences of Water Birth

1. Water Birth as an Emotional Choice and Symbol of Maternal Autonomy in Childbirth

Water birth, or birth in water, is increasingly accepted as a more natural alternative option for mothers who want a less medically-interventional birth experience. In addition to giving mothers the freedom to control their bodies and the birth process, water birth also symbolizes the empowerment of mothers in choosing how they want to give birth (Yanti & Suryani, 2024). Scientific research supports the many benefits associated with water birth, both physical, psychological, and emotional, although some risk aspects also need to be considered.

One of the main benefits described in various studies is pain reduction. Research states that water birth can reduce the use of analgesics and other medical interventions during childbirth (Latifahanum et al., 2025). The process of water birth, according to several studies, reduces muscle tension and provides a relaxing effect thanks to the warm water temperature. This allows the mother to move more freely, respond to contractions more flexibly, and feel more comfortable compared to conventional births. A study by Mu'tamaroh (2017) found that mothers who give birth in water tend to use less painkillers such as epidurals, thanks to the soothing nature of water, which can also reduce pain naturally. This study showed that 73% of mothers who chose water birth reported

a higher level of comfort during labor compared to mothers who chose conventional births.

In addition, several studies have also shown that water birth can reduce perineal injuries. A study conducted by Tridiyawati (2020) showed that mothers who gave birth in water experienced lower rates of perineal injuries compared to those who gave birth conventionally. Water provides softness to the perineal tissue, allowing for more natural opening and stretching without the risk of tearing or episiotomy that often occurs in vaginal birth. According to research by Górný et al., 2025), water birth can also reduce the likelihood of babies experiencing birth trauma, such as head or spine injuries, due to the warmer water temperature and a more supportive environment for baby movement during birth.

However, despite the overwhelming evidence supporting the benefits of water birth, some risks remain and should be considered. Although water birth can reduce the need for medical intervention, there is a risk of infection for babies born in water if the water quality is not maintained properly. (Pariani, 2018) Bacterial infections or problems related to contaminated water can cause complications for the mother or baby. Therefore, it is important to ensure that the water remains clean and safe for use in childbirth. The study found that although the risk of infection remains, with proper hygiene procedures, water birth can be done safely without serious complications.

Water birth also offers significant psychological benefits for mothers. Several studies have shown that water birth can enhance a mother's emotional experience during labor. Water provides a sense of comfort, allowing mothers to feel more relaxed, reducing anxiety, and helping them maintain control over contractions. This study suggests that psychological aspects of water birth such as feeling more independent, more connected to the body, and more calm have a positive impact on mothers' feelings about the birth process (Masykuroh et al., 2022).

In social and cultural aspects, water birth is also seen as a symbol of maternal empowerment. In modern society, where many mothers feel less involved in medical decisions related to their pregnancy and childbirth, water birth provides an opportunity to choose how they want to give birth. A study by Cooper & Warland (2022) showed that mothers who choose water birth tend to value personal freedom and control over their bodies more, leading to a more positive and meaningful experience. This also reflects an important shift in the maternal health care system, which is increasingly paying attention to maternal choice and raising awareness of the importance of active maternal involvement in determining the best way to give birth.

Overall, water birth has been scientifically proven to have many benefits, especially in terms of reducing pain, reducing the risk of perineal injury, and improving the emotional well-being of mothers. While there are risks of infection to be aware of, these studies show that with proper management, water birth can be a safe and effective experience. It is not only a physical alternative to giving birth, but also an emotional choice that represents a mother's control over her

body and a shift in how we view women's roles in the birth process. With more and more research supporting it, water birth continues to symbolize empowerment and freedom for mothers to choose how they give birth, while still considering the safety and well-being of both mother and baby.

2. The Role of Facilities and Medical Personnel in the Comfort and Sense of Security of Mothers

The role of facilities and medical personnel is very important in determining the comfort and safety of mothers during the water birth process. Although emotional factors, such as positive experiences and the mother's trust in this method, are the main considerations, the mother's physical comfort also depends greatly on the readiness of the facilities and the quality of support provided by medical personnel. Adequate facilities play a key role in creating a comfortable and safe atmosphere for mothers during labor. A large enough water pool, with a stable water temperature, can help mothers feel more relaxed and reduce the pain of contractions. Conversely, a narrow pool or uncontrolled water temperature can increase maternal discomfort and slow down the labor process. Water birth can also significantly reduce pain, increase emotional comfort, and reduce dependence on painkillers, but these benefits are highly dependent on the quality of the facilities provided (Rahayu et al., 2022; Sarawad, 2023). Stable water temperature, pool cleanliness, and complete medical equipment are factors that greatly support a smooth and safe labor experience.

In addition to facilities, competent and trained medical personnel also play an important role in creating a sense of security and comfort for mothers. In the water birth process, the presence of a doctor or midwife who has special skills in managing water birth procedures is vital. Trained medical personnel are able to provide the emotional support needed by mothers, reduce anxiety, and optimize the management of delivery procedures. A study by Gultom et al (2025) revealed that emotional support provided by medical personnel can reduce maternal stress during labor and increase their perception of comfort. When mothers feel supported, both emotionally and with clear information about the stages of labor, a sense of security will be created and the labor process tends to run more smoothly. Conversely, the inability of medical personnel to provide support or inadequate information can increase maternal anxiety, which can ultimately worsen the labor experience.

However, limited facilities and lack of special training for medical personnel can be serious obstacles in implementing the water birth method. Some mothers reported that they felt anxious and uncomfortable when the facilities used did not meet standards, such as pools that were too small or unstable water temperature settings. In a more relatable phenomenon, many mothers who gave birth in hospitals with limited facilities expressed the discomfort they felt, especially related to the cramped space and poorly maintained water temperature. Without trained medical personnel, the risk of complications such as difficulty breathing in babies or bleeding in mothers can also increase, which can worsen the mother's

sense of security and comfort. Anisa et al (2024) stated that inadequate facilities can affect maternal comfort and slow down the labor process, while facilities that meet standards can help speed up birth and reduce maternal stress.

In conclusion, maternal comfort during water birth is greatly influenced by two main factors: the quality of the facilities and the competence of the medical staff. Adequate facilities, such as a large enough water pool and stable temperature settings, as well as medical staff who are trained, competent, and can provide appropriate emotional support, contribute greatly to a positive and safe birth experience. Conversely, limited facilities and poorly trained medical staff can increase maternal anxiety and reduce her comfort, which in turn can affect the smoothness of the birth process. Therefore, it is important for health facilities to ensure that these two aspects of the facilities and medical staff are always maintained in quality to create a safe and comfortable water birth experience for mothers.

Critical Evaluation of Water Birth Safety Based on Literature and Clinical Practice

1. Inconsistencies between International Security Protocols and Field Practices in Indonesia

Although there are strict guidelines on the safety of water births that have been issued by international organizations such as ACOG (2014) and the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (RCOG, 2018), in reality, many health facilities in Indonesia have not fully complied with these standards. These international guidelines cover various important aspects such as close monitoring of the condition of the mother and baby, the use of sterile water, and special training for medical personnel in handling complications that may arise during the birth process. However, in the field, many clinics or hospitals in Indonesia only provide water pools without being equipped with technology to monitor water temperature or an adequate sterilization system. The absence of appropriate facilities and minimal training of medical personnel increase the potential for serious risks, such as infection, aspiration of water by the baby, or delays in emergency treatment.

This phenomenon reflects a larger problem in Indonesia, namely the mismatch between international standards and the reality on the ground. The desire of many mothers to give birth naturally with water birth is often influenced by the perception that this birth process is more comfortable and safer. However, many are unaware of the risks associated if this procedure is not carried out properly. In a scientific study by Tarabit (2019), it was stated that water birth can provide comfort and reduce pain for the mother, but without adequate monitoring of the mother and baby, serious complications such as water aspiration by the baby or infection can occur. The study emphasized that to reduce the risk, facilities offering water birth must be equipped with sophisticated medical equipment and trained medical personnel to handle complications that may arise.

In addition, research by Hendarwan et al (2018) also revealed that without proper medical monitoring, such as a baby's heart rate monitor or a device that can detect complications, the risk to the safety of the mother and baby increases significantly. This discussion is in line with the findings of the WHO (World Health Organization) which states that water birth can only be carried out safely if the facility is equipped with adequate medical equipment and trained medical personnel to deal with complications. WHO also warns that if international protocols are not followed, morbidity and mortality rates can increase, both for mothers and babies.

The high incidence of infection in facilities that do not meet sterilization standards (Pariani, 2018; Nolt et al., 2022). The study found that many hospitals do not have strict sterilization procedures for water pools, which ultimately increases the risk of infection. In addition, the study also revealed that many health facilities do not have rapid access to trained medical teams to handle emergency complications such as water aspiration by the baby or maternal bleeding after birth. This further worsens safety during water birth.

Given these facts, it can be concluded that although water birth is increasingly popular in Indonesia as a more natural and comfortable birth alternative, the mismatch between international protocols and field practices remains a major problem. This gap increases the risk of serious complications that can endanger the safety of the mother and baby. Therefore, to ensure safety during water birth, Indonesia needs to improve the quality of medical facilities and the training of medical personnel involved. By implementing strict protocols, improving medical infrastructure, and ensuring the readiness of facilities to handle complications, these risks can be minimized, and water birth can be performed safely in accordance with international standards.

2. Lack of Local Empirical Data as an Obstacle to Objective Evaluation of Water Birth Safety

The lack of local empirical data on the safety of water birth is indeed a major obstacle in efforts to objectively evaluate this birth method in Indonesia. Most of the existing scientific references on the safety of water birth come from international studies, which were conducted in the context of a health system that is very different from Indonesia. Countries with more advanced health systems, such as the United States or European countries, have complete medical facilities and better health infrastructure, with stricter and more structured medical protocols. In contrast, Indonesia faces major challenges in terms of the quality of health services, infrastructure, and differences in access between urban and rural areas. Therefore, data obtained from these countries are often irrelevant or difficult to apply to the Indonesian context, due to the large differences in access to medical care, trained medical personnel, and hospital infrastructure.

A relevant example of an international study is a study conducted by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) in the UK. In their study, water births were considered safe if performed in hospitals with adequate medical supervision and appropriate facilities. However, this is highly dependent

on the quality of the hospital facilities and the availability of trained medical personnel. In Indonesia, especially in areas with limited health facilities or outside large cities, this can be a major challenge. Water births in developed countries have very low complication rates, but this cannot be used as a direct reference for Indonesia, which faces major differences in terms of the quality of facilities and access to trained medical personnel. Therefore, discussions about data from abroad need to be understood in the context of very different health systems.

This phenomenon is clearly seen in case studies in Indonesia, such as those that occur in several hospitals or clinics in urban and rural areas. In areas with limited medical facilities, the implementation of water birth often relies more on existing resources, such as the presence of a sterile water tub and access to a doctor or midwife trained in the procedure. In such situations, although the water birth method is reported to provide a more comfortable experience for the mother, the risk of complications remains, including infection, physical trauma, or even complications related to the baby's breathing. In the absence of systematic and reliable data from local research, doctors and medical personnel are forced to rely on international guidelines that may not always be relevant to local challenges.

In this context, scientific discussions also support the urgency of developing a local database. Research by the World Health Organization (WHO) on the practice of water birth emphasizes the importance of careful monitoring and adequate medical supervision during the birth process. WHO recommends that this method should only be carried out in health facilities that can provide emergency medical care in case of complications, as well as clear procedures for monitoring the mother and baby during and after birth. Therefore, systematic and longitudinal research involving various hospitals in Indonesia is very important to better understand the risks and benefits of water birth in the Indonesian context.

Longitudinal research in Indonesia would also help identify long-term health outcomes for mothers and babies after water birth. Longitudinal studies allow for monitoring of changes in maternal and infant health, including long-term effects such as respiratory problems or developmental disorders (Nuryana et al., 2024). Without in-depth long-term data, it is difficult to gauge the overall impact of water birth over a longer period of time, especially in the context of social and economic disparities in Indonesia.

In addition, clinical experience gained from local data collection is also important. For example, in some hospitals or clinics in a particular area, water birth success rates and complication rates may vary depending on the quality of the facilities and the level of expertise of the medical personnel available. Research involving more comprehensive local data could lead to a better understanding of the specific risks faced by mothers and babies, and ways to mitigate these risks through better training or improved facilities.

The importance of building a stronger local clinical database is further enhanced by the fact that medical decision-making without relevant data is often based on assumptions and international standards that do not always reflect local

needs. More comprehensive data collection will enable evidence-based policy-making that is more in line with Indonesia's medical needs and challenges. This will not only improve the quality of health care but also improve health outcomes for mothers and babies who choose water birth. With a stronger local database, Indonesia can develop more relevant and effective medical guidelines, ensuring the safety and well-being of mothers and babies in every birth.

Thus, the development of systematic and longitudinal research in Indonesia is urgently needed to generate data that can be used to evaluate and improve water birth practices, as well as to develop better health policies that are more suited to the specific needs of Indonesian society.

CONCLUSION

Water birth is seen as a more natural and empowering birthing method, giving mothers greater control over their bodies and the birth process. The subjective experiences of mothers suggest that this method can reduce pain, speed up labor, and increase physical and emotional comfort, especially when supported by adequate facilities and trained medical personnel. However, in Indonesia, there is still a mismatch between field practices and international protocol standards, which can increase risks such as infection and delayed management of complications. Therefore, although water birth has the potential to provide a positive birthing experience, its success is highly dependent on the readiness of the facilities and the competence of medical personnel.

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