



2022

Rebozo Policy Research Report

Executive Summary



Background

Concerns have been raised about cultural appropriation within the birth support industry, with the use of the Mexican Rebozo being a specific point of contention. This has created a policy question for birth work organizations as to whether or not their current practices are culturally appropriative and if so, is there a way to teach that avoids this.

To address this policy question, Doula Canada undertook a policy research project in the Spring of 2021 to address:

1. What is cultural appropriation?
2. Are our current practices culturally appropriative? And if so:
3. Is there a way to move forward with the teaching of techniques using textiles that is not culturally appropriative?

To address these policy research questions, a research team led by Keira Grant, EDI Lead, Racialized Communities, designed and conducted the following qualitative research methods:

1. One-on-one semi-structured interviews with four (4) Mexican birth workers
2. A one-on-one semi-structured interview with a professor of Mexican history
3. A semi-structured roundtable discussion with a Mexican DTC member and two birthworkers living in Mexico whom she is connected with.
4. Thematic analysis of posts on the topic of “Rebozo” in the DTC private member Facebook group.

All qualitative data were coded using an *a priori* coding scheme based on a narrative literature review of sources on perceptions and experiences of cultural appropriation in Central America and in the Central American diaspora; as well as sources on the history and usage of the Rebozo.

CULTURAL APPROPRIATION

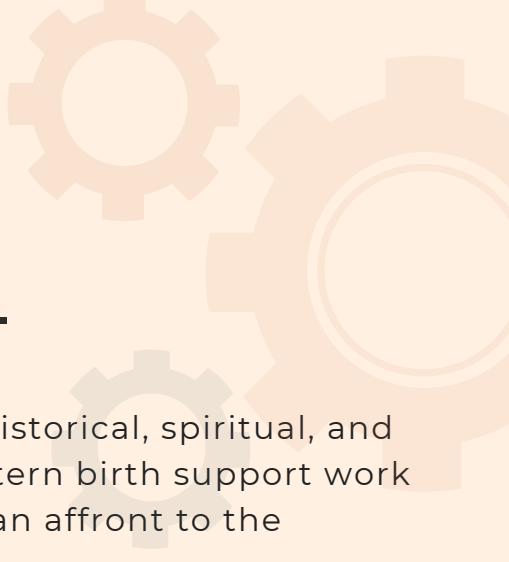
The analysis found that cultural appropriation is the usage by members of a white-dominant society of items or ideas created by members of a racialized culture when that usage involves four elements: 1) displays of colonially-derived power, 2) casual or disrespectful use of items that are intimate and sacred in the originating culture, 3) economic exploitation of the appropriated item and the individuals who created it, and 4) using the item inauthentically, i.e. in a manner that deviates from or makes light of the items intended purpose.

Conventional approaches to teaching birth support techniques in white-dominant organizations such as Doula Canada enacts these four elements in various ways.

Colonial power dynamics have manifested in ways like teaching traditional Indigenous techniques in conjunction with techniques that have been developed by Western birth workers since Rebozo was popularized in the 1960s and 70s. This teaching can happen both with no acknowledgment of the source of Indigenous knowledge and also by claiming that techniques are of “ethnic” origin when they are not.

Another way in which the power dynamics of colonialism are evident is that right now it is virtually an expectation that Western-trained doulas are versed in techniques using a Rebozo, and this predominantly white workforce is highly rewarded for using these techniques. Conversely, there continues to be ongoing marginalization of traditional Mexican birth workers in Mexico and in the diaspora who are trying to preserve their traditional practices using the Rebozo.

Doula Canada will alleviate harm by providing education regarding cultural appropriation as a dimension of systemic racism. Additionally, education will be provided regarding the history of Rebozos, how they became popularized in Western birth work, and the concerns that have arisen regarding cultural appropriation and Rebozos. Doula Canada will also implement a gratitude practice and encourage students and alumni to implement a gratitude practice when authentic Rebozos or any items created by racialized cultures are used. The capitalization of the word “Rebozo”, when used in print, is an example of that gratitude practice.



ACTIONS IN BIRTH WORK

Many people view the Rebozo as an item of profound historical, spiritual, and personal significance. The commonly held view in Western birth support work that the Rebozo is a “tool” or a “birth bag essential”, is an affront to the intimacy and sacredness of the item.

To alleviate the harms caused by the use and misuse of intimate and sacred items, Doula Canada will focus its teaching of textile support techniques on techniques that have been developed in the West since the Rebozo was popularized. Doula Canada will not provide hands-on teaching of techniques that are exclusive to racialized and Indigenous cultures.

Economic exploitation in relation to Rebozos in birth work manifests with regards to profit from the item, and profit from the techniques. With regards to the item, many Indigenous artisans rely on selling Rebozos for their livelihood. The demand for Rebozos created by the birth support industry has led to mass production of Rebozos, putting profit from Indigenous designs and weaving techniques in the hands of corporations rather than Indigenous people. In some instances, these products claim to be authentic (i.e. handmade by Indigenous people) when they are not. When Rebozos are authentic, Indigenous artisans are often exploited by a middle person who pays them very little, while charging an exploitative mark-up when the item is sold to the North American market.

Economic exploitation of the techniques happens when birth workers extract Indigenous knowledge from a variety of nations and use the combined teachings for ongoing profit while there is simultaneously no mechanism for ongoing compensation of the Indigenous people who shared the teachings. In fact, the Indigenous people who provided the knowledge often live in poverty.

To alleviate these harms, Doula Canada will provide students with a verified list of options for sourcing Rebozos made by Indigenous Mexicans who have been compensated fairly. Doula Canada will offer Educational Units (EUs) for external textile technique courses only if the instructor is of ancestry that is relevant to the textiles and techniques being used.

ACTIONS IN BIRTH WORK (CONT.)

Inauthenticity has arisen in birth work when textiles such as sheets, scarves, and any long fabric have been called Rebozos. Inauthenticity has also been implied by the common use of the term “Rebozo-techniques”. This terminology implies that all birth support techniques carried out with textiles are of Mexican origin when this is not the case. It also implies that the Rebozo is a tool for birth support, when in fact it has a much more complex and rich history, as well as a broad range of uses and applications. Many of the techniques using Rebozos that are part of the practices of parteras (traditional Indigenous Mexican midwives) are outside the scope of non-medical birth support and can cause harm to fetuses and birthing people if performed without proper training.

To alleviate the harms caused by inauthenticity, we will only use the word “Rebozo” to refer to traditionally handcrafted Indigenous-made Rebozos. When other textiles are used, we will use the phrase “textile techniques”. When Rebozos are used to demonstrate techniques developed by Westerners or which are universal, the phrase “techniques using a Rebozo” will be used.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Based on the findings of the research report, Doula Canada developed the Textile Techniques Policy and began implementing it in the Spring of 2022. The policy will be reviewed in the Spring of 2025. The policy adopts eleven (11) recommendations made in the report.

The complete research report, with direct quotes from participants, recommendations, references, and appendices can be found in the “Member Resources” section of Doula Canada’s website and is available upon request by emailing info@doulatraining.ca.

The Textile Techniques Policy (2022) is available in the Member Resources section of Doula Canada's website