

Dignity in Childbirth: Less than half of UK women have the birth they want

For immediate release

As they launch their campaign for Dignity in Childbirth for all UK women, new research from Birthrights (the human rights in childbirth charity) shows that **less than half of women who give birth in hospital or a birth centre have the birth that they want**. The survey shows that the care women receive during childbirth has a profound impact on their self-image, and on their relationships with their babies and partners.

Birthrights founder Elizabeth Prochaska says: "Our survey of over 1100 Mumsnet users who gave birth in the last three years reveals that many women still fail to receive respectful care and choice in childbirth. The research refutes the popular idea that birth only matters for a day, suggesting instead that how women are treated at this crucial time in their lives can have long-term consequences for their mental health, their bond with their infant and the strength of their family relationships."

Key findings from women who received care in hospital and birth centres include:

- **Nearly two thirds of women (63%) felt their baby's birth affected how they felt about themselves. Of those women 55% felt the impact was positive and 41% felt the impact was negative. The negative impact rose to 73% women who had instrumental births (i.e. experienced the use of a ventouse or forceps).**
- **Almost half of women felt that the birth affected their relationship with their baby. Of those 22% felt the impact was negative. Again, the negative impact rose dramatically for women who had instrumental births (59%).**
- **Over half of women said that childbirth affected their desire to have more children. Half of those women (52%) felt that their birth experience led to positive feelings about having children in the future, while 42% felt it had a negative impact.**

Television presenter **Davina McCall**, who will speak at the Birthrights Dignity in Childbirth Forum on 16th October, voiced her support for the campaign, saying: "I know from my own experiences that having respectful care during pregnancy and birth can make the journey to motherhood a positive one. It's shocking to hear how many women aren't getting the care they need."

Women were asked about their experience of choice and respect during their birth. Findings from women who received care in hospital and birth centres include:

- **Only 68% of women were given a choice of where to give birth**
- **20% of women felt that they were not given enough information to make choices during birth**
- **31% of women said that they did not feel in control of their birth experience**
- **15% of women were unhappy with the availability of pain relief and 10% were unhappy with the choice of pain relief**
- **23% of women were unhappy about being not given a choice of position during labour**
- **20% of women said healthcare professionals did not always introduce themselves**
- **18% of women did not feel that health professionals listened to them**
- **12% of women did not consider that they had consented to medical procedures, 24% of women who had instrumental births said they had not consented to procedures**

Women who experienced instrumental births or caesarean sections reported very significantly reduced choice and increased levels of disrespect during birth than those who experienced vaginal births. Women in London reported higher levels of disrespectful care.

Satisfaction rates were significantly lower for women who had given birth in hospital than for those who gave birth in birth centres and at home.



Mumsnet co-founder Carrie Longton also lent her support to the Birthrights campaign, stating: *"The results of this survey show just how important dignity during childbirth is, with less than half of Mums reporting that they were able to have the birth they wanted. But encouragingly the report also shows that it's not impossible to get it right if Mums are given the information, control, support and choice they need before during and after labour."*

In a series of in-depth interviews conducted with midwives for Birthrights by an independent researcher, midwives spoke of staffing shortages that left them unable to provide dignified care and described inadequate training on dignity issues.

In response to these results and the Mumsnet survey, **Professor Lesley Page (President of the Royal College of Midwives)** added: *"This important research underlines just how key respectful, dignified care during childbirth is for women and the midwives who are supporting them. While there are many examples of exceptional care taking place across the UK, these new statistics from Birthrights show that many women aren't able to exercise some of their basic rights to choose where and how they give birth. The negative impact this has on women and those caring for them is very clear. I support the Birthrights Dignity in Childbirth campaign to help enable all midwives to provide choice and respectful care to all women."*

Birthrights has published two interactive graphic stories representing the experiences of some of the mothers who have contacted Birthrights for support: <http://www.birthrights.org.uk/campaigns/graphic-stories>

Birthrights can provide further information and case studies on request. Please contact press@birthrights.org.uk or call Rebecca Schiller on 07793084945 for more information or to arrange an interview.

Notes to Editors

- Birthrights is the UK's only organisation dedicated to improving women's experience of pregnancy and childbirth by promoting respect for human rights. We believe that all women are entitled to respectful maternity care that protects their fundamental rights to dignity, autonomy, privacy and equality.
- Birthrights provides support and advice for women, their families and health professionals on a range of human rights in pregnancy and childbirth issues.
- The Birthrights Dignity in Childbirth Forum will take place on 16th October 2013 at the Royal College of Physicians London. Keynote speakers include **Davina McCall, Professor Lesley Page and Carrie Longton**. If you wish to attend the 1pm press and photo call (details of which can be found in the attached email) please RSVP to press@birthrights.org.uk
- Birthrights is a registered charity funded entirely by donations and run by volunteers. We are currently raising funds for our Dignity in Childbirth Campaign.
- Further details about the Forum and Campaign can be found on our website.
- Biographies of the Board of Trustees can be provided.
- A summary of the human rights in childbirth situation in the UK is provided below.

WHY DO HUMAN RIGHTS MATTER TO PREGNANT WOMEN?

The care that pregnant women receive during pregnancy and childbirth has a long-lasting effect on the physical and psychological health of women and their babies. Lack of respect for women's basic rights during childbirth can lead to women feeling degraded and dehumanised. The fundamental human rights values of dignity, privacy, equality and autonomy help guarantee women access to appropriate maternity services and respectful treatment during childbirth.

WHAT IS A HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATION IN CHILDBIRTH?

Failure to provide adequate maternity care, lack of respect for women's dignity, invasions of privacy, procedures carried out without consent, failure to provide adequate pain relief without medical contraindication, unnecessary or unexplained medical interventions, and lack of respect for women's choices about where and how a birth takes place, may all violate human rights law.

ARE WOMEN'S RIGHTS BEING VIOLATED IN THE UK?

Sadly, there is evidence that too many women in the UK are experiencing maternity care that does not respect their basic rights. Strain on under-resourced maternity services, a culture of excessive emphasis on clinical policy rather than individualised care, and misunderstanding of basic legal responsibilities, all contribute to poor quality care that can lead to violations of women's dignity and autonomy.

ARE HEALTHCARE PROVIDERS COVERED BY HUMAN RIGHTS LAW?

Under the Human Rights Act 1998, all UK public bodies must respect the rights set out in the European Convention on Human Rights. Public bodies include all NHS institutions, such as hospitals, Primary Care Trusts, NHS Trusts and Clinical Commissioning Groups. This means that NHS bodies must respect human rights when making decisions. It also means that caregivers working for public bodies must respect human rights as they go about their work.

DOES HUMAN RIGHTS LAW PROTECT UNBORN CHILDREN?

No. Unborn children do not have separate legal recognition from their mothers. Women are free to make choices against medical advice and, so long as they have mental capacity, they cannot be forced to accept treatment which is said to be in the interest of their unborn child.