Midwives supporting women's rights

Midwives and the women they care for are driving it forward, using the conceptual and legal framework of human rights to improve the world of childbirth; focusing us once again on the impact of this vulnerable time on individual women.

It is unsurprising, then, that this rights-based approach is progressing hand in hand with a feminist reawakening within the midwifery community (Walsh et al 2015). Midwifery has struggled to find acceptance and congruence with the broader feminist project at times, and birth has not consistently focused large on the agenda of the reproductive rights movement. Increasingly, though, across professions, disciplines and campaign groups, there is a shared recognition that if we can't get it right in birth, the impact spills over into more robustly defended areas of the women's rights movement.

The need for respect
Inspirational work is being done around the UK under a more explicit rights-banner. A 2010 Care Quality Commission (CQC) report into maternity care at Barking, Havering and Redbridge University Hospitals NHS Trust found the all-too-common connection between disrespectful and dangerous care (CQC 2011). Part of the remedy, led by midwife Felicity Ukoko, has been the embedding of the White Ribbon Alliance’s (WRA) Respectful maternity care charter (WRA 2014) in the mandatory education of midwives and the obstetric team, to positive effect (Birthrights 2013).

Education is key
Dignity in childbirth education, designed specifically for midwives and doctors, is increasingly in demand. A midwives’ guide to human rights (a collaborative project between several organisations) is being launched this autumn. It aims to empower and inspire the midwifery community to understand how the human rights legal framework impacts on their work and how it can be used as a positive tool; both for professionals and for women.

Midwives as activists
The quiet work of midwifery, that which goes on privately in the birth room, on the labour ward phone line and in research offices, is activism. Midwives are perfectly placed to bring human dignity and respect into the lives of often-vulnerable women. It’s time to start framing their work in this way. [OPINION]

Rebecca Schiller is co-chair of Birthrights charity and a doula in Ramsgate

References
CQC (2011). Maternity care at Barking, Havering and Redbridge University Hospitals NHS Trust, Newcastle upon Tyne: CQC.