



Rebecca Schiller

## Viewpoint

# Midwives supporting women's rights

Women's rights activists are everywhere. Some lobby hard for policy change, some work long hours in fluorescent-lit refuges supporting women fleeing domestic abuse, others use their legal expertise to counsel those whom no-one else is interested in. The more public-facing make speeches, write books and deliver lectures. Together they make the subtle changes that publicly and privately progress the women's rights movement. I'm grateful to know a few.

But there is another group working hard for women who often get overlooked. Happily they number in their 10s of thousands here in the UK. They get up early in the mornings and spend their days and nights at the grassroots of women's rights. Advocating. Making options open up where before there were none. They offer kindness and care in the form of tea, confident eyes and a flannel on the brow. Not just listening but really hearing. Cutting through a difficult system as best they can to make space for what they've heard. Treating each woman as an individual, not an inconvenience.

### Human rights in childbirth

They work quietly, often without recognition, and increasingly inside a system at odds with their mission. Many wouldn't frame their work as women's rights work; but for me, they are at the centre. These activists are midwives and, given the right tools, they have the power to make great change.

The human rights in childbirth movement is growing in reach and recognition. Increasingly

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. [tpm](#)

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### References

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