

## A Letter from An Anonymous Survivor Of Sexual Abuse For The Attention Of Birth Policy-Makers

To all those involved in designing, commissioning, regulating, reviewing and providing NHS Maternity Services,

I write as a woman who gave birth, rather naively, 10 years ago. At the time I believed I would birth better at home with a known and trusted midwife. I did birth better at home with a known and trusted midwife, fortunately, but only now, 10 years on, do I really realise why...

I was sexually abused when I was four years old. I remember feeling confused throughout my childhood, trying to work out what had happened and why. Was I special? Was I naughty? Did it happen to every four year old? Then I hit puberty and having been of use, of pleasure, to a man when I was a four year old girl, it was normal for me to be of use, of pleasure, as a fourteen year old girl. My body didn't feel like my own. I was distant from it. I lived in it, well I lived in my head not my body, but my relationship with it was strained. It let me down because it let things happen I wasn't sure I wanted to let happen, but they were normal things to me having learnt incorrectly what was normal at four years of age.

Then, at nineteen, I was told I would never conceive. No problem, I thought, I didn't want children anyway. A baby? Coming out of there? Sucking milk at your breast? Being dependent upon me? No thanks. Then I met a man and fell in love. How strange. Men had always been scary. I had learnt they had control over me and so I asserted myself, incredulously. It was critical to my functioning that I quash any sense of being controlled and so became controlling. Still fairly distant from my body but now in a relationship I wanted to make work with a kind, gentle and loving man who gave me all the space I needed. But I decided I wanted out. The acceptance and love was too hard to cope with and I was better alone, he was better without me and my baggage. We parted, but soon after, I discovered I was pregnant with his child. We decided to give marriage another go and try life with the baby we never thought we'd have. Deep down, I did have a desire to become a mother, of course I did...

I met my community midwife at 10 weeks pregnant and all I remember of that appointment was her asking me where I would give birth and how I would feed my baby. Neither of which I had any knowledge or experience of in order to make a decision. So I answered that I would birth in hospital and give breastfeeding a go – that's what you're supposed to say, right? I had only known I was pregnant for 2 weeks by then. She was efficient and to the point, and I didn't like her, I didn't feel cared for. But I kept seeing her, when I had to. What else do you do? Meanwhile a respected work colleague suggested my husband and I do a natural birth preparation class. Having never heard of this, I searched and found details of a local, 6 week course about breathing and relaxation techniques for a natural birth. I'm not really sure looking back why I was sold - I honestly think it was the kindness in the face of the teacher's photo on the website. It certainly wasn't because I wanted a natural birth. I really wanted a cesarean; take the baby out of my tummy and leave my vagina out of this. However, at the end of the 6 weeks, we were planning a homebirth.

I visited my midwife for a 37 week appointment and to tell her of our exciting homebirth plans. Her response: have your second at home and go in to hospital for your first. Little did she and I know then that I would never get a second chance at birth. I disliked her even more for not supporting us. I contacted the birth preparation teacher and she invited me for a cuppa. She suggested I chat with a midwife friend of hers, who when I did, was hugely supportive and offered to be my NHS community midwife instead. Who knew you could do this? Fabulous. She came and saw me at home and became my friend. She believed in me from the start and I felt safe with her. She was open, down to earth, kind and funny and made herself 'at home' in our home during my final antenatal appointments. We looked at our diaries together and she told me the days she wouldn't be available to support our homebirth – one day she was teaching on the midwifery course and another evening she'd be at a party. The Tuesday when I would be 39+5 was a free day. I went into labour on the Monday and gave birth on the Tuesday, in her care, in my home.

The labour started with a trickle of waters and some discomfort - just not really feeling fully well, but not having contractions. After a bath I decided to go to bed, but we rang our midwife just to confirm she didn't want us to go anywhere. She told us to keep to our plan and go to bed, then called back to say she would pop over to check I was definitely OK. She took my temperature and checked my blood pressure and told us her phone was on. That was about 1am. At 8.30am we called her back to say we were having contractions. I was coping with each one by breathing calmly and deeply and holding my dear husband's hands. We were still in bed dozing between them. Our midwife arrived with us about 9.30am - we had told her we didn't think we were near to birth. But as she arrived on our landing, I knew I was safe with her. I knew she would take care of me. I trusted her. Her crazy hair was piled up on her head with a pencil stuffed in it and her sweet, gentle smile filled me with confidence. She asked if I wanted her to examine me, I said no, not really and asked her opinion of where in the process she thought I was. She responded by asking me where I thought I was and I remember saying 'please don't say I am still in effacement'. Her response? 'No I think you're 8 or 9cm'. More confidence flooded my system.

Within 30 mins of that exchange of words, I was bearing down and by 10.15am my baby was born on the bathroom floor. My husband and I did it, together, with a kind and loving and trusted midwife at our side. A maternity care assistant had arrived before the birth as well - I didn't know her, but it was fine because she was our midwife's friend which meant she was trustworthy to us. I had skin to skin, then a bath, then my husband had skin to skin and then we got into bed with our baby, ate cakes and drank something fizzy, toasting our daughter's arrival with our midwife and her friend. It was as perfect as it could have been. No-one had put anything inside me, none of my negative memories had been triggered and I had a wholly positive birth experience leaving me feeling like I could do anything. My daughter's birth made me who I am today and cemented my husband and I together for life. As a new unit we started our new life.

I went on to become a doula and have since supported many women and their birth partners before, during and after birth. I have seen some practices, heard some words; certain language or tone of voice and a variety of interventions that I know would have triggered me immensely had I given birth in different circumstances and with different people. Had I birthed in hospital, with medical pain relief, with unknown and possibly male care providers, I am sure I would have been at risk of having a negative experience and possibly being re-traumatised. I can only see in hindsight how important it was for me, in my situation, to be in my own environment, my own home with my loyal man and a midwife I knew and trusted implicitly. I never acknowledged at the time that my childhood sexual abuse experiences would have ever had anything to do with how I birthed a baby, but now I can see now that they were right at the heart of why I needed to birth how I did. I needed to feel safe to be able to open, both physically and emotionally, and I needed people around me who trusted in the birth process, and in me.

I therefore believe it is paramount that women are able to get to know a midwife of their choice during their pregnancy. A midwife they feel at ease with. A midwife they like. A midwife they trust and feel safe with. And for that midwife to be the one to support that woman and her birth partner during her birth experience. I think I was somewhat fortunate with my birth experience and I want all women, regardless of their background, to have the opportunity to be as well supported as I was.

If we know 1 in 3 women aged 18-24 report being victims of childhood sexual abuse and 1 in 5 women aged 16-59 report experiencing some form of sexual violence since the age of 16, how absolutely critical is it that they have continuity of carer during their pregnancy and birth? And until this happens up and down the country within the NHS, how short-sighted is it to eliminate the gold standard of midwifery; independent midwives who women are able to choose and pay for out of their own pockets to ensure for themselves the level of care they need to birth well, to feel safe, to start motherhood feeling like wonderwomen, and to not go through birth being reminded of traumatic experiences.

From an anonymous, clever, surviving, strong, passionate, caring, brave woman.