

Birthrights Launches Today to Protect Women's Rights in Childbirth

Embargoed until 00:01 24/01/13

The UK's only organisation dedicated to improving women's experiences of pregnancy and childbirth by promoting respect for human rights launches in London today.

More than 120 key figures from the maternity services, including representatives from the Royal College of Midwives, Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists and the Royal College of Physicians, will meet this evening to officially launch Birthrights; a legal organisation founded on the belief that all women are entitled to respectful maternity care that protects their fundamental rights to dignity, autonomy, privacy and equality.

Speaking before the launch founder and chair Elizabeth Prochaska said, "as a barrister specialising in human rights my own experience of pregnancy and birth made me aware that our rights in childbirth are often forgotten, particularly when women are from vulnerable groups. Birthrights will seek to tackle this, forging close relationships with midwives, doctors and their professional bodies to promote and protect these rights. Our newly launched website (birthrights.org.uk) also provides clear and easy to understand information for women and their partners to ensure they are aware of their rights and know how to ensure they are respected. The law is very clear on many issues that women and their caregivers are currently facing. We will use it as a powerful tool for change."

The organisation, currently run by volunteers and reliant on donations, has been overwhelmed by the huge response to the launch. Co-chair Rebecca Schiller added, "we are delighted by the positive reactions from women, midwives, doctors and campaigners. Our launch is timely. With so much focus on the rising birth-rate and the strain on maternity services, the negative impact this can have on women has never been clearer. Birthrights will be campaigning for respect for women's rights during pregnancy and birth. By respecting these rights an investment in the maternity services can be made without any financial cost. Without this investment women's physical and psychological health are at risk."

New mother Clare Connerton, 30 from Whitstable, described Birthrights as, "a vital organisation providing clarity and advice to women and the professionals who care for them."

She added, "My own recent experiences of giving birth have highlighted just how deep an imprint women's experiences of pregnancy and birth leave on them. Three years ago, when my first baby was born, there were times when my wishes were ignored and when I felt abandoned and bullied by my care providers. I was shouted at by people I needed to be kind to me and denied an epidural for hours. Despite also meeting some wonderful midwives, his birth was a traumatic experience for me."

"Last month I had my second baby. This time I was better informed. I knew that I had a fundamental right to insist that those around me respected my wishes. Because of this I sought out senior midwives to talk to when others weren't supporting my choice to give birth at home and was able to access the care I needed. This time my care was based on giving me good information, respecting my decisions and treating me with dignity. Though my second baby was 11lb 2 ozs at birth he was born swiftly at home."



His birth, and the way I was treated this time, made me feel amazing. All women need and deserve to have access to maternity care that respects their rights in this way."

Please contact press@birthrights.org.uk or call 07793084945 for more information or to arrange interviews.

ENDS

Notes to Editors

- Birthrights is a not-for-profit organisation. We have applied to the Charity Commission for charitable status and to HMRC for recognition as charitable for tax and Gift Aid purposes.
- 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.

Do human rights apply to the NHS?

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.

