

Human Rights Challenges Experienced by Perinatal Women Facing Severe and Multiple Disadvantage

Introduction

This poster describes a current research project being carried out by Birthrights and Birth Companions which aims to investigate the human rights challenges experienced by women facing severe and multiple disadvantage during their maternity care. The project is funded by Trust for London.

Background

Many women still do not receive respectful care or choice in childbirth.¹ This problem is likely to be particularly acute for women who are facing severe and multiple disadvantage.²

In this project we use **severe and multiple disadvantage** to refer to sets of co-presenting needs, which may include:

- Housing problems, poverty and/or no access to public funds
- Perinatal mental health problems
- Physical and/or learning disabilities
- Substance misuse
- Social services involvement, or history of safeguarding issues
- Experiences of asylum, immigration and/or trafficking
- Isolation
- History of domestic abuse, sexual violence, human rights violations
- Experience of detention or imprisonment
- Language issues
- Experience of sex work

High-quality care, choice and control are strongly associated with positive experiences, birth outcomes and mother-baby relations.³ Poor quality and disrespectful care are associated with trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder, particularly for women with a history of mistreatment.⁴

Women facing multiple disadvantage run a greater risk of experiencing care that fails to recognise their choices, because of the complexity of overlapping needs, and because they may not be well-placed to advocate for themselves.⁵ They are less likely to access care, have poorer outcomes and are more likely to experience perinatal mental health problems.⁶

This project focusses on the experiences of women in London, where women with complex needs are over-represented in maternal deaths.⁷

Objectives of research

- To map the most frequent and severe rights-based issues which arise for women facing severe and multiple disadvantage during their care;
- To identify policy and practice changes to address these issues;
- To effect change and disseminate learning through multiple routes, including policy work, resources and training.

The project is strategically timed to feed in to the significant national and local change programmes set up to implement the 2016 NHS England National Maternity Review over the next two years.



Methodology

The project seeks to draw out rights-based challenges women face in the context of their maternity stories as a whole, because rights-based issues may not be recognised and articulated as such by women who have experienced them. The project is being overseen by a steering group of specialist midwives, researchers and women with lived experience.

Interviews

The first stage involves in-depth, semi-structured interviews with women who have recent experience of maternity care whilst facing severe and multiple disadvantage. Women are asked about their stories and experiences of maternity care. Through analysis, human rights issues are identified that may not be articulated as a rights breach during interviews.

Focus groups

As a second stage of research, we are running focus groups with specialist and non-specialist midwives and birth supporters, and with child protection professionals to understand the challenges they face in supporting women facing severe and multiple disadvantage.

Can you help?

We are currently seeking child protection professionals to take part in focus groups in London.

If you would be willing to take part in a focus group, or to refer others who may consider taking part, please speak with us or contact Rebecca Brione at rebeccabrione@birthrights.org.uk.

About the organisations

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.

Birth Companions is a unique charity which supports women experiencing severe disadvantage during pregnancy, birth and early parenting. We are the UK's leading organisation working in this area, with widely acknowledged expertise in the needs of pregnant women and new mothers facing severe disadvantage both in prison and the community.

The collaboration of Birthrights and Birth Companions draws upon the complementary skills of each organisation. Birthrights uses an extensive knowledge of human rights law and maternity care to inform women and educate maternity professionals about women's rights in childbirth. Birth Companions brings 20 years of experience of engaging with women with complex needs, and an in-depth understanding of the needs of highly vulnerable women as they transition to motherhood. Both organisations have a strong history of policy impact and media presence.

References

1. Birthrights, 2013. Dignity in Childbirth: Dignity Survey: Women's and midwives' experiences of dignity in UK maternity care.
2. Morad, S., Parry-Smith, W. and McSherry, W., 2013. Dignity in maternity care. Evidence Based Midwifery, 21, pp.5-15.
3. Birthrights, 2013. Dignity in Childbirth; Cook, K. and Loomis, C., 2012. The impact of choice and control on women's childbirth experiences. The Journal of perinatal education, 21(3), p.158; NHS England, 2016. National Maternity Review. Better Births; Improving Outcomes of Maternity Services in England.
4. Reed, R., Sharman, R. and Inglis, C., 2017. Women's descriptions of childbirth trauma relating to care provider actions and interactions. BMC pregnancy and childbirth, 17(1), p.21; Harris, R. and Ayers, S., 2012. What makes labour and birth traumatic? A survey of intrapartum 'hotspots'. Psychology & health, 27(10), pp.1166-1177.
5. Morad et al, 2013. Dignity in maternity care; McLeish, J. and Redshaw, M., 2018. Maternity experiences of mothers with multiple disadvantages in England: A qualitative study. Women and Birth, in press.
6. Balaam, M.C., Thomson, G., Van Lessen, L., Jenkins, H., Austin, J., Burnell, J. and Leavey, R., 2016. Birth Companions Research Project: Experiences and Birth Outcomes of Vulnerable Women.
7. NHS London Clinical Networks, 2016. London Maternal Deaths: A 2015 review.