



Interview with Mara Ricoy: Campaigning against obstetric violence

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Mara Ricoy

Interview by Jo Dagustun

In this interview, we hear from Mara who - based on her knowledge of variations in maternity experiences between the UK and Spain^[1] - created an international movement to raise awareness of, and ultimately seek to eradicate, the problem that is obstetric violence. Mara called the movement The Roses Revolution. In this interview, Mara reflects on the campaign's progress and the barriers that remain.

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed by AIMS, Mara. To start, can you tell us more about what drives your interest in maternity service improvement, and how you got started?

Thank you for giving me this space. When I was pregnant with my first child 20 years ago in London, I used to talk to other Spanish women like me, online, and realised the disparity in the care between the two countries. I had a great birth experience and I couldn't understand that this was a matter of chance, luck or location.

You describe yourself as matri-activist. What do you mean by that?

It was a way of trying to shorten my introductions and explanations, but it didn't work. I need to explain the word now. I consider myself an activist for the rights of women over our reproductive bodies throughout our lives, irrespectively of becoming mothers or not (menstruation, miscarriage, abortion, birth, breastfeeding, menopause, etc.) But also an activist to promote and recover our matriarchal culture and science.

Please tell us about the international initiative you created, The Roses Revolution.

The movement started 10 years ago as a reaction to the The Spanish Society of Gynaecology and Obstetrics publishing comic strips on their public website in which they laughed at women during labour, and at their sexual health and other issues. I was quite popular on social media talking about birth and the Spanish women were, quite rightly so, outraged - so was I. There were so many stories of obstetric violence coming out, the general feeling was of adding insult to injury. So I suggested writing those stories and taking them to maternity hospitals. I have learned - thanks to my admired Sheila Kitzinger and working for a birth crisis helpline - of the power of writing our stories to help with trauma. And we adopted the image of a rose, as it has such powerful symbolic meanings for people. The day I chose when we repeated the first action was the 25th of November as it is the day against violence towards women.^[2] The movement grew so much that someone told me in Austria they used the day to retrain midwives, and it has been mentioned as part of an exhibition about birth.

You've been working in this area for over 10 years. What progress have you seen over that period, and how optimistic are you for the potential for future progress?

I have to say, little, and difficult to know; it is almost like some positives in one direction and negatives in others. For example, 10 years ago most of the attacks I received were because I used the term 'obstetric violence' - nowadays the term is more commonly used, but I feel that we are still more worried about debating it than solving it, more concern about descriptions and definitions than the actual suffering and the behaviours.

What do you think is the biggest challenge faced by those working to eliminate obstetric violence today?

The lack of understanding of obstetric violence as a misogynistic crime. Not realising that this is a women's issue, for being women. And diluting our fight with neologisms from gender ideology^[3] that, rather than bring inclusivity, spread confusion and further invisibility of the oppression of women.

AIMS celebrated its 60th birthday in 2020. Looking forward, how do you think AIMS might best focus our limited resources, to help ensure improved maternity services for all?

Understanding how women, in all circumstances, give birth in the UK and in the world, refrain from falling into the trap of accidentally placing responsibility on women. I find birth a fascinating topic, but women have a right to turn up completely uninformed, no antenatal classes, not speaking the language, and to still be treated as the ones making the decisions in birth. So perhaps our activism should start at that level and engage with the women who don't know what AIMS is.

Visit this website to find out more about The Roses Revolution movement:

<https://jesusaricoy.wixsite.com/rosesrevolution>

Watch this video to see Mara speak about her work at the Forth Valley Feminists Women's Festival

(March 2022): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R9L5mFSiQ44>

[1] Editor's note: Mara first wrote for AIMS in 2012: <https://www.aims.org.uk/journal/item/spanish-rights>

[2] United Nations - International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women

25 November <https://www.un.org/en/observances/ending-violence-against-women-day>

[3] Editor's note: A neologism is a new word, usage or expression (Collins English Dictionary). The author appears to be suggesting that language around current debates on gender can dim the focus on women's issues in this case.