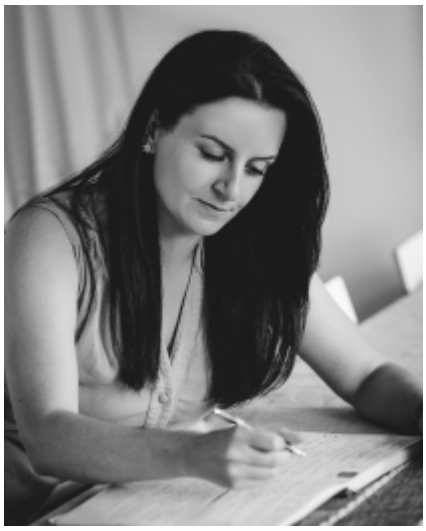
AIMS For a better birth...

Feminism, Graphic Zines and Maternity Rights

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By Gemma McKenzie

> *"I don't care if you want to hear from me, I'm saying it anyway."*

These are the words of Andi Zeisler in her co-authored book with Alison Piepmeier entitled,*Girl Zines: Making Media, Doing Feminism.*[1] The book explores what they describe as "grrrl zines"; "self-produced and anti-corporate" (p.2) pamphlets written by women and girls. In their pre-internet 90s' heyday, the authors describe zines as handmade, messy, containing photocopied images, and often sprinkled with stickers and glitter. They were:

"…sites for the articulation of a vernacular third wave feminist theory. Grrrl zines offer idiosyncratic, surprising, yet savvy and complex responses to the late twentieth-century incarnations of sexism, racism and homophobia." (p.4).

In a world in which women's voices and experiences are often silenced, zines provided the opportunity to challenge, provoke, and share ideas. Originating from the punk scene, they stem from a long history of women producing and distributing 'underground' texts that both inform and critique. Examples of this include literature on sex and women's health created in the early twentieth century by activists such as Margaret Sanger,[2] Mary Ware Dennett,[3] and the Boston Women's Health Book Collective.[4]

I had no idea of the rebellious, feminist history of zines when I stumbled across the artwork ofMichelle Freeman

on social media. She was just completing her award-winning graphic novel,*Room of Stars*, and had posted striking examples from the book online. I was captivated. Michelle's work was magical, ethereal, haunting – almost 'cosily spooky.' Her images portrayed both vulnerability and strength, and captured the essence of solitude, unease, beauty, and even fear that often accompanies life as a girl and woman in contemporary society. I knew I wanted to work with her but had no idea what the format could take.

We spoke one evening and Michelle introduced me to the world of graphic zines. I was just writing up my PhD on women's experiences of freebirthing in the UK.[5] Through interviews with sixteen women who had intentionally given birth without doctors or midwives present, I had learned of an underbelly of maternity provision in which women were subjected to violations of their human rights and even cut and penetrated without consent. Such abuse is known as obstetric violence.[6] [7] Interviewees spoke of wanting to be listened to, respected, treated as individuals and acknowledged as adults who had autonomy and bodily integrity.

With funding from Wellcome, ESRC[8] and King's College London,[9] I created a small team to help me bring my idea to fruition. I wanted to combine the results of the study with Michelle's art and the wisdom and knowledge of service users and birth activists. Alongside Michelle and myself, our team consisted of Emma Ashworth and Anne Glover, both of whom are experienced doulas,[10] activists and volunteers at AIMS. In addition, my long-term friend Alice Spencer contributed her experiences of birth and obstetric violence.

Our aim was to bring to life women's experiences of maternity care - both good and bad - and to emphasise women's human rights in childbirth. We did not want the zine to be text-heavy, nor for it to reflect the type of mainstream leaflets that appear within the NHS. This was going to be something different, something eye-catching, something that encouraged the reader to engage and think.

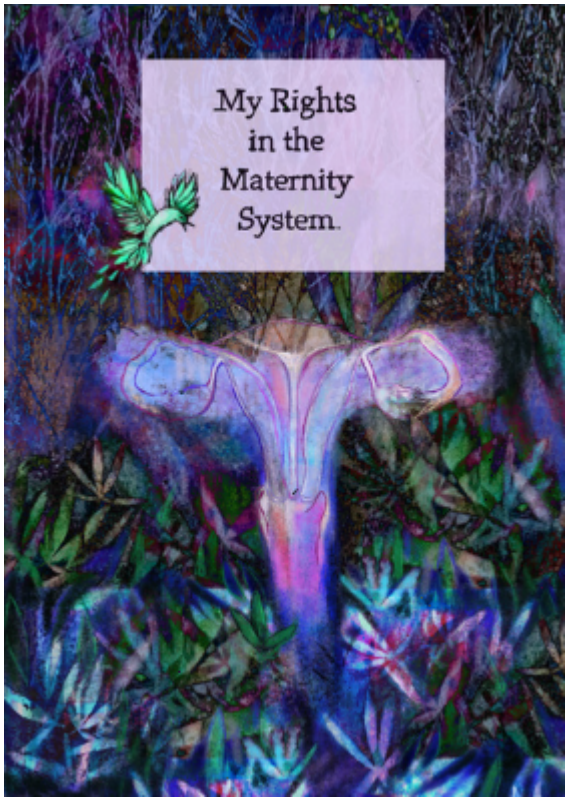
Reproductive rights and obstetric violence are indicative of much wider gender-based issues in society. We wanted the zine to capture this broader battle to eradicate discrimination, oppression, and violence against women. One page, for example, includes the text 'You can't touch me without my consent.' A lone pregnant woman sits at a solitary and darkened bus stop. In one respect the image simply depicts her returning home from a hospital appointment, daydreaming perhaps; a woman with full human rights, telling the world that she is free, confident, and in possession of bodily autonomy. But from another perspective, she is in a precarious situation - perhaps unsafe even - vulnerable to the unknown. Indeed, looking carefully at the image, the shadows of darkened tree branches creep towards her in the moonlight.



As the debate over a woman's right to abortion in the US intensified, we felt a greater urgency to depict women as real people - not fetal containers - but as multi-dimensional individuals who experience nuanced and complex lives, have relationships, commitments, and hopes. Michelle drew women experiencing their daily life, and then juxtaposed this with an image of a naked woman in a specimen jar. The idea was to emphasise the point that, even when pregnant, a woman has other facets to her life: we are workers, business women, mothers, partners; and when we are disrespected, abused, or dehumanised – it hurts, and it impacts our lives.

Inevitably, not everyone will like our zine. After all, its aim is to challenge and provoke. Yet, like all the feminist creators of 'underground' texts, our goal is to raise an issue that is not being adequately addressed in the mainstream. Obstetric violence during pregnancy and birth does exist; it is an uncomfortable truth. This form of abuse is just one of many that exists under patriarchy. Resisting an urge to be silent and to brush these abuses under the carpet we are using this zine to speak up. Regardless of whether people are ready to listen, like the writers of the "grrrl zines", we are going to say it anyway.

A short video of the images from the zine is available and for the link to the e-book clickhere.[11]



Author Bio: Gemma McKenzie has just completed her PhD exploring women's experiences of freebirthing in the UK. She is about to embark on new research projects with King's College London, Durham University and the Faculty of Forensic and Legal Medicine.

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[1] Piepmeier A. (2009) Girl Zines: Making Media, Doing Feminism. New York University Press

[2] Michals D. (2017) Margaret Sanger. National Women's History Museum. Online: www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/margaret-sanger

[3] Craig, J. M. (1995). "The Sex Side of Life": The Obscenity Case of Mary Ware Dennett.*Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, *15*(3), 145–166. https://doi.org/10.2307/3346796

[4] Boston Women's Health Book Collective. www.ourbodiesourselves.org

[5] McKenzie G. The Freebirth Study. www.gemmamckenzie.co.uk/the-freebirth-study

[6] Durham University. Obstetric Violence Blog. Editors: Camilla Pickles and Olivia Verity. www.durham.ac.uk/research/institutes-and-centres/ethics-law-life-sciences/about-us/news/obstetric-

violence-blog

[7] AIMS journal (2022) www.aims.org.uk/journal/index/34/2

[8] Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) www.ukri.org/councils/esrc

[9] King's College London. Public Engagement Small Grants. www.kcl.ac.uk/study-legacy/doctoral-studies/doctoral-training/training-themes/communication-and-impact/pe-small-grants

[10] Editor's note: Doulas are people who attend births to support the family. https://doula.org.uk

[11] The video of the images from the zine is available at: www.youtube.com/shorts/fw6IvDn2fzw. The link to the e-book: https://www.lulu.com/shop/gemma-mckenzie-and-michelle-freeman/my-rights-in-the-maternity-system/ebook/product-2p2nwe.html?q=My+rights+in+the+maternity+system&page=1&pageSize=4