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Report of Parliamentary Debate on Birth Trauma

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By Elle Gundry

The first parliamentary debate on birth trauma took place in the House of Commons on Thursday 19th October 2023.[1] Thankfully, the word 'debate' is a misnomer here; there was no disagreement on the reality of birth trauma, or that NHS services to help women with birth trauma are inadequate. Theo Clarke MP led the debate and started by sharing her own experience of birth trauma and a birth injury. It was powerful to see women MPs supporting Theo Clarke through the difficult moments of sharing her story. The rest of the debate was largely a collection of personal stories with a clear message that more needs to be done to support women with birth trauma. Both psychological and physical causes of birth trauma were discussed with a sense of evenhandedness. I was concerned the focus would be solely on physical causes and psychological factors would be overlooked, so it was reassuring to see acknowledgement and discussion of both.

We heard Maria Caulfield, Minister for Women's Health, confirm the government's commitment to a rollout of postnatal services and acknowledge that birth trauma can often be prevented. Frustratingly she did not commit to actions that directly address preventing birth trauma, the focus was on (much needed) postnatal support. There was also a lack of nuance to the debate regarding the pressures or factors that influence how pregnant women and people feel in the perinatal period. It felt like the complex interplay of power, medical misogyny, an underfunded maternity system, race, sexuality, gender, previous trauma and social pressure, to name a few, were not unpicked or discussed. There was no mention of the role of obstetric violence as a cause of birth trauma. There was also little said about the huge disparity in care and outcomes for Black and Asian mothers. The ways in which hospital policy or

culture impede women's decision making was not mentioned. Similarly, the UK's rising induction and caesarean rates were not discussed nor was there much focus on informed consent or refusal. It is my feeling that this is where the work needs to happen to prevent birth trauma, but this requires us to be willing to listen to traumatised women and understand their experiences.

Perhaps this debate is the start of that broader conversation on preventing birth trauma.

It is important to recognise the significance of this first debate on birth trauma and to thank Theo Clarke MP for organising the debate and sharing her own experience. Dame Andrea Leadsome MP said that Theo Clarke MP had "the support of Members right across the House". I think she also had the support of women, birthing people and families right across the country who have been failed by our NHS maternity system.

Author Bio: Elle began volunteering for AIMS in 2023. She lives near Shrewsbury, and is happiest in the garden learning by trial and error to grow veg with her enthusiastic toddler. She has an interest in human rights, and after experiencing NHS perinatal services first-hand has sought to understand how maternity services can better serve women.

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[1] Debate on Birth Trauma 19th October 2023 | Maria Caulfield MP
www.youtube.com/watch?v=cvdT9QG_97c

The full debate can be viewed here: https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2023-10-19/debates/D9DC6BAC-118F-4EA1-BE02-F815D5BE6436/BirthTrauma, and the transcript is accessible via Hansard Online - https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2023-10-19/debates/D9DC6BAC-118F-4EA1-BE02-F815D5BE6436/BirthTrauma