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# Playing the Long Game: Threads of Protest and Human Rights in Childbirth

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*By Gemma McKenzie*

What do obstetric violence, human rights in childbirth, and crochet have in common? Well, it's quite a long story and spans the last 15 years of my life. It starts with misogyny and ends in protest. And it includes a way in which we as women and activists can come together to challenge the widespread abuses we experience and hear about in the UK maternity system and beyond.

Last summer, as I was daydreaming, strolling alone to pick my 9-year-old daughter up from school, a car full of laughing men sped past and threw water over me. The incident joins a long list of other indignities that I – and no doubt most women reading this – have experienced on the street as they go about their day-to-day lives.

What strikes me as I look back on this type of street abuse is that I was unable to complain. Who could I complain to? I might tell my girlfriends at some point, and they would likely recount similar stories. But in a society in which these incidents are so frequent they have almost become normalised, who is going to appropriately respond to this misogyny? The reality is, on all these occasions, I had no choice but to shake off the experience and carry on with my day.

It is with this same understanding that I entered the birth room. At twenty-eight and pregnant with my first baby, I was acutely aware of the misogynistic society in which we live, but blindly naive as to how that could manifest in NHS maternity care. Infantilised, coerced, uninformed and manhandled, I left that birth physically and mentally scarred. I had been sucked into the obstetric machine, crushed, and spat back out again.

At the time, I was too bewildered to complain. I didn't understand whether I even had anything to complain about. When I spoke to other women, almost everyone else's birth seemed to be as dehumanising and unnecessarily violent as mine. Sometimes, their accounts were even worse than what I experienced. In a routine that I have seen countless times since, women conferred with each other about the violence they had experienced, but so normalised was the abuse, that there seemed to be nowhere to turn.

By the time I was pregnant for the second time, I had sought help from AIMS. I remember being supported by Debbie Chippington-Derrick. She had suggested I contact my maternity unit to explain that my previous experiences at the hospital had traumatised me and that I would need extra support. Numb, I read the midwife's response out to Debbie over the phone. Instead of reaching out to me in a supportive way, the midwife had instead gone through my hospital notes and against every medical intervention I had endured she had written in bold: You consented. You consented. You consented.

I had been dismissed. I had been gaslit. I had been blamed for not speaking up at the time. Like the street abuse, I was now expected to shut up, shrug my shoulders and carry on with my day. With that letter, I knew that no amount of complaining to midwifery staff would alter the fact that their abuse of me was systemic; it was so frequent, so common, so widespread, that the behaviour was not recognised as problematic. Mirroring approaches we often see in other forms of violence against women – her skirt was too short, she walked in an unlit area alone, she should have left her partner sooner –*I* was now to blame for the violence that had been inflicted against me.

I was left reeling from that letter. Unlike other forms of gender-based violence that I had experienced in the past, I couldn't just shake this off. I never made any official complaint about my treatment at the maternity unit as I knew it would be futile. Instead however, I decided to play the long game. As my babies became toddlers and children, and then teenagers, I investigated these violations against women and the way in which their human rights were often decimated during pregnancy and childbirth. Now armed with a postgraduate certificate, a master's degree and then a PhD, I knew with certainty that the treatment I was subjected to was not only immoral, but unlawful – and perhaps even criminal.

I could also see the parallels with all the other forms of misogyny and violence against women that permeate our society. Whether a woman is cat-called on the street, coercively controlled by a partner or subjected to a non-consensual vaginal examination by a midwife, she is treated as something less than human. Her right to move freely and safely through the world is compromised. Problematically, the more frequently this abuse happens, the more normalised it becomes and the harder it is to make a complaint that is taken seriously and acted upon. Instead, there is the expectation that we remain silent, submissive, and accepting of the abuses that people and institutions dish out to us. The violence we experience becomes just another ordinary event in the life of a woman.

When those men drenched me last summer, an exhausted yet furious thought hit me:*I am so fed up with this sh$t*. I concluded that I am not in a position to challenge all forms of violence against women (yet), but given my job and my educational background, I am now in a position to speak up about abuses during childbirth. With funding from the Economic and Social Research Council, I decided to do something that at first blush seems totally bizarre – I would create a crochet exhibition promoting human rights in childbirth.

You may consider crochet and human rights to be a million miles apart. However, when I was really struggling after the births of my children, I learned crochet as a way of calming my mind. By watching YouTube videos and copying what I saw, I could begin to mentally switch off and the weaving and bending of the yarn became cathartic. Before I knew it, I had a house full of random crochet blankets and an official craft cupboard housing all my paraphernalia.

The exhibition I came up with is called 'Threads of Protest: Human Rights in Childbirth' and almost unbelievably, it will run for 3 months at the Atkinson in Southport from July to September 2025 and then for 3 months at the Curiosity Cabinet in London until January 2026. As always, AIMS is supporting my efforts. In fact, one of the pieces I will present links to the Wellcome funded graphic zine we worked on together, entitled 'My rights in the Maternity System.' Using tapestry crochet, I will recreate sentences from the zine[1] in crochet, such as, You can't touch me without my consent; I have rights; I am an individual; I am more than my pregnancy. I am also pairing professional crochet artists up with charities that support asylum seeking women, LGBTQ communities and those birthing in the criminal justice system, to highlight the human rights issues associated with these situations.

But perhaps most ambitiously, I am asking members of the public to donate a granny square to the exhibition. The idea is to sew the squares together and present them as a form of yarn bombing or craftivism. There is a whole history of women protesting using thread, ranging from the embroidery of the Suffragettes to the numerous examples of yarnbombing challenging violence against women (see here for an example). I want this piece to demonstrate how people – especially women – come together to challenge human rights abuses during childbirth. I aim to highlight that it is not normal or acceptable to be abused during birth and that these abuses are part of the wider problem of misogyny that we experience in society.

If this is the type of social activism that you are interested in, then I would encourage you to get involved.

Whether you are an experienced crocheter or you fancy learning for free like I did via YouTube, all you will need is a ball of yarn and a hook. All squares can be any pattern, any colour, any yarn – and don't worry if your stitches aren't perfect or things look a bit wobbly. It's more important to get involved in raising awareness of the issue. I only ask that squares are a maximum of 15cm x 15cm (6 inches by 6 inches) and don't contain any offensive or derogatory wording. Once you have completed your square (or squares!), you can send them to:

Threads of Protest
PO Box 239
Liverpool
L37 8YU
If you live in the North West, you may find it easier to drop your square(s) off at A Modern Yarn, 39 Chapel Lane, Formby, L37 4DL.

Do I expect the crochet exhibition to change the world overnight? Of course not. However, it might get people talking - and perhaps more dangerously - it might get people thinking. It might also help people to understand the way gender-based violence we see throughout our society emerges in the birth room. Perhaps this way, we can stress the point that we do not lose our rights once we become pregnant or enter the hospital, and that our bodies belong to*us* - they are not to be manhandled, penetrated, or cut without our consent. And possibly most importantly, when we are abused or violated, it has a hugely negative impact. No longer can abuses be normalised in a system that does not understand these acts as violent. We need ways to be heard, to challenge and to call out this behaviour. I refuse to shrug my shoulders any longer and just accept that this violence is too monumental, too ingrained, and too widespread in our society to challenge. I couldn't complain at the time –*but I am complaining now.* I might not be able to eradicate the misogyny that runs through our society and our birth rooms, but I can chip away at it – one granny square at a time.

For more information on Threads of Protest: Human Rights in Childbirth seehere.[2]

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**Author Bio:** Gemma is currently an ESRC post-doc fellow and research associate at King's College London. She centres her research on maternity care, obstetric violence and the experiences of women who exercise their right to decline services they do not wish to access. Her website is: www.gemmamckenzie.co.uk

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1 Editor's note: A zine (/zi?n/ ZEEN; short fo**magazine or fanzine**) is a small-circulation self-published work of original or appropriated texts and images, usually reproduced via a copy machine.

2 Gemma McKenzie - Threads of Protest: Human Rights in Childbirth -

www.gemmamckenzie.co.uk/threadsofprotest