AIMS For a better birth...

Freedom for birth

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Lisa Sykes organised the global premiere, Halifax screening, on 20 September 2012

At our local home birth support group, over tea and cake, as most serious business is conducted, independent midwife Susan Stephenson and I decided we would try to pull together a local screening of the human rights in childbirth documentary, Freedom For Birth.

Susan had already taken delivery of the film and some marketing materials, so we just needed to secure a venue and get the word out so that we had someone to show the film to. Susan had the inspired idea to contact a local high school with a media and arts specialism to see if they would host the screening. They were happy to oblige and so we set to work promoting the screening over the next two weeks. We were keen to ensure this wasn't just a 'preaching to the converted' exercise and set about pulling together a panel for questions and answers after the film. We distributed flyers and spread the word across social media. We were really pleased to have a reply from our local MP's office, confirming he would be attending, and also from one of the most senior midwives in the area. We invited another midwife from a neighbouring trust to join our Q&A panel and she was keen to come. Disappointingly her head of midwifery would not allow her to be at the screening, claiming it was felt to be 'too radical', despite the film being backed by the Royal College of Midwives and featuring Cathy Warwick and Lesley Page.

In my mind, given the short timescales we had arranged things in, if a dozen people turned up I'd class that as a success. In the event we saw around three times that number join us in the school lecture theatre. We had a good mix – practising midwives (both NHS and independent) students and teachers from the school, mothers with babes in arms, doulas, student midwives and aspiring student midwives, and politics students. Our local paper covered the event and, interestingly, the MP did not want to be photographed prior to the screening – who said birth isn't political?

The day of the screening was the first time I had seen the film. Susan had watched it in advance to prepare some points to get the discussion flowing afterwards. I was very quickly moved to tears listening to the passion of the many birth experts and advocates. The film goes on to tell the now familiar story of Hungarian obstetrician turned midwife, Ágnes Geréb, and other stories of abuses of human rights in childbirth across the world. One woman in The Netherlands tells her story of being arrested for considering a home birth with a midwife when pregnant with twins and her subsequent forced caesarean section. Another woman in Florida was subjected to the same – arrested and her baby surgically removed – for not signing a hospital blanket consent form. Even for someone who knows of the abuses of women in childbirth it made upsetting and disturbing viewing. Many of the audience sat open-mouthed in

disbelief at what they were hearing. The ray of light was the ruling passed down by the European Court of Human Rights. In the case of Ternovszky v Hungary, brought by one of the thousands of mothers who had been cared for by Ágnes Geréb before her imprisonment, Anna Ternovszky put it that she had been denied the opportunity to have her baby at home as midwives were effectively dissuaded from assisting her because they risked prosecution like Ágnes. The cour t found that she was in effect not free to choose to give birth at home and, as such, her human right 'to respect for private and family life' had been violated. I don't think we can underestimate the importance of this ruling.

At the end of the screening the lights went up and there were several people, myself included, wiping away tears. We opened the floor to discussion, with the consultant midwife, the MP and me at the front of the room. My perception of his body language was that the MP couldn't have been less interested. Susan prompted our audience by asking how the film had left people feeling. One woman, who identified herself only as a midwife, said the film left her feeling incredibly frustrated, unhappy that a lack of staffing and suppor t meant that she found it almost impossible to give women the kind of care she felt they deserved. She said she was ready to quit midwifery. The consultant midwife was quick to try to talk about the good work that was being done in maternity services locally and how choice was supported in our trust. The discussion could have gone on for much longer but we were very restricted for time. One mother remarked that choice may be supported on the surface, but that message was not the one coming from some midwives on the ground. Locally women are still being told they are 'not allowed' home births for various reasons and informed choice is not being truly supported. When a woman talked of her choice to birth unassisted to avoid being 'abused by the system', she was labelled 'irresponsible' by the MP. For many others in the room the question was, 'How is a woman made to feel that declining clinical care is the only way to be treated with respect and dignity in birth?'

The MP also said that he received many letters on many matters but 'birth' and 'maternity services' were not topics that had ever landed on his desk. Perhaps it's time they did. Most people in the room were also unaware of the issues facing independent midwifery.

Our main objective was to get the film's message to someone new and I think we did that. Students said they were shocked. One was inspired to research other human rights abuses in childbirth and spoke about wanting to 'do something about it'. The aspiring midwives were the ones who seemed most shocked by what they saw and heard. One young woman said she had no idea about 'any of this' and that she thought things were 'just like they are on One Born Every Minute'. Doesn't that say so much?

Our long term aim for the film is to get it seen by asmany young people as possible. If we are going to effect change then we need to change the culture and perception of the next generation before they come to maternity services as parents-to-be. The film is going to be showing in other secondary schools to students as part of their citizenship studies and to politics students too.

The day after the film I literally couldn't stop thinking about everything raised. This is not a 'natural childbirth' issue. It's not even just a home birth issue. It's about fundamental human rights. It's about abuse, power and control. It's about the continued erosion of real choice. It affects all birthing families

regardless of their choices: home, hospital, vaginal, surgical, assisted, unassisted. ALL of us. Your children and mine.

Information from One World Birth

Women claim their rights in childbirth with a powerful new documentary premiered simultaneously in 1,000 locations in over 50 countries in 17 different languages. Suggestions for action:

- Connect up with people like yourselves who are taking action.
- Use our facebook.com/oneworldbirth community to reach out to other people.
- Tell us what you are doing: email us at info@altofilms.com
- Organise more screenings.
- Blog about it, share/tweet/post about it, tell your friends and family, get it reviewed in your localmedia.

Most importantly enjoy it!

Soon after the screenings, we're going to be releasing a short version of the film on the internet for free so we need everyone to share it widely to make it go viral – so it's seen by millions!!! We will be creating and releasing more videos to educate people about birth – so keep an eye ononeworldbirth.net and tell people about FREEDOM FOR BIRTH