AIMS For a better birth...

The Night that was neither Silent nor Holy

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I seem to struggle a great deal with flashbacks and anger about my births around my children's birthdays and Christmas. The latter caught me by surprise. I thought the trouble I had the Christmas before was because it was close to my second birth. With all the tinsel and sparkles, I couldn't feel much joy or excitement, and I was hardly functional on Christmas day. Having graphic scenes of birth and glowing scenes with sentiments of immaculate midwives on recurring ads by a major nappy brand just got too much for me. Sentiment by association sells I suppose, but a quick visit on the brand's Twitter page saw other women in a similar situation to me who found the graphic details triggering and unnecessary for TV too.

It is difficult to escape the thought of birth when many of the festive songs are about Christ being born, the holiness and silence of the night and the juxtaposition for me. I hope Mary was not expected to birth in silence. At my own births, a number of midwives made comments about me being loud (they even recorded this in my notes), having a low pain threshold and moving around too much. It was completely unprofessional and unkind. A birthing woman should be free to make as much noise or move how she likes. Birth was never meant to be judged by anyone. The people who think that they have the right to judge those giving birth are not safe to have around. They fail to make women feel safe by denying their inner knowledge.

Very often I see discussions of poor treatment of birthing women accompanied by a disclaimer that health care providers are well-meaning, have difficult jobs to do and didn't mean to cause harm. This does not really help anyone. There are layers and layers of people who defend health providers' practice. They even get to write in our maternity notes, a legal document, about what happened to us in pregnancy and birth. Words that may not always be fully reflective of our experience but can still be used as evidence. Their version of the "truth".

These are full grown, educated adults who know full well their position of perceived authority and influence. They have a choice in how they treat another human being. In my experience, when I said NO, I didn't want to be touched or given a certain medication, I expected to be respected because it was my decision. When someone forced entry to my room, coerced and deceived me to carry out protocols, well-meaning or not, abuse, assault and human rights violations took place.

We need to be honest in the narratives of birth abuses and stop excusing them. Only by acknowledging the realities of unbalanced power dynamics, the lack of professional accountability, the obscure ideas of birth/how women should birth and acknowledge that poor attitudes towards women exist, can they be addressed. Birth can be painful and exhausting, like running a marathon, but it doesn't have to be traumatic. The kind of hurt and trauma that insensitive words, forceful actions and lack of compassion, respect and dignity cause are mostly preventable. They are in the control of the health care providers.

Our healthcare system has got to get better at treating women well when we need its care and support the most. We have every right to be angry, and to demand better. Not every woman wants to be subjected to the highly medicalised model of birth. A model which benefits pharmaceutical and medical equipment companies, while bankrupting the NHS and hurting mums and babies that would have had better outcomes if their physiological births were genuinely supported. Choosing where to birth, home, midwife-led unit, hospital, stables, etc. is an expectant mother and her baby's birth right. It should be supported.

My daughter walked over cuddling her new doll and said, "Mummy, what are you doing?" I held her hand and looked into her eyes. I wanted to say, you were born out of love, to be loved, and not meant to be an object to be abused by people. This world needs to change to respect women and human rights. The war on birth freedom is not yet over. We must break the silence so obstetric violence can be addressed and peace will return to women and families. I went into the kitchen and lit a candle to remember all the women and babies that have been harmed. I pray that one day, the wounds in our hearts and on our bodies will heal, and the freedom to birth will return.