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Book Review: Give Birth like a Feminist by Milli Hill

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Give Birth like a Feminist : Your body. Your baby. Your choices.

By Milli Hill

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Find this book on Amazon

Once in a while, a new book is published that seems integral to the mission of AIMS: to support all maternity service users to navigate the system as it exists, and campaign for a system which truly meets the needs of all.

This new book from Milli Hill – founder of the Positive Birth Movement and author of the popular The Positive Birth Book - certainly seems to fit that description, talking directly to pregnant women about their own forthcoming births but also encouraging them to become active and campaign for 'a different kind of maternity experience for women of the future'. Commencing with a look at the vexed issue of " 'Am I allowed?': The Birth Room Power Imbalance", Milli's well-researched book covers a wide-range of issues relevant to understanding why she identifies birth as a feminist issue and why she thinks we need to start talking about it in those terms. We invited a group of AIMS volunteers to share their views about it: thanks to Maddie McMahon, Rachel Boldero and Marein Schmitthenner.

Can you describe this book in just a few words?
Rachel: Empowering, modern, powerful
Marein: The new feminist mother's manifesto
Maddie: It's YOUR body

What is the main message you took away from this book, that you would like more people to hear?

Maddie: Every birthing person has choice, and right to consent or decline, and that - sadly - informed decision making is often not being facilitated as it should.
Rachel: You own your body and your decisions
Marein: That we cannot improve the maternity system, and the way it works (or doesn't) for mothers, babies and families, unless we address the underlying problems of power imbalances (not just in the birth world) and the lack of respect for women, who are still too often viewed as weak, unreasonable and unable to make decisions (for themselves and their babies) independently.

Who should read this book?
Marein: Birthworkers, feminists, pregnant women, activists, gynaecologists, obstetricians, decision makers in the health service, and everyone else!
Maddie: Despite those who may feel the topic is a niche issue, I think this book needs to be read by everyone! Whether you are pregnant, already a parent, a health professional or interested in the cutting edge of real-world feminism, this book will provide food for thought.
Rachel: I personally think it's an important one for pregnant women and their partners, plus anyone who is considering having a child in the future. The sooner we can spread these messages the better in my view, before individuals become completely coerced into thinking a different way by what they see in the media and so on. I also think that it would be very useful as a mandatory read for student (and qualified) midwives, and it's an important book for doulas too.

The book is quite UK-focussed: do you think it would make for good reading outside the UK?
Rachel: Yes, we should be sharing learning and learning from others
Marein: It would absolutely make for important reading outside the UK. I am involved in the European Doula Network, and I know from first-hand experience that doulas, birth workers and mothers everywhere suffer the same (or worse!) discrimination and this affects their birth experiences.
Maddie: Yes, the themes are universal. Whilst this book focuses mainly on the problem of too much intervention too soon, the issue of too little intervention too late is also discussed: the lack of timely intervention for mothers having childbirth difficulties in developing countries is also an important feminist birth issue, so I think this book should have wide appeal.

What chapters/ parts of the book did you find most valuable?
Marein: This is a tough choice. They are all very valuable. To me, though, Chapter 7, 'Birth Rights and Women's Rights are Human Rights' is the most important chapter. It ties together all the different parts of the book and explains why a woman's rights in the birth situation are so intricately connected to her fundamental rights as a human being. Understanding the legal position is very important in our fight to make sure these rights do not just exist in theory, but are lived experience every day for all women. And very worryingly - in the light of recent increasingly misogynist policies around the world - we know that existing legal protections must be fought for tooth and nail, in order that they we don't lose them.
Rachel: I found the section discussing vulnerabilities following sexual abuse or trauma very insightful. I appreciated how the book addresses this issue full on. Also on the issue of race: Milli makes it clear that we need to make sure the maternity services are really listening to ALL service users.

Maddie: There are many, but I think there are some points that Milli makes with such clarity, in a field that can be rife with emotion, binary discussion and out-and-out warfare. For example, the point that, whilst the safety of the baby is very, very important, a live baby should not be the pinnacle of a woman's expectations. In fact, it should be the bare minimum. After reading this book you could not fail to have understood that a woman's experience of childbirth matters too; not for any fluffy, hippy reasons, but because her mental and physical health actually matter, to her, her family and wider society.

At the end of the Letter to Pregnant readers, Milli suggests eight things that women can do to give birth like a feminist. What did you make of that? Is there anything you'd like to add?
Maddie: I can't answer this. It is all spot on.
Marein: I loved that list. It's all-inclusive, proving Milli's immense knowledge of the birth world and its problems, and how to overcome them, one woman at a time, but also with activism. These 8 points are a fantastic list of how to fight discrimination, improve maternity services for all and find your voice!

A postscript from Jo Dagustun, AIMS Book Review Editor
I had a really interesting reaction to this book. As soon as I'd read the first few pages, I felt hugely privileged to have access to one of the final pre-publication proof copies. After having read it cover to cover I kept it in my bag in the days that followed, carrying it around with me everywhere, retrieving it at any appropriate opportunity to show people that I'd just read this amazing book and that it was coming out soon! (This included my local libraries, to ask them to order copies.)

Straightaway, I knew that if asked to pick a favourite extract, I'd select a few words from Milli's excellent focus on encouraging all pregnant women, as they approach birth, to claim their right to 'be the key decision maker over what happens to their body, and to be listened to, and treated with respect'. I particularly liked the first of Milli's eight tips in her 'letter to pregnant readers' that closes the book:

> "Be an adult … Refuse to be infantilised, patronized or mansplained in your maternity care … stand up for yourself – just as you do in other areas of your life."

My (strictly unofficial) hunch is that this book would have won first place if AIMS had run a 'best new book for birth activists' competition in 2019. It is a highly-accessible and up-to-date account of contemporary birth culture in the UK, and is perfect for anyone wanting to brief themselves as they become part of the UK's flourishing maternity service improvement community. I've been part of this community myself since 2008, and I can attest to the fact that Milli's book covers well the key events, issues and debates of the last decade. As AIMS Book Review Editor, this is a book that I'd certainly like to encourage all AIMS volunteers - and others in the birth improvement community - to read. Thank you so much, Milli, for writing this valuable book.