AIMS For a better birth...

Introducing “They said to me”: Giving voice to the voiceless

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By Samantha Gadsden

They Said To Me is an awareness-raising platform, present on Facebook, Instagram and now a website, where women and birthing people can anonymously share their experiences of maternity services, giving voice to the voiceless.

It was founded in response to a perception of an ongoing and significant erosion of birth rights, with a corresponding increase in coercion and a rise in emotive language, and in women and birthing people being dictated to by their healthcare providers; less informed choice and more “you will comply” instruction, sometimes accompanied by threats.

> “They Said To Me I am a danger to myself and my unborn child as the placenta fails after 40 weeks and I need social care to help me make better choices”.

It appears that in the COVID-19 pandemic, birth rights were simply cancelled. It is becoming increasingly evident that the respect and ability to be centred in their own care and involved in decision making about themselves that all pregnant and birthing women and people deserve is not being accorded to them.

The “positive story” narratives being posted by maternity care providers contrast starkly with stories of women literally having word battles with their care providers in order to prevent unwanted interventions. Others report feeling that they cannot speak out about their experiences of being separated from their birth partners, for fear of “letting the side down” if they don’t have a smiling face on

the ward.

Even in areas where home birth is still being supported, health care professionals may use a variety of reasons and excuses to talk women out of home birth, such as "your baby could die waiting for an ambulance".

> "A consultant told me I would die if I attempted a home birth and my baby would die if I attempted a home birth. She also called my husband rude for standing up for my choices".

Fights between women and healthcare providers should not be happening. We are all supposed to be working together. Currently within the system, women are becoming more and more powerless instead of more and more powerful.

At 3:30 am on the 26th May, as I was answering another query from another terrified woman, I thought in despair, "I cannot hear another one of these stories without having somewhere to put it, it needs to be somewhere. I need to publicly share their stories in order to raise awareness and bring about change." This led to the birth of They Said To Me.

They Said To Me uses the power of social media to gather stories and expose bad practice. It gives women a safe and anonymous space to share their experiences within the maternity services and receive empathic, responsive support, a voice and a community, and help to ensure that they are never silenced.

They Said To Me shares daily posts on Facebook and Instagram from women and birthing people about their experiences within a maternity system that is undeniably broken and that undeniably damages both those who work within it and those who have to use its services. Since its creation at the end of May 2020, They Said To Me has had almost 4 thousand people 'like' and 4,350 people follow the Facebook page, and gained 2700 followers on Instagram. On Facebook in the four weeks to 13th February 2021, over 25 thousand users saw the posts and over 11 thousand engaged with them. On Instagram for the same period, the posts were seen by over 4 thousand accounts and were interacted with 2817 times.

> "Thank you for your page, it is so powerful and angering to hear other birthing people's experiences".

Via our website, we now have a function to "share your story," enabling people to share much longer stories, including heartbreaking accounts of miscarriage, of dreadful experiences in early pregnancy units, of divide and conquer between parents.

> "I knew I would be in for a fight but some of the things she said to me were just downright awful, she even tried telling my partner I was going to kill the baby for refusing a gestational diabetes test and said that if the baby was stillborn that'll be the reason why, even though it would go down as unexplained. I had to warn him beforehand she would

turn to him, because I'm not backing down”.

In the future, I would like They Said to Me to become a community interest company and raise grant funding to support women and birthing people.

Author Bio: Samantha Gadsden is an experienced antenatal, birth and postnatal doula and educator, a hypnobirthing teacher and birth trauma worker. At her heart she is a birth activist. As well as being the creatrix of They Said To Me she runs the large and growing Home Birth Support Group UK, as well as ‘the village and associated network of Due In and follow on parenting groups’. She is also co-host of The Birth Activist Podcast.