

# The Importance of Narrative in an Ethical Analysis of Freebirth

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## Introduction

Freebirth occurs when a woman decides to deliberately give birth without a health care professional (HCP) present. This poster represents the starting point of a doctoral thesis exploring why some women make 'atypical' or 'risky' birthing decisions. My work on freebirth mirrors the prevalent themes found in the limited published literature in this area. I argue that narrative must form a major part of any ethical analysis of women's birthing decisions.

Do we have a patriarchal maternity system?

Moral authority of women in birthing decisions?

Objective versus subjective assessment of risk?

Is birth in the UK over-medicalised?

Woman as fetal container?

Limits to women's autonomy? How? When? (Result - forced c-sections? 'Pre-birth seizures'?)

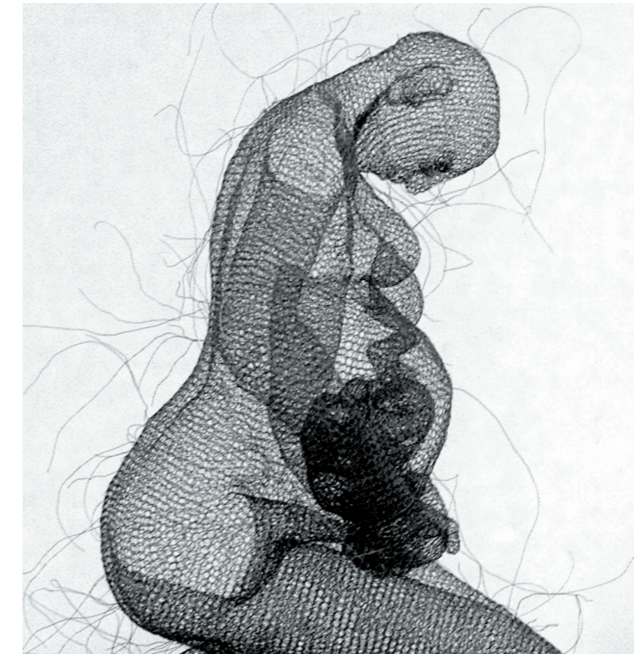
Future child arguments?

How seriously is mental health taken in birthing outcomes?

Effacement of women's subjectivity for sake of fetus?

How evidenced based are obstetric and midwifery practices?

Is hospital the safest place to give birth?



If you don't understand the problem or situation how can you formulate an appropriate ethical response?

### Natural physiological process - mind and body

"After my second birth I realised that the tiniest interventions impacted hugely on my mind and my birthing body. The **less intervention**, the less noise, the less to think about, meant I could focus on me and birthing my baby. By baby number three, I was adamant I would be alone and it was a wonderful experience. It made me realise how **women have lost trust and faith in their own minds and bodies** to deal with what nature intends us to do." Sarah

### Bullying and surveillance

"When I exercised my right to refuse some of the NHS antenatal care, I was **threatened** with a social services referral on two separate occasions by two different midwives. I felt **bullied** and it **shattered my trust** in the community midwifery team." Maria

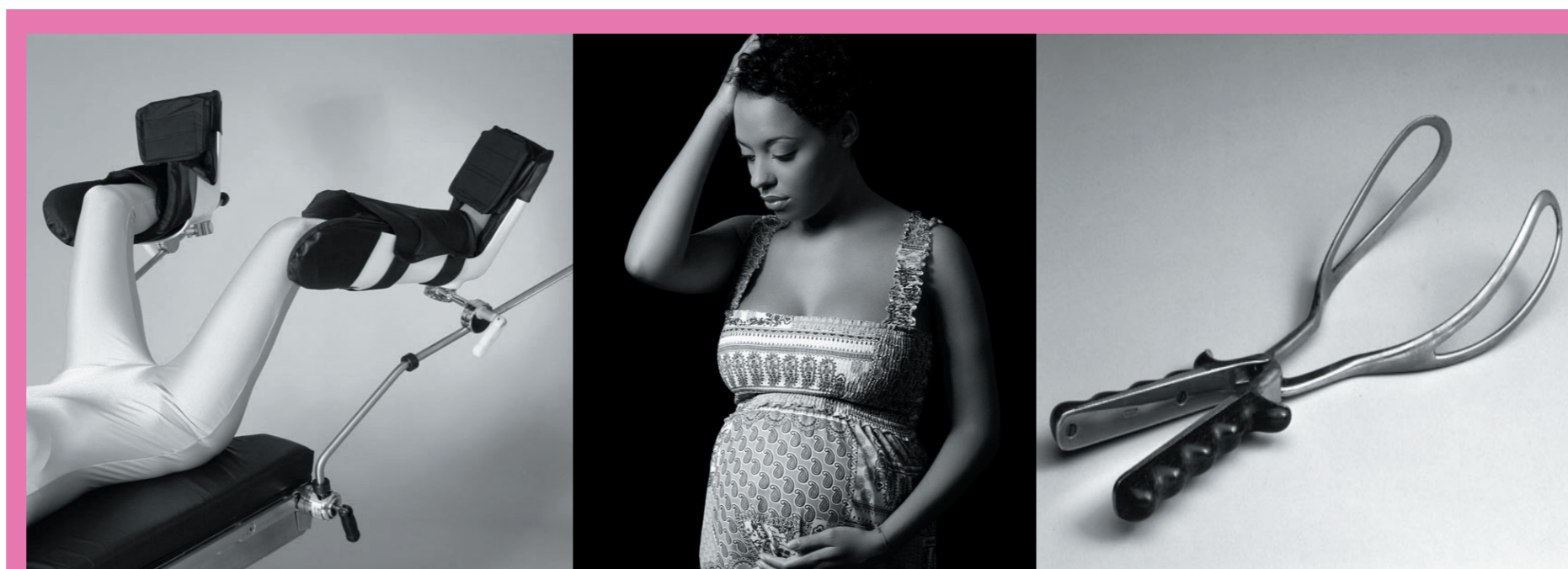
### Confidence and intuition

"Freebirthing was a true **celebration of my pregnant body** and the deep, knowing trust I had built up with it during my previous two births. I was so sure I could birth alone there seemed little point inviting anyone else in who could possibly interrupt my flow. Were I to birth again, there would be no other way to go!" Frances

### Birth trauma/birth rape

"Being induced was not how I'd imagined and it is something I feel ruins the experience of giving birth for many women. For me the process took almost 44 hours and was **invasive**, leaving me feeling as if I'd been **assaulted**. I don't believe my baby and my body were ready, and feel as if the labour was **forced**."

I required an assisted delivery in theatre and the memories I have of my daughter being born are very hazy. I ended up developing **post partum psychosis** with **extreme anxiety** and **panic attacks**, which has ruined my experience of being a mother. I believe that the induction contributed to my mind set post delivery. I wouldn't wish an induction on anybody. It has cast a shadow over what should have been a magical experience. I've been left feeling **fearful of future births** and I am awaiting counselling to help me deal with it all." Jenny



## Women's Lived Experiences

### Continuity of care

"I couldn't face the thought of a complete **stranger**, who knew nothing about me or my birthing philosophy, turning up at my house during one of my most **intimate and private moments**. It would have felt stressful, intrusive and raised my adrenaline, potentially throwing me off course and stopping my labour. I would rather birth **undisturbed** than risk a cheerleading, overbearing or unconfident midwife being present." Jo

### Trust in information given

"During my first birth I was **lied** to and told I needed an induction because the 'placenta was coming away.' I now know that if this had have been true, I would have needed an emergency caesarean section. Because of the trauma of my first birth, **I don't trust the midwives** to do what is best for me and my baby." Diana

### Unnecessary intervention

"...even a pair of eyes starts the **cascade of intervention**." Kerry  
  
"After the **traumatic**, and in my opinion avoidable, experience with my second baby, there was **no way I was ever going to let a midwife near me in labour again**. I trusted myself and my body to birth without interference. And it did - three freebirths after that." Bryony

### Rigid NHS policies

"NHS midwives **obstructed my home birth plans**. Backed into a corner, I turned around and found a secret door. I pushed the door and it opened up a **journey into myself**." Kate

## The role of litigation

Between 2000 and 2010, the NHS paid out £3,117,649,888 in compensation due to maternity claims

Defensive medicine

Rigid hospital policies

Over-medicalisation of birth

## Implications for policy

National Maternity Review 2016

Personalised care and better choice for women

Appropriate training for health care professionals

Appropriate environment that allows NHS staff to support women who make 'atypical' decisions

## Acknowledgements

This project was inspired by the work of the Association for the Improvement in Maternity Services ([www.aims.org.uk](http://www.aims.org.uk)), a charity that provides information to women to assist decision making during pregnancy and birth.

Many thanks go to all of the women who volunteered their narratives.