Symposium: Birth, Fear and Preparation

*Tensions and conflicts in ‘choice’: Women’s experiences of freebirthing in the UK*

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**Background:** The concept of choice is a central tenet of modern maternity care. However, in reality women’s choice of birth is constrained by a paucity of resources and dominant medical and risk adverse discourses. In this paper we add to this debate through highlighting the tensions and conflicts that women faced when enacting a freebirthing choice.

**Methods:** Secondary analysis of data collected to explore why women choose to freebirth in the UK was undertaken. Ten women were recruited from diverse areas of the UK via invitations on freebirthing websites. Women provided a narrative and/or participated in an in-depth interview. A thematic analysis approach was used.

**Findings:** We present three key themes. First ‘violation of rights’ highlights the conflicts women faced from maternity care systems who were unaware of women’s legal rights to freebirth, conflating this choice with issues of child protection. ‘Tactical planning’ describes some of the strategies women used in their attempts to achieve the birth they desired and to circumnavigate any interference or reprisals. The third theme, ‘unfit to be a mother’ describes distressing accounts of women who were reported to social services.

**Conclusion and implications for practice:** Women who choose to freebirth face opposition and conflict from maternity providers, and often negative and distressing repercussions through statutory referrals. These insights raise important implications for raising awareness among health professionals about women’s legal rights. They also emphasise a need to develop guidelines and care pathways that accurately and sensitively support the midwives professional scope of practice and women’s choices for birth.

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