

Geraldine Williams' statement on why we need #Repeal4BetterBirth

My name is Geraldine Williams, also known as 'Mother B' after the HSE took me to court on the eve of giving birth to my fourth child, on 30 September 2016, in the court case known as HSE vs Mother B.

Their order sought to use "such reasonable and proportionate force and/or restraint" as would be required to compel me to have a Caesarean-section against my will.

In its submissions, the HSE accepted that "medical treatment cannot ordinarily be given to an adult of full capacity without her consent", but then argued that in my case "there is a further issue that arises and that is the balancing of the right to life of the unborn child which is also guaranteed under the Irish constitution". The lawyer appointed by the Court to represent the unborn child also cited the Eighth Amendment in arguing that the judge must consider the rights of the "second life" regardless of my capacity.

15 months on, I want to tell my story about how the 8th amendment impacted on my life and the life of my baby.

I believe the time is right because it's clear now that a referendum will happen, and people don't realise the effect the 8th amendment can have on a woman's right to have input into her care during pregnancy and childbirth.

It isn't just to do with abortion. In Ireland every year, 60,000 women give birth, so that's a lot of people affected.

Here, we have a culture around birth, dominated by the obstetric model of 'active management', that prizes compliance by women, and does not place enough value on the woman's right to decision making – or enough trust in her ability to know what is best for her baby and herself.

There are many reasons for this, not all to do with the 8th amendment, but the point I want to make is that the 8th props up this culture, and while it is still in place, there is nothing that can be done to meaningfully improve our patient rights during pregnancy and child birth.

The right to informed consent should not be a matter of pot luck – it should be a right available to every woman in every corner of Ireland and every stage of her pregnancy and birth.

So this is my story.

I went to the hospital for a check-up the morning I was due my baby. They gave me a scan. There was a bit more fluid around the baby, and they said I could have gestational diabetes. But I'd no other symptoms and I was feeling very well.

I'd had three previous Caesarean sections but I wanted to try for a natural birth. Most women in Ireland who've had a previous C-section aren't encouraged to try for a normal birth. But I'd researched it.

Labour is good for a baby's lungs. The hormones the body produces during labour help them take their first breath, so they're less likely to be admitted to intensive care. Even if a C-section turns out to be needed in the end, being in labour for a while is good for your baby.

I also knew the downside a C-section can have for the mother, the effect on your emotional wellbeing, the physical toll on your body, the long and painful recovery. I knew that to try for a natural birth was best for my baby, and for me.

The hospital staff didn't agree. I was told that trying for a natural birth was too high risk. I held my ground. But I did not feel listened to or dealt with in an even, respectful way – instead I felt enormous pressure to comply with their wishes. I was told to think of all the mothers who'd lost babies, and how they'd love to have them. I was even told if I turned up in labour, I wouldn't be given pain relief.

The day passed and they said I had to stay the night. But I'd no bags with me and I hadn't organised the children. I said I'd be back in the morning but they did not want me to leave. They wanted to send a midwife out to the house with me while I got my things. The atmosphere was very strange.

I went home to get my bags and came back at 8 o'clock. My partner left as soon as I got to the ward. A midwife started to put a CTG on me but she was interrupted. My consultant wanted to speak to me – in the delivery room. It was about half eight at night.

He told me they were taking me to court. I was in shock. No one had ever said anything about court. It was terrifying. All I could think of was what would happen to my baby. Could I go to jail? How could I go to court when I was about to go into labour? I was dumbfounded and panicked at the same time. I had been having the beginnings of contractions, but they stalled. I think it was the shock. I never felt more vulnerable in my life.

24 hours later I found out that I'd won the case. It didn't feel like a victory. It was a strange mix of emotions, but mostly emptiness. All I wanted was to get home to my children. I was angry that I'd been put through such an ordeal. It was a million miles from the experience I wanted.

The following day I went into labour. The relief was enormous. When it became clear a natural birth was not to be, I looked for a C-section. I always knew I would if it was needed. I know I am a good mother. I have only ever wanted what is best for my family.

So before I finish, here is why I believe the 8th amendment must be repealed.

I was innocent. I believed that I had a say in my birth, but when it came to it, I didn't. I was also lucky – the court did not allow the HSE to use force to compel me to have a C-section.

But the experience has left lasting marks. 15 months on, I try not to think about it as it is so upsetting. Having my power taken from me in such a brutal way has had impacts on my mental and emotional wellbeing. I have suffered depression and anxiety. It has not been easy but I do not regret asserting my right to informed consent. I am proud of myself. I had amazing support including from my doula.

But women have a right to know – and many do know directly – that you can be taken to court for exercising your right to informed consent, in Ireland.

With most it never gets that far, because the threat alone is enough to create compliance. I was never threatened, just told.

Birth is a place for care, for compassion, for listening, for heeding a mother's knowledge and wisdom of her own body and the life she carries within her. It is no place for the strong arm of the law. If the culture is to change, the 8th must be repealed.

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