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Pregnancy ‘Can Spark Violence by Partners’

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Jo Revill and Judy Hobson

Babies are dying in the womb or being born with torn limbs because their mother has been attacked during pregnancy, according to midwives who will lift the lid on a hitherto taboo subject this week.

Midwives believe they are seeing an escalation of violence, with pregnant women being attacked by their partners, who become angry that they no longer ‘have ownership’ over their bodies.

Sometimes abuse results in a miscarriage; occasionally women give birth to babies with broken arms or legs. It can continue after the birth, with terrible injuries inflicted on the nursing mother.

In a study carried out over one week last month, one in five midwives working in the 10 regional centres in the UK, including Leeds, Birmingham and London, reported seeing at least one physically abused pregnant woman. These findings are included in a study conducted by the Royal College of Midwives, which will be the subject of a debate in London this week.

Women’s Aid, the charity which runs 500 refuges for abused women in the UK, launched a campaign to draw attention to the issue two years ago, but it is only now that the government and health professionals are starting to recognise it.

Astrid Osbourne, consultant midwife and acting head of midwifery at the Elizabeth Garrett Anderson and Obstetric Hospital in London, has seen terrible instances of pregnant abuse in her 30-year career. She said: ‘One case in the West Midlands sticks in my mind. A woman with five children was 28 weeks pregnant when her husband was let out of prison. He accused her of having an affair and cut her vagina to pieces with a broken bottle. She was rushed to hospital where her vaginal walls were repaired. The baby luckily survived.’

Osbourne, who will speak at this week’s RCM debate, has seen babies born with broken limbs and women who have had their stitches ripped out by their partners three or four

days after giving birth. A punch to the stomach can lead to death in the womb, or to the detachment of the placenta which feeds the foetus.

She said: 'It is all about power. During pregnancy the woman is the focus of attention. It is too simplistic to say the man is jealous - it is more to do with him thinking he is losing control over her. With so many carers involved in her pregnancy, he thinks she is no longer his property.'

Previous studies have estimated that 30 per cent of domestic violence is triggered by pregnancy. It is also known that women who are already being abused frequently find this escalates when they become pregnant.

The latest report by the Confidential Enquiries into Maternal Death in the UK, which looks at why women or babies die during or after childbirth, states that around 12 per cent of women suffer some form of abuse during their pregnancy. The Home Office puts the number even higher at about 16 per cent.

Osbourne said: 'We have no statistics as to how many babies die or are injured, as it is only in the last four years that we have started to look in depth at this issue. We are now going down the same route as child abuse. Twenty years ago that was not talked about. We are at that same stage of disbelief.'

Nicola Harwin, director of the charity Women's Aid, said: 'One of the problems has been getting this recognised by health professionals and the government. It was only in the late Nineties that a policy on domestic violence started to be drawn up. The violence starts because the man wants the woman to recognise that he is the most important person in the household. Pregnancy is a trigger because then the woman and baby are important and seen as a threat.

'We strongly believe that routine questions about abuse should be asked during pregnancy,' added Harwin.

An in-depth study looking at women's experiences during pregnancy is about to be published by Dr Gillian Aston, a lecturer from King's College, London. She spoke to 22 women from different parts of the country and found a third of them had suffered violence at the hands of their partners during the six weeks after giving birth. Some men even resented the mother giving the baby a bottle. The violence included having their hair pulled out and suffering black eyes.

'The one thing that was clear,' Aston said, 'is that these women want a voice. They believed just talking would have made them feel less alone with their problem. What we must do is make this happen as soon as possible.'

National domestic violence 24-hour helpline: 0808 200 0247.

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