

HUMAN RIGHTS IN CHILDBEARING

4. SUPPORTING AUTISTIC MIDWIVES IN THE WORKPLACE

SUMMARY

As an autistic midwife I am often asked for advice to support autistic women accessing maternity care. Recently my advice was sought for an autistic midwife. This experience was a turning point for reflection on my own experiences of once being an autistic student and my current role of practising midwife. This led me to consider the experiences of autistic workers and the ensuing discrimination and bullying that can occur, and how my experiences evidenced the need for midwives to be aware of their own and others' human rights. I also researched the support available for NHS midwives and offer ideas for compassionate reasonable adjustments.



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THE DILEMMA

I was approached by a midwifery manager seeking my advice to help an autistic midwife become quicker at documentation, as this was a point of contention within their team. Whilst it was clear that the manager wanted to support the midwife, the underlying tone was one of ableism¹ which assumes the person needs to be fixed, not the underlying structures. It was clear that the situation had not been considered from the midwife's point of view and what it must feel like to be 'othered'² by your colleagues for being slow with documentation.

A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE

This experience felt like a turning point for me, and I felt compelled to write. I started to consider why we, as health professionals, go out of our way to support women and patients but not each other. I too am guilty of focusing on others and have spent the last few years dedicated to improving autistic women's maternity experiences through creating accessible care. I have never asked the questions: What about me? What about my autistic colleagues? After considering this, I realised I felt alone as an autistic student accessing placements and I have felt alone in the workplace. I have never considered workplace adjustments, yet I find myself working in manageable areas only. We do not frequently consider our own human rights as midwives and students, and yet the underpinning philosophy of midwifery supports midwives as much as it does birthing people.

EXPERIENCES OF BEING AN AUTISTIC STUDENT

As a student midwife I excelled in university but not so much in practice. I was openly honest about being autistic and expected I would be embraced and welcomed on placements because isn't that what midwives do? The reality was very different, as some mentors would use my adjustment requests as a means of entertainment. One example of this is that I had requested maps and clear directions to places within the hospital because I get lost easily. During my first placement I was sent on errands so the midwives could see how long it would take me to find my way back. They laughed about it, and I just took it on the chin because I wanted to fit in and be part of the team however, in reality, I was being 'othered' by them, put in the category of she's 'not like us' midwives.³

THE CULTURE OF MIDWIFERY

Becoming a midwife involves both the formal process of gaining knowledge and technical skills plus the informal process of professional socialisation. This involves being informally socialised into the surrounding culture, a process like primary socialisation in children whereby social norms, values and a sense of self are developed through interaction with others.⁴

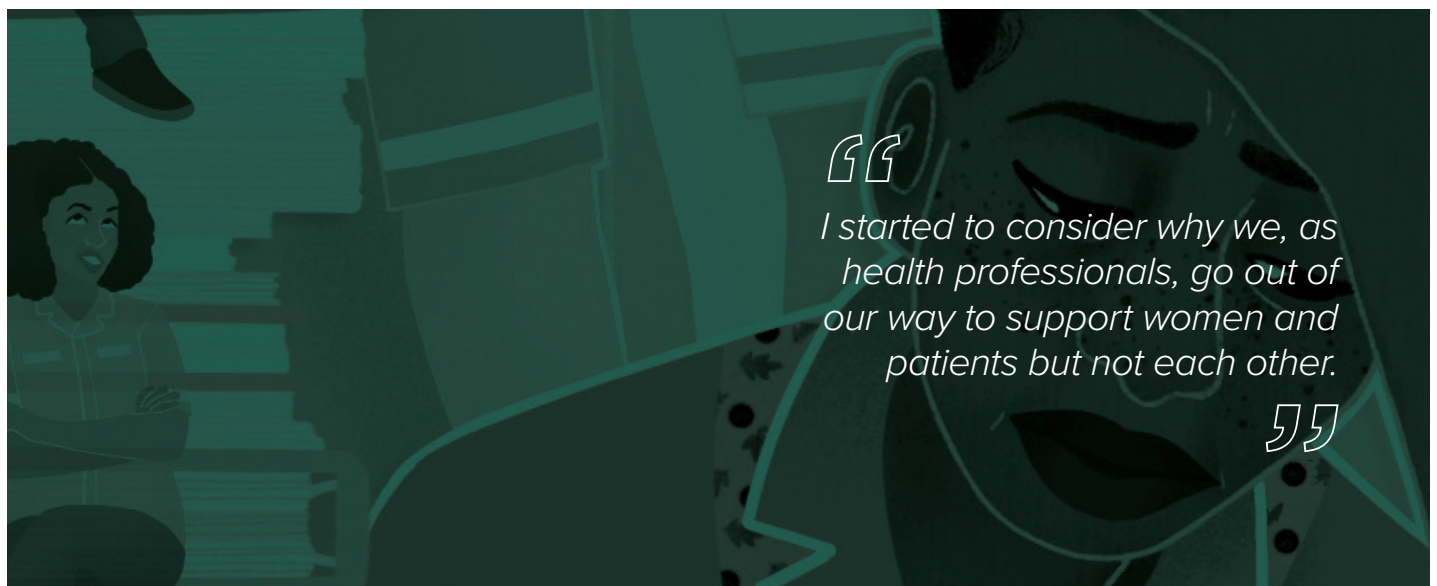
AUTISM IN THE WORKPLACE

As an autistic woman entering student life, I naively prepared myself for the academic work of studying and the physical work in clinical placements. However, I was unprepared for the bullying I experienced. I found the midwifery culture difficult, especially on quiet shifts as I would be left out of conversations. My body language and hand wringing would be commented upon and my skills downgraded because I appeared different. The pressure to fit in socially can be disabling for autistic workers who find small talk, banter and chatter difficult.⁵ Equally, intelligence, capability and kindness count for nothing in an environment where people misunderstand and subsequently dislike people who are different.⁶ I was often told to be like the midwives to gain placement grades. On one occasion I failed a placement, not through incompetency but because the midwife said, 'there's just something about her I can't put my finger on'. I also experienced group bullying as mentors I had never met before held perceptions about my ability based on others' opinions. Bullying often stems from a position of power.⁵ Students hold inferior positions in relation to midwives, a place where 72% of bullied employees lie according to the US Healthy Workplace Bill.⁷ My training was so much more difficult than it needed to be. Upon qualification I sought employment elsewhere.

Receiving the email from the midwifery manager reinforced those internal struggles of wondering why workplace cultures are like this. We all have our individual strengths - autistic people are no exception. Where is the kindness and compassion and why are these values retained only for the women we care for and not extended to our colleagues?

WORKPLACE BULLYING AND DISCRIMINATION

Unfortunately, my experience is not unique. In 2016, the National Autistic Society⁸ surveyed 2,080 autistic adults regarding their working experiences. Of the people who had experienced employment, 48% had faced bullying, discrimination and harassment for being autistic. Also, 51% reported unfair treatment in the workplace. One respondent was bullied, abused and told



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when fired, 'employers want people to be normal'.⁸ Whilst being employed can improve independence,⁹ the effects of bullying can have long-term consequences of poor mental health, a greater reliance on others and long-term unemployment.⁸

AUTISM AND EMPLOYMENT

According to the National Autistic Society⁸ most autistic people want to work but only 16% of the adults surveyed were employed full-time and a further 16% part-time. This figure has remained static for ten years (15.5% in 2007) despite raised autism awareness.¹⁰ When compared to other categories of employed people such as non-disabled people (81.8%) and disabled people (53.2%),¹¹ autistic people (32%) are less likely to be employed despite 77% of those questioned wanting to be.⁵ Even when in employment, 51% of the autistic people questioned reported being underemployed in roles that did not match their skillset alongside evidence of an autistic glass ceiling whereby autistic people rarely, if ever, experience promotion to managerial roles.⁵ This demonstrates real examples of workplace discrimination, and I wonder how many autistic people work in the NHS, how suited they are to their roles and how many hold managerial positions.

SUPPORT IN THE WORKPLACE

Being autistic means legal protection from The Equality Act 2010¹² and an entitlement to reasonable adjustments in the workplace. Some autistic people experience stigma, bullying and discrimination - leading many to not disclose their autistic status. They subsequently struggle in their roles or simply leave.

With this in mind, I began to consider what adjustments can be made for autistic midwives.

I think support needs to start with the same kindness and compassion we give to the women we care for, the same respect for dignity and human rights. It is time to stand back and embrace each other for our uniqueness and not be judged for how well we clone other people. Masking and trying to be like everyone else is exhausting for autistic people so why can't we be our authentic selves? If the women and birthing people we support are cared for in a safe, nurturing environment, then surely these values can be exerted and extended to everyone.

REASONABLE ADJUSTMENTS

Reasonable adjustment ideas can be accessed online¹³ but tailored individualised adjustments are really the answer. For example, if a midwife struggles with completing documentation tasks quickly following a birth, perhaps some extra time to complete the paperwork could be given, or a quiet space provided to complete the paperwork in for those who find working in a noisy, busy environment difficult. One solution could be that the administrative tasks are completed by someone else, and this is one of the adaptations available through the 'access to work scheme'.¹⁴ The scheme is a government programme which offers funding for autism

training for all employees in the workplace plus funding for individualised support, such as environmental adaptations, support assistants and personal aides like noise cancelling headphones. Employers can also access the Disability Confident scheme¹⁵ for advice about challenging preconceived workplace perceptions and discrimination towards disabled staff.

Initiating autism training in workplaces is a start but there needs to be more than autism awareness, there needs to be autism acceptance. Acceptance of difference. Acceptance that work may be completed in a different way. Perhaps an autism advocate in the workplace might go some way to eradicate workplace barriers through training and support, especially if the advocate understands what it feels like to be autistic.



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CONCLUSION



I know this piece has been written by an autistic midwife to highlight the needs of autistic midwives but I also understand the workplace pressures; I know the NHS is stretched and is task and efficiency driven. I think all midwives need compassionate workplaces. Compassion for ourselves and compassion for each other. Midwives should not be working whole shifts without having a drink or using the toilet. I know we are women focused, we love caring for them. It is why we chose this profession. But going to work should not cost us physically or emotionally and cause poor health. We all deserve to be supported at work and my reflection provides some insight into why midwives need human rights too. **TPM**



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