

***Press Statement from the Community Midwives Association and the Midwives Association of Ireland.***

Today the 5<sup>th</sup> of May is International Day of the Midwife.

The theme set this year, set by the International Confederation of Midwives is '100 Years of Progress' celebrating 100 years of the confederation.

In Ireland, in 1918 midwifery was given separate recognition under the British Midwives Act of 1902. However, by 1920 midwifery had been subsumed into sub-speciality of nursing, and by 1925 when the term 'midwife' was dropped from the Irish Nursing Union, Irish midwifery and Irish midwives lost their distinct voice and identity, in sharp contrast to midwives in Northern Ireland, Scotland and England and Wales.

The Irish state chose to continue to downgrade the midwifery profession. The Nurses Bill of 1950 proposed to abolish the word 'Midwife' and replace it with 'maternity nurse'. The 1985 Nursing Act added further to the decline by stating that the term 'Nurse' included 'Midwife' and the term 'Nursing' included 'Midwifery'.

When Justice Mella Carroll chaired the Commission on Nursing in 1998, some of this damage was reversed. The Commission recognised midwifery as an entity distinct from nursing and stemming directly from the Commission's recommendations, the progressive direct entry undergraduate midwifery programme was introduced in 2006. In 2010 the Irish Nursing Organisation reintroduced 'Midwifery' into its title. In 2011, the Nurses and Midwives Act repealed the Nursing Act of 1985 and recognised Midwifery as distinct profession from Nursing.

So now in 2022 how do midwives view this progress? Prior to the 1930s many infants were born at home under the care of midwives, often in impoverished circumstances. Throughout the decades, while new technologies have improved safety, modernising many areas of reproductive care, midwives now work within system that promotes medicalised care over midwifery-led care, (this is not to refute the absolute need for interventions in the case of safety for women and her babies). Our 19 maternity units and hospitals are consultant-led obstetric units, in sharp contrast with our near neighbours. We have only two pilot midwifery-led units, a stalled National Maternity Strategy which has not delivered on any new midwifery-led units, and less than 1% of the population give birth at home. Midwifery skills are in some areas downgraded to very basic care. Midwives unable to practice midwifery as thought through international based education programme, sadly choose to leave the profession.

Despite these grievous setbacks, for International Day of the Midwife, and embracing the theme progress, both our associations have chosen to **advocate for reinstatement of waterbirth in homebirth settings as our focus.**

**1. HSE ban on birthing in water, for women availing of the HSE homebirth service since November 2020**

- Suspension of HSE services without due diligence does not happen, to the best of our knowledge, in consultant-led hospital settings. To suspend the use of epidural, for example, is unthinkable, so why suspend waterbirth.
- 18 months on it is still not reinstated despite the HSE findings that there is no link with clinical incidences and birthing in water.

## 2. Birthing in water is safe.

- **International safety record:** The biggest study into the safety of water births conducted in the US in 2021 that compared 17,530 water births and 17,530 non-water births in a healthy, low-risk pregnancies population.
- There was a lower risk of several maternal and neonatal outcomes, including postpartum haemorrhage, fewer perineal lacerations and hospitalisation soon after birth, and no increase in neonatal death in women who gave birth in water.
- **Irish safety record:** The safety record of waterbirth in Ireland was confirmed when an investigation of the HSE Homebirth Service for the previous 12 years found no adverse clinical outcomes associated with birthing in water (NPEC 2021).
- The ban is unethical, unequitable, unjust and simple not evidenced based, given that birthing in water is now considered a safe alternative to medicalized birth, for women who have a low-risk pregnancy (Barry et al 2020, Bovbjerg et al 2021).

## 3. Women highly value the service

- An anonymous survey sent to HSE Homebirth service-users in 2021 reported that 93.6% rated the service as excellent and 100% would recommend the service to family and friends.
- *“We could not have asked for more! It makes me emotional to think about it -it was extraordinary, and we feel blessed and grateful” ...*
- *“It was a top-class experience, one that was priceless. I look back on my experience with joy and pride and happiness.”*

## 4. The National Maternity Strategy promised safe choices of place of birth to women

- Let women decide on where, with whom and how to give birth.
- In a democratic society where, reproductive justice is valued, and adults are encouraged to make informed decisions (National consent policy).
- Returned the choice of where and how to give birth to women.

On International Day of the Midwife, we query how much ‘progress’ there is in Ireland if midwives can’t practice ‘basic midwifery skills’ and in this case are disallowed from providing the pain relief and support which water birth gives to women in a homebirth setting. Now 18 months on, we reiterate that this ban is non-evidenced based, unethical and unequitable and should not still be in place. Given the evidence of the safety of water birth Internationally, we ask the Minister for Health, Stephen Donnelly, instruct the HSE to lift this ban on waterbirth with immediately effect.

**THIS WOULD BE REAL PROGRESS FOR BOTH WOMEN AND MIDWIVES.**

Yours Sincerely

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