

{EXPOSING}  
the silence  
*project*

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Vice President,  
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Founder,  
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Co-creator,  
Exposing the Silence  
Project

Birth photographer  
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Spot of Serendipity

Co-creator,  
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Project

# Project Background

## Purpose

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Community-based project  
to document birth trauma &  
postpartum mental health implications

# Cristen & Lindsay trauma counseling training

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- 1 – 2 hour private interview,  
audio or video recorded  
30-minute photo shoot
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Private online forum for participants

## Cross-Country Road Trip, 2015-2016



Media in U.S., U.K., and  
Australia

YAHOO!

BIRTH

## Bullied, Powerless, and Defeated: 45 Women Share Their Striking Birth Stories



Beth Greenfield  
Senior Writer  
July 8, 2015

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Daily Mail  
.com

Emotional photo essay reveals a darker side to the delivery room as mothers detail how they were 'bullied' by doctors during birth and 'forced' to undergo invasive procedures against their will

By VALERIE BERRY FOR DAILY MAIL.COM



THE HUFFINGTON POST

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## Women Open Up About Negative Birth Experiences In Emotional Photo Series

"Most women are very hesitant to speak about what they've been through."

# Childbirth & PTSD



Trauma: self-defined

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PTSD: clinical diagnosis

*Posttraumatic stress disorder in new mothers: Results from a two-stage U.S. national survey (2011)*

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900 women

1.7-9% met PTSD criteria > 6 mos. after birth

8 variables for elevated symptom levels incl.

- pressure for induction and epidural
- not breastfeeding as long as wanted
- not exclusively breastfeeding at 1 month

*Risk factors for PTSD: Coercion during labor and history of abuse (Abstract, 2014)*

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Study definition for coercion:

"You felt like you had no choice to do what the provider or somebody else told you, or your wishes were not heard or were disregarded."

1,125 U.S. women of childbearing age

42% experienced childhood abuse

67% reported coercion in childbirth

34% scored at/above cutoff for PTSD

*Coercion in childbirth stronger predictor of  
postpartum PTSD than childhood abuse*

*Elimination & Prevention of Disrespect & Abuse during Facility-Based Childbirth*  
World Health Organization (2014)

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Humiliation and verbal abuse

Coercive or unconsented medical procedures

Failure to obtain fully informed consent

Refusal of admission to health facilities

Threats to abandon care

# Results

70+ women

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12 states

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Almost 60% were Cesarean births  
Several maternal near-misses  
& perinatal deaths

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Several nurses and doulas

# Themes

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"I had no voice"

"No one was listening to me"

Mother/baby separation at birth  
(especially in Cesarean births)

Objectification (being acted upon)



*Stories*  
behind the statistics



They threatened to tie me down, so I kept my body in a crucifix. I cried. I vomited. I pleaded with the anesthesiologist to please wipe my mouth. He pretended not to see.



I felt like a cow being passed down the assembly line... Somebody came over, I couldn't even see who it was, and they strapped me down... When we came home, [my husband and I] both broke down and cried on the floor.



I said, "Stop!" but she kept going. I felt so small. I didn't feel like I had the strength to make her stop. I realized then my body wasn't mine anymore... It was theirs.

I had no feelings. No connection, no bond to my baby. It was like she wasn't mine. It was just a baby.

For the first year, maybe more, I went through life pretty much convinced she would be better off without me or with somebody else.



People kept saying at least you and the baby are healthy, but I'm NOT healthy. I've been in trauma counseling for almost two years, taking anti-anxiety meds for the first time in my life. It's crazy how people dismiss it.



# Discussion

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Stories behind public health statistics

Patients have answers  
to improve care & outcomes

## Practice Implications

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Honor informed consent & refusal

“Be Nice”

*Lawsuits: Last resort for patients  
who feel ignored*



## Conclusion

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How women are treated  
—not birth outcome—  
that is major source of trauma

Much trauma is avoidable

Questions?

[exposingthesilenceproject.com](http://exposingthesilenceproject.com)