

CHILDBIRTH-19

By
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Female pain exists in a crossroad of stigma, disbelief, and misogyny. The same world that tells us to be female is to be weak and fragile expects us to understand that to be female is also to grind our teeth through pain. We are expected to buck up and shut up about our discomfort, so we don't embarrass the same people who have the audacity to tell us our bodies are embarrassing.

Female pain must be regarded as legitimate. It is more than important that we talk about our health free from stigma or embarrassment. It is necessary. Because disbelieving and delegitimizing female pain is a form of oppression.

Caroline Reilly

"Taking resources away from maternity care doesn't make sense because we know that will create long-term harm"

Mary Renfrew

Professor of Mother and Infant Health at the University of Dundee

CHARACTERS

SHANI KIPTANUI 32-year-old black woman.

HER HUSBAND 28-year-old black man.

THE VOICE IN THE HOSPITAL Objectivity.

SCENE 1. Shani's living room. She's there with her husband but we can only see her.

SHANI

(Walking left and right slowly, breathing loudly, crosses the screen twice before speaking out of frame. While having a contraction, to her husband.)

Another one! Oh, god. I think this is it.

(Gets in frame)

We can go again now. Isn't this it? Oh, god. That hurts. I think we can we go back to the hospital. Now. Yes.

(Exhales deeply)

It hurts. Wait. I can't. I can't. Oh, god! And this is just the beginning. I feel really nauseous.

(Pause)

I'm shaking.

(Pause)

I'm feeling pressure. My back hurts.

(Surprised)

Is that the baby already? Oh, god.

(Inhaling deeply, trying to control her emotions and pain)

Let's go. Maybe they'll let me stay already. I want to stay.

(Exhales. Contraction ending)

It's going now.

(Taking her time until the contraction fully ends. Exhales)

Read me the rules again.

(Pause while she listens to her husband. Repeating what he's reading.)

If you are found to be in early labour... yes? you may stay on the antenatal ward for observation... ok... but this would be without your partner. Shit. I can't... I just keep forgetting. They won't let you stay with me, as they didn't let you come in with me yesterday for the assessment or for any other consultations or visits or scans before that. I'm so sick of this. But you can stay during labour or not?

(Pause)

Ok. Right. Fine. So, what is the labour? Just the pushing moment or what? Six centimetres. Pff. It's so confusing. I've had the appointments by phone, the antenatal classes online, I feel like I have been taught how-to drive in theory and now they want me

to go cross-country alone in a tank. I mean... Maybe we should just call again.

(Exhales deeply. Another contraction is coming.)

Another one. Oh, god. I need you. I'm not ready to do this alone. I need you with me all the time through this, oh, darling. Even if you're useless.

(Contraction ends. She laughs and goes out of screen to kiss him.)

I can't go through this alone.

(Coming back)

I just can't. They got it wrong.

(To the camera. Slowly)

Families need to be together.

(Back in character)

You know in those videos I have been watching of moms in labour during Covid, they are all alone. They are just waiting for so long, all alone, some of them even going through it with masks on their faces. Am I going to have to wear a mask too? But throughout the whole time I am there or just in labour? Ah. But what's labour?! Check that mask thing out, please.

(Pause while she listens to her husband. Then repeating what he's reading.)

It doesn't say. Ok. Are you sure? Oh, gosh, this all feels so random. After having the baby, you can't have any visits, really? But my mom has been quarantining for this! Not even if she's been shielding herself? Oh, no. If the baby has to go into nicu you can't even see your own baby beyond visiting hours, really?! What about breastfeeding her??

(Pause)

That's horrible.

(Pause)

What are you still doing on the phone? Are you in the contractions app? Why? Did you get all of them? I'm not obsessing I just think I won't have any issues with them listening to me if we go with my perfect birthplan and all my homework done. We need to document everything, remember? It helps me. It's in the Five Times More website and in the BirthRights too. Document everything! Remember? You are? Ok. I'm sure nothing is going to happen, but we need to be ready. I need to feel I have some control over this. It's my life. It's my body.

(Inhaling deeply. Getting out of frame to get the phone.)

Just give me the phone..

(Comes back. Exhaling deeply. Looking at the phone, an app that is not the one she is talking about, is open, she looks at him frustrated. Opening the contractions app and checking that they are all registered.)

I can't see them all. Are they all here? Are you sure? When did you start counting them? Right now? What do you mean you've got

the three of them? What do you think it meant when I was saying "Another one". I've been saying "another one, another one, another one" for hours. Come on, babe!

(Touching her belly. Pause.)

Oh, look, I've never known a move like the one she's doing right now. So strong. I don't know if it is because she's moved down? Ah.

(Inhales deeply)

This is good, right? It means things are happening. Let's go back to the hospital.

(Leaving the screen through her right side. Out of screen)

Are you ready? Where is the hospital bag?!

(At the same time, she is getting in the bedroom through her left side)

Do I have to do everything? Where is this stupid bag..

(Leaving the bedroom through her left side. Crossing by the living room. Getting in the kitchen through her right side.)

Where did you put it? What do you mean you're busy? What can you possibly be doing? You go check by the door. And if you have to leave me, please make sure you take the battery packs for your phone from the bag. I don't want to be worrying about this stuff once we're there. If you have to wait outside and I have to call you to come back in I don't want you to miss the call because

your phone died because you were watching funny videos while I'm in labour or whatever.

(Hormones kick in)

Oh, babe, I know you would rather be with me. I don't want to do this without you. Could we try to get you in somehow? What do you mean I have mental health issues? I have zero issues. Ah, as a way to cheat your way in. Would that work? Well, you know what? I'll have them for real if they make me go through this alone. And by the way there is no shame in having mental health issues, ok? Ok. I know you know. I know. I love you too. Help me with my shoes, please. Thank you, babe.

We need to share this. It's our life. Our family. The beginning of our new adorable family can't start like this. Without you. Without my mommy or my sisters...

Alone, surrounded by frustrated people that won't listen to me because they're too busy or understaffed or because I am black. Oh, god. I'm so stressed. And by the way, I don't understand why there are less midwives available right now, is not like they are putting them to help with Covid patients, is it? Wait. I don't know if we should go just yet. I don't want to be up and down the hospital again if this is still not active labour...

(He says something)

When did anyone ever relaxed after being told to relax?! I'm not having a panic attack, I am just scared I am not going to be listened to, I am not going to be believed, my pain is not going to be believed. I am a black woman. I'm just scared. You want me to what?? Dance? Now? You want me to dance now. Oh, babe. Oh, come on...

(We can hear "Away from you", from second 0:23 in <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RsSBypxSwI> Shani dances throughout the pain, starts smiling and relaxing)

SCENE 2. Everything that happens to Shani from now on until she's back in her house is a blur for her. The sets behind her change along with her journey.

VOICE

HOUSE. Get out of the house. Weak. STREET. Walk to the hospital. For the third time.

SHANI

I'm here.

VOICE

HOSPITAL. Get admitted.

SHANI

Finally. Here, this is my birthplan.

VOICE

HOSPITAL ROOM. Intense pain. COVID rules sending the birthplan to hell in a handbag. BED with handrails.

SHANI

People, listen to me.

VOICE

Fear. Anxiety. Pain. Terror. Fear. Worry.

SHANI

I am feeling shrugged off.
People with masks around me.
I can't see the face of the midwife.
I don't feel connected to any of them.
I get an epidural. Finally.
Already?
Why is it so painful? Uh.
Oh. Someone is touching me. I don't remember giving consent to that. Someone between my legs.

VOICE

Opening. Looking. Hurting.

SHANI

(Angry)

I don't remember being asked for consent for that pain.

VOICE

But still she gets assessed, and again, and again. Hurting her.
Why? No respect for her body. No respect for her emotions.

SHANI

What is happening around me?

VOICE

Baby monitor making noises. The baby's heartbeat.

SHANI

I can touch the monitor. Touching the monitor feels like touching the baby's heart. Me and my baby.

VOICE

She loves that sound. That beat grounds her. Reminds her of her goal. Reminds her of her love.

She's exhausted. She's out of control. Distressed.

Beat.

Beat.

Focus on that beat.

SHANI

I'll just listen to the beat. Let's do this.

VOICE

She's moaning. Guttural sounds coming out of her. Her face is losing tension.

Her face is tense.

Her eyes get bigger.

Her eyes are almost closing.

Someone says something.

Bigger again.

SHANI

What is happening around me?

VOICE

She's falling asleep.

She's in intense pain.

Half-awake through dreamland. Dreaming awake. Having a nightmare half-awake. Weaker. Weaker.

SHANI

Who are all these people behind masks? This looks like a movie.

Am I in a movie?

VOICE

She's dizzy. She's hungry. She's vomiting. She's being told what to do no matter what she says, thinks, wants, or feels.

She's asking for things she's not getting.

Asking again.

Not getting them.

Getting things she doesn't want.

At all.

She said it.

SHANI

I don't want that. Look. It's in my birthplan. I don't want any of that.

VOICE

But she's getting all of that. In vein.

SHANI

What is happening around me?

VOICE

Asking again. Not being listened to.

SHANI

I hear words from people making decisions. I don't understand.

VOICE

Decisions about her.

She's thirsty.

Swelling. Burning. Pressure

She cries.

HOSPITAL THEATRE. The baby is coming.

Now.

Push. Push. Push.

SHANI

I don't feel pain anymore.

VOICE

Push. Push.

Is it out?

The baby is not crying.

SHANI

Is it out?

VOICE

It is.

But not crying.

Emergency team gets in the theatre.

SHANI

The baby is not crying. Babe, go see what's happening.

VOICE

The baby gets out in a transparent box on wheels. While she's bleeding non-stop.

Doctors around her. Masks around her. This will make it end.

SHANI

Why are we still here? Ah, the placenta.

VOICE

Placenta comes out.

But not even that was allowed to happen on its own time.

Everything has to happen when they say it has to happen.

Fuck Nature's timings, right?

The Masks control Time.

VOICE (CONT'D)

Now she's empty. She feels empty.

The baby has been wheeled out.

HOSPITAL ROOM. So exhausted she can't care as much as she wants to.

SHANI

Where did they take the...?

VOICE

Sleep. Sleep, babe.

The husband says.

Rest, please. I have to go now.

They are making me go.

He says.

I can come back tomorrow for an hour, ok? Sleep now.

He says.

She falls asleep.

Wake up! Wake up! Where is the baby? She might be hungry. I am.

SHANI

Someone gives me toast.

VOICE

What is it always with the toasts?

SHANI

Please let me breastfeed my baby out of visiting hours.

VOICE

But they don't let her.

Horrible. Who the fuck made that decision?

Breast pain.

She has to stay three days in the hospital.

VOICE (CONT'D)

Breast pain.

A Hungry screaming baby.

A Mommy expressing milk to be wasted.

Baby in the intensive care unit alone.

Mommy in the hospital room alone.

Daddy nowhere.

No visits allowed.

Floods of tears.

No sympathy or comfort anywhere to be found.

SHANI

I can hear women crying all the time. I cry. All the time. I just want to be with my baby and my husband. Please.

VOICE

The midwives call her "sweet" or other generic terms.

On the third night in, a midwife comes on shift and learns and uses her name. Shani, darling.

She cries because it reminds her of everything she is missing out on from being in hospital during Covid-19.

Then she gets sent home without the baby.

Baby in the hospital alone.

She won't ever latch or feed from mommy.

Ever.

No visits allowed.

Mommy. HOME. Crying.

SHANI

I feel like I will always remember this for the horrible reasons. This makes me feel so sad. I want my baby. I need my baby. Babe, are you crying too? Come, hold my hand.

VOICE

A week passes by.

BEDROOM IN SHANI'S HOUSE.

SHANI

(Changing clothes and applying pink lipstick)

Babe come on! We're getting the baby! We're getting the baby!
Oh, god, I can't wait!!! Babe!!! What are you doing? Come on!
Let's go! I'm so happy! We are getting our beautiful little
human being today.

SCENE 3. The fourth trimester. Breath. Look at the camera. We are in Youtube. Videoblogging. To her thousands of subscribers.

SHANI

Hello, guys, I'm sorry it's taken me months to make a new video, but you know, I've been busy. I hope you haven't forgotten about me.

I am so happy I can be here with you again. Ah, I'll be making a video of LIFE IS A GIFT per month instead of a video per week from now on, ok? April is so much work. I finally found a moment to do this video because she's taking a nap now, and I was missing you so much, your support, your comments.. I've missed you!! I have so much to share with you. It's been months!! I can't believe how time flies when you have a baby.

So, before I start, tiny tiny tiny trigger warning for all the mummies to be: Please don't get scared watching this video. We are strong and beautiful, and you will get through this and come through stronger and empowered, ok? You've got this!

(Inhaling deeply, smiling, doing some signature gesture she will repeat every time she says this sentence and then exhaling slowly)

Say it with me: Life is a gift.

So today, instead of unpacking anything, I just want to talk about some things that have happened after having my gorgeous little baby girl. Here goes.

(Shani moves to her left and front)

Three days after childbirth they sent me home without her, Matt and I were beyond sad. Seeing our baby just one hour per day, not being able to be there together. Matt wasn't even allowed in. That was hell, believe me, hell, until a week later we could finally go get her. I've never felt happier. What a rollercoaster of emotions. But we finally got our beautiful little human being. Well, I got, because again, I had to go in all alone, but we didn't care anymore. Not after everything we already had to go through, we were just happy it was over. Or so we thought but 2020. You know. Right in the middle of the Covid Pandemic. When you think you have gone through everything and all the Covid collateral damage has been done to you and over, then the most stupid things happen, things you could never imagine.

Like what do you do after having a baby? You go and get her registered and get her birth certificate. Easy-peasy-lemon-squeezy, right? Well, not for us. We had to wait until August to be able to do that. Four months. There was a four months delay to register births in Warrington, because all the offices were closed. I called and asked. "Even for that? Are you joking? Can't we do it on the phone? Video call it? Something? No. Nothing. Ok, I guess it won't be that important then. What do you really need a birth certificate for? Ha ha."

(Pause. Remembers and then getting mad)

I'll tell you. Did you know that you can't register a baby for the GP without a birth certificate? Yes. No. No doctor. You can't. And from here on it just snowballs..

Next thing we found out is that a baby can't have the vaccinations without being registered with a GP. What?! What can you do to get her vaccinated then? Nothing. Wait. Nothing. How can this be happening? Who is allowing this to happen? Do they know? How can they not know?

(Stands up, starts walking)

Then it happened. At three weeks April got sick. But she's not registered with a GP and GPs are not even accepting walk ins. What can I do to get her seen by a doctor? I asked the person on the phone and they said: "You have to book an appointment online". I went to do it, but I couldn't, because there is a stupid limit and if a person is not at least six months old you can't book an appointment online for them. Why? Because you are supposed to be able to walk in with them to see a doctor before that age, and they are also supposed to have health visitors regularly checking up on them, and at that point they are supposed to have all their first vaccinations done. But there was none of that for April. None.

(Standing still)

So here we are, inheriting protocols from a system who worked under certain circumstances but that becomes a wall after a wall after a wall when conditions change, and nobody is thinking about adapting the protocols, just creating more and more on top of them until they're all obstructing each other, and it is causing so much damage. So what are you going to do about that? Huh?

(Walking again)

I called again, frustrated, angry, everything, and they told me to just go to the hospital.

Right, to the hospital where all the craziness is happening, instead of just going to the practice that is literally empty because they are doing all the appointments on the phone. Ok. Yeah. That makes sense. Exposing her to whatever, when she's not having immunisations from the vaccines or the specific protection that mommy's milk would make for her, because you, and your stupid visiting hours rule in the hospital, stopped me from breastfeeding her.

(Pause. Sad)

It's all so cruel, you would think machines are in charge instead of human beings.

(Angry)

You should not take babies to hospitals to start with, but ok, she kept vomiting and it had been a whole day already so we decided we would take her. While Matt was getting ready to go I tried again to feed her and then, thank god, she kept her formula down.

(Sits back down)

That's when I lost it, guys, I cried my eyes out because I couldn't stop myself from imagining what could have happened, what could still happen if there is a next time, what is happening to other babies who are not as lucky as April.

So after those two awful days I thought: "Is it only me?" "Is this just happening to me because I am doing something wrong? It can't be that difficult, can it?"

What are the other moms doing? Seriously, what are you guys doing? How are you doing? Is any of you going through something similar? I know I am not the only one. Please, let me know in the comments below. This is a safe sharing space. Ok? Because there are no mommy groups anymore. What else can we do? Sometimes it feels as if I want to start a rebellion or something when I just want to be with my family and chill.

And I know I am doing things wrong. It's my first baby and I have no idea what I am doing, and I want to give her everything I can. I want what's best for her. I know I can do better. I feel it.

After she got sick, I was also feeling April wasn't doing well, generally speaking, and I didn't know if she was gaining the weight she was supposed to or not, because the check-ups were cancelled. I was really anxious I wasn't breastfeeding her. So, in the middle of all this self-doubting guilt trip I thought... "Wait! What if I try and start breastfeeding her now? Is that an option? After so long? Would that work?"

So I googled it, and I found lots of websites saying you can do it. Apparently, it is called "relactation" or "inducing lactation". I was so happy when I found that out. I told Matt all excited and he looked at me like "Huh?"

Is not easy though, like it's not easy at all, but I did it! It took time, and effort and commitment and lots and lots of trust in Nature and in the process. But it worked. I got the milk

going! It's amazing. It's unbelievable what the human body can do if you create the conditions for it to thrive, just let it lead you. You know? Let your body do what it is supposed to do. Listen to your body. Life is a gift.

I am not saying don't trust doctors or midwives or whatever, I am just saying do your research, find out your options, inform yourself. Empower yourself with knowledge.

I know. I know. These are way too many issues to talk about in just one little video, moment, conversation, even in a whole lifetime. Whatever. I know that this might be overwhelming for you, my dear watchers, it is just too much. Too much. I don't want you to unsubscribe from my channel because all of a sudden, I'm not fun anymore or I have become even political about some stuff. Me, political, right?

Oh! I can hear April, she's moving around in her cot. I'm going to go breastfeed my gorgeous baby and pray for this to end as soon as possible. Thank you, guys. Don't forget to like, share and subscribe to everything.

(Pointing at places around her)

Here, here and here. I'll go back to my usual joyful social self in my next video, do you know why? Because I have zero traumas after this. Zero mental health issues. Mommy is coming!! Mental health issues, what's that? Zero postpartum anxiety. Zero. Zero. Zero. If I keep repeating it, it will become true. Coming!!! Z E R O. I'm perfect. I have a perfect family. Perfect. Zero. One second! This was all like a bad dream and not a defining moment in my life AT ALL. ZERO issues. I have been empowered by this. I'm healthy as a cucumber. Byeeeee. Life is a gift! Unpack it! ZERO issues. Byeeeee.

(To April)

Mommy is coming, baby, mommy is coming.