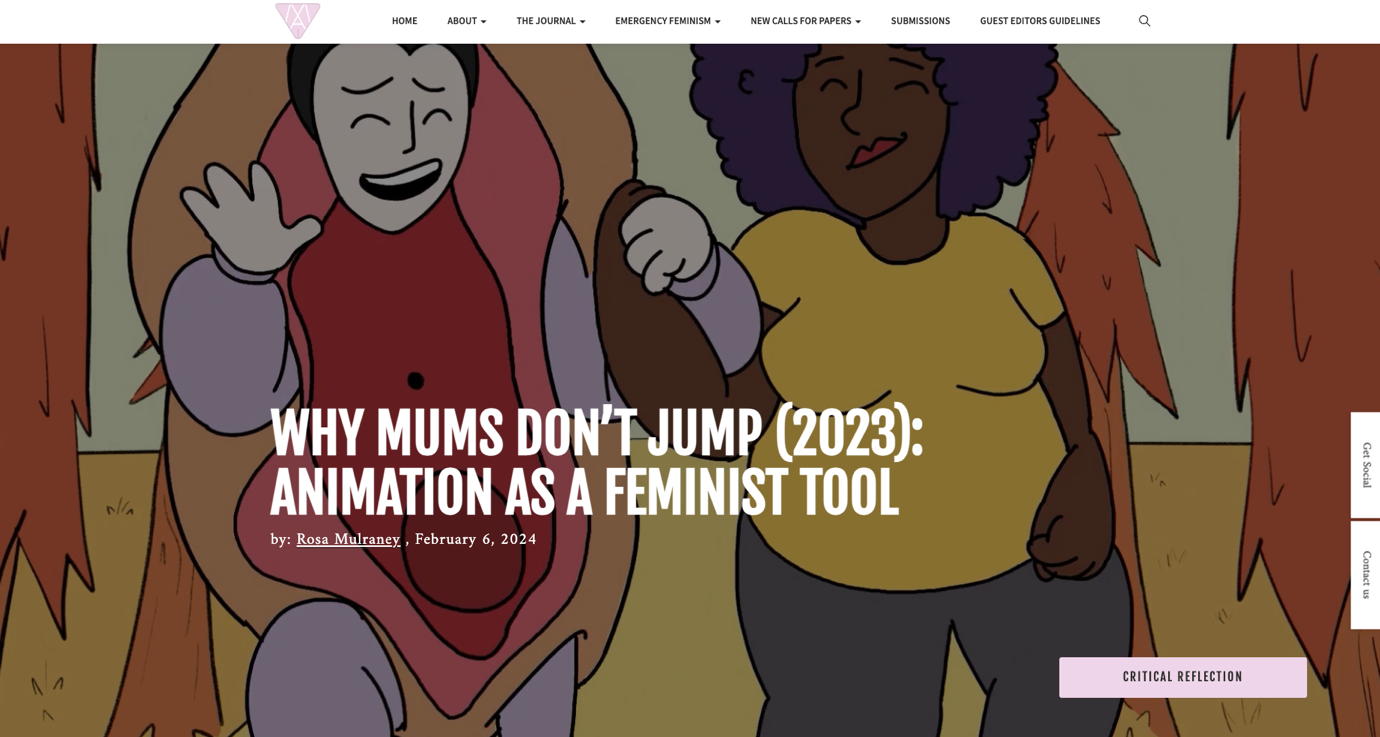
<https://maifeminism.com/why-mums-dont-jump-2023-animation-as-a-feminist-tool/>

Using the title film as a case study to promote ‘prolapse awareness’, Mulraney argues for animation as a powerful feminist tool.



by: [Rosa Mulraney](https://maifeminism.com/author/rosa-mulraney/) , February 6, 2024

Post ‘Me Too,’ women have realised that their individual voices might make a difference. Amongst these voices, a few powerful testimonies have come forward revealing harrowing insights into the plight of women postpartum. Previously, these women have silenced themselves, as they have been systemically hushed and made ashamed of their suffering after delivering babies, but this is changing. Individual women have called out into the social media void, and others have echoed back to confirm that they were not alone. Online communities have gathered to empower women to go public, releasing podcasts, books, and films.

Here, I aim to draw attention to these cultural events, which I see as formative of a new trend inspired by candour and hope, and which has led to the recent world premiere of what turned out to be a ground-breaking short film Why Mums Don’t Jump (2023). It brings—perhaps for the first time—the taboo of the lived postpartum experience to the screen in an animated form, narrating stories of women dealing with incontinence, prolapse, and pelvic pain after childbirth.

To offer some context for it, I retrace the historic steps that led to the release of the film, and the alliances that made it possible, paying particular attention to those individuals whose work, experience, and input contributed to the success of this project: Helen Ledwick, Cat Pearson, Kerry Glencorse, Rosa Mulraney, Derek Hayes, Nikki Marlborough, Leslie Lapage, Cadi Cornwell-Davison, Tim Eweoya, Bonnie Harris, Mia Mackenzie, Dee McCann and Sammy Reavley. Overall, I hope to demonstrate that animation can be used as a powerful feminist tool to help unveil hidden oppression or suppression of women’s voices and, as a result, hope to accelerate social change.

In April 2020, journalist Helen Ledwick launched her podcast Why Mums Don’t Jump. It has grown over the years to include over 12 hours of harrowing testimonies on the impact of postpartum injuries on the affected women’s day-to-day lives. Ledwick kickstarts the podcast with her own story, motivated by her frustration at only finding out about prolapse after it had happened to her, and the extreme isolation of not having any information or support (Ledwick 2020.1).

Pelvic organ prolapse is a condition where internal organs can fall out of place into the vagina, causing discomfort and pain. According to the paper published in 2023 by the Department of Health and Social Care and Maria Caulfield MP, 1 in 12 women report symptoms of pelvic organ prolapse after childbirth. Although it is known among the medical community, it had not been listed in the indices of pregnancy books, including a book written by a consultant obstetrician at University College Hospital, London, titled The Day-by-Day Pregnancy Book: Comprehensive Advice from a Team of Experts and Amazing Images Every Single Day (Blott 2009).

Ledwick’s podcast highlights this shared female experience of not being pre-warned or informed about these conditions. There has been a culture of silence in healthcare that failed to convey timely knowledge or details on how to prepare and manage the damage caused to female bodies by pregnancy and labour, or even access research-backed medical care (Slawson 2022). Ledwick further demonstrates the neglect of women by documenting the experiences of many high-profile women from different walks of life, including ultra-marathon runner Sophie Power and comedian Elaine Miller. The shame around these conditions has meant many women have suffered in silence, incorrectly believing their condition was a one-off, rather than part of a more considerable oppression by the patriarchy. This oppression has dismissed their suffering, and has led to it being framed on the level of the individual: as either the woman’s fault—’Women are designed badly’—or something that a person cannot handle knowing about: ‘too scared to give birth’ (Anon 2022).

The animated film Why Mums Don’t Jump (2023) was birthed through the collective activism of Falmouth University’s staff and students, including Nikki Marlborough (Course Leader), Derek Hayes (Module Lead), Rosa Mulraney (Senior Lecturer) and students, Cadi Cornwell-Davison, Tim Eweoya, Bonnie Harris, Mia Mackenzie, Dee McCann, Sammy Reavley. The project completed in March 2023 to coincide with the premiere of Ledwick’s book. The podcast brought these activists together, acting as both a beacon in the dark and a qualitative research resource around which to build the film script.

Although the title of the film implies that the experience of incontinence, prolapse, and pelvic pain only happens to cisgender women who have given birth, it is vital to make clear that Ledwick’s intention is not to exclude anyone or imply that these are the only narratives around pelvic health. The idea for what title to use came to Ledwick one evening and is a play on words from the film White Men Can’t Jump (1992). Ledwick’s inspiration to commit to going public was a chance encounter on a shopping mall bench in Manchester with a female GP. They openly discussed prolapse making Ledwick realise that prolapse was a public conversation it was possible to have (Ledwick 2020.2).

This mode of a casual encounter is a repeated narrative I have found that runs through the research on the subject in Ledwick’s podcast and this film. Many of the women included have had water-cooler moments of shared exasperation with medical professionals, and the gauntlet has been thrown back at them as patients, ‘Why don’t you do something about it?’ (Mulraney 2023). What has started as a quiet unease is given momentum by each unsettling conversation, as per Sara Ahmed’s observation on the emergence of feminist consciousness, ‘[m]aybe it begins as background anxiety, like a humming noise that gradually gets louder over time’ (Ahmed 2017:27).

These chance candid interactions meant that when the Why Mums Don’t Jump podcast launched into the public domain in 2020, affected women, including myself, were ready to act. Cat Pearson, a professional designer, reached out to Ledwick to offer illustration and branding services and Glencorse, a literary agent, negotiated her book deal. I invited Ledwick to be our live-brief client for the animation students at Falmouth University.

As a backdrop to this, other voices from women who have been affected started to emerge. In 2019 Brianne Grogan, a trained physiotherapist, started running a fitness YouTube channel designed for postpartum women: Femfusionfitness, later rebranded as Dr Bri’s Vibrant Health in 2021.Denise Conway launched The Flower Empowered in 2019, another fitness YouTube channel, designed to help women improve their management of pain and incontinence through exercise. All these platforms frame pelvic health knowledge as empowering, whilst acknowledging that postpartum pelvic health is unsupported and under-researched. Ledwick states, ‘We just don’t know enough about conditions that only affect women’ (2020.1).

Despite the challenging and taboo topic, Ledwick intentionally curated the animated film’s approach with a written brief to the students that asked for optimism and humour, in contrast to the shame and invisibility these women feel: ‘the tone is honest, heartfelt and humorous as well as positive and noisy, energetic and proud’ (Ledwick 2022).

The students included a drawn vagina [1], front and centre in the film, which we see drawn for fun.. Historically, the vagina has been represented in film as a monster, as titillation in porn, and also as a source of female pleasure and celebration. Aaron Gerow notes the representation of the vagina as a beast, with the use of vagina dentata in Gozu (2003) (2009: 35). William Johnson draws attention to the physicality and performance of the vagina in the films of Kumashiro, The World of Geisha (1973) and Ichijo Sayuri: Following Desire (1972); the vagina on stage as both freedom of expression and demeaning sex show (2003: 15). Patrícia Mourão de Andrade highlights erotic feminism in Schneeman’s Fuses (1964), the vagina as a source of pleasure and the importance of representing both male and female ecstasy, ‘the film gives equal attention to Tenney’s erect penis and to Schneemann’s aroused breasts and vagina’ (2020: 97).

In Why Mums Don’t Jump (2023) the vagina is a both a private burden and public joy. We see the vagina in a private space and transition to a very public one: a marathon. Initially the vagina appears as a weight to bear but transitions to a worn costume in a marathon race to raise awareness for ‘Why Mums Don’t Run!’ We see a character go from isolation and being overwhelmed by a vagina, to running in a marathon dressed as the same vagina, reaching out to link arms in joyful celebration with another woman. The characters move from private spaces of isolation and despair into public spaces of shared joy. As Ahmen states, ‘Experiences that left you feeling all alone are the experiences that lead you to others.’ (2017: 31).

The secrecy shrouding female reproductive health is highlighted through the thoughtful selection of audio clips, ‘no-one told me this could happen’ (Why Mums Don’t Jump 2023). The film intentionally draws attention to the oppression of silence perpetrated against women during pregnancy and post-partum and then moves the dialogue away from the implicit bias ‘just what happens’ (Anon 2022), towards an empowered position: ‘fight for your body’ (Why Mums Don’t Jump 2023). As a backdrop to this, books and articles have been published that draw attention to bias against women. In 2020 Hannah Devlin wrote an article for The Guardian, highlighting the recent medical bias women have faced from the NHS (Devlin 2020.1) and in 2019 Caroline Criado Perez published Invisible Women: Exposing the Gender Bias Women Face Every Day. Another publication by Catharine Blackledge, Raising the Skirt: The Unsung Power of the Vagina, was re-released in 2020, and highlights how and why women’s reproductive health has been considered shameful and taboo. Feminists are starting to question the patriarchal narrative imposed upon them and Blackledge’s research uncovers empowering language that reframes women and their reproductive health away from the heritage of ‘pudendum’ from the Latin ‘pudēre,’ meaning ‘to be ashamed’ and ‘schamlippen,’ which stands for ‘lips of shame,’ to positive and powerful words from earlier history, like ‘verenda’ that means ‘to inspire respect’ (Blackledge 2020).

These collective voices are brought together under one narrative in Why Mums Don’t Jump (2023). We hear five women’s voices and see women represented on screen, but only Ledwick is recognisable as a caricature. The other voices are visualised through the forms of other diverse women, helping to amplify this message of a shared female experience, their voices talking through other bodies. The film and the podcast highlight how this is about wider issues of public health and social justice; the right to timely information and research-backed medical care. Women are suffering from invasive corrective operations that aren’t fit for purpose and there is evidence that pelvic health issues reflect a wider problem of inequality, given that women across the country are being affected, (Devlin 2020.3). It is becoming increasingly apparent that different countries have different approaches to supporting women in childbirth. In the UK, pelvic health care has been provided via a leaflet given to women as they exit the maternity ward—which I experienced—in contrast with France, which offers 6 weeks of physiotherapy (Anam 2008).

The challenge that women face is the implicit bias encountered in both the medical profession and society at large. Doctors have historically seen this either as just what happens, ‘Women are designed badly’ (Anon 2022) and some women have accepted their fates, trying to just get on with their lives as best they can (Ledwick 2020.3). Activists seek to question this patriarchal narrative, and there is growing support. Recent government programmes including the ‘Women’s Health Strategy’ have acknowledged that there are problems; a road map has been announced calling for sweeping changes including women’s health centres, education around pelvic health in secondary schools, protocols for pelvic health assessments in pregnancy and signposting for earlier interventions alongside increase in research-based medical support, (GOV.UK 2022). However, there are concerns that these good intentions will not be followed through with sufficient resourcing which may hamper meaningful change (Devlin, 2022). Facing these ongoing challenges means it is vital that women speak up and look out for each other and the younger generations are rightfully starting to confront older women about their silence (Davina McCall: Sex, Myths and the Menopause 2021).

Why has it taken so long for affected women to bring the realities of postpartum healthcare to light? Social media seems to have given these motivated feminists a way to make sense of their own experiences; Ledwick states that the initial Instagram community she built was instrumental in showing her that she was not alone, and that there was an audience for these stories (2020.4). The success of her Instagram community led Ledwick to commit to creating the podcast Why Mums Don’t Jump, which became a calling card for other feminists to approach her: journalists, doctors, designers, lecturers, publishers and animators reached out. Their shared agenda is to unite and break the taboos surrounding postpartum care, so that women can be properly informed and cared for and not feel so isolated, ‘I think our main kind of thing that we wanted to, which was part of the client brief, that we really wanted to tap into was the aspect of the audience not feeling alone, or people who are going through it not feeling alone.’ (Reavley cited in Mulraney 2023).

There seems to be a determination that this taboo will end with the activism of Generation X mums. What has been inspiring is that when the call has gone out to younger generations to help, Generation Z have jumped at the opportunity, ‘I must work on this live brief, I don’t care what it takes, I must work with Helen!’ (Harris, cited in Mulraney 2023). If Ledwick and I were nervous of the reception to this live-client brief with such a taboo subject, our worries were unfounded.

In 2020 Ledwick used her website to articulate her manifesto, ‘to bust myths and taboos around leaks and lumps after childbirth.’ The three-year anniversary of the podcast culminated in the creation of the film, which was the result of many years of research and activism. During this time, Ledwick, Grogan and Conway released their books, the UK Government launched the Women’s Health Strategy, and The Vagina Museum reopened through crowdfunding support. This all represents an emerging trend of collective action as women started to reclaim their reproductive health back from the patriarchy.

The backdrop to this trend is the recent tensions around definitions of ‘female’ and ‘woman’ and whether medical literature should use the term female or woman rather than ‘person.’ In the press there have been dramatic scenes of Elaine Miller pretending to flash her vagina in Scottish Parliament to oppose The Gender Reform bill, (Blake 2022). There has also been controversy around J.K Rowling questioning who can be defined as a woman (Harper 2020) and the emerging scandals around dismissal of female pain in medical care and informed consent (At Your Cervix 2023).

Alongside all this activism and conflict, it is this collective action of feminists breaking taboos that may help them realise their shared ambition to help make meaningful change. Despite the conflict, horror stories, and suffering, these women are focused on positivity and empowerment. Ledwick’s podcast is a candid look at the heart-wrenching suffering of postpartum women, but done with a huge amount of optimism focusing on getting back to enjoying life. In fact, all the contributors to the film often described the Why Mums Don’t Jump (2023) film as fun, ‘“just have fun with it”, was the feedback that kind of lightened up a lot of the ideas’ (Reavley, cited in Mulraney 2023). These feminist mixed gender communities have come together to bring hope to women through their advocacy and camaraderie.

There remains a resistance against talking about reproductive health in public, which is argued to stem from Western Christianity (Blackledge 2020). The patriarchy has built a culture of reproductive health as a resource to be controlled, and a culture of trusting your doctor without question, ‘I trusted my doctors’ (Devlin 2020). Women tend to doubt their own narrative ‘was I stupid?’ (Anon 2022). Why Mums Don’t Jump (2023) starts with individual women separated from each other but as the film progresses, they cross into each other’s scenes and join hands in solidarity and joy. The truth is, many women will still be suffering in isolation—but as Teichart writes, ‘feminism as a manifestation of the world it wants to create’ (2023). In the film we see the women join hands in joy, one of them dressed as a vagina as they run in a marathon with a banner that reads Why Mums Don’t Run! Ledwick’s best friend responds to this idea with, ‘I would love that!’ (Ledwick 2020.1).

The cinematic premiere of Why Mums Don’t Jump (2023) in Los Angeles at La Femme International Festival 2023, demonstrates the crucial role that feminist film festivals and animation can play in the public dissemination of information for the purpose of social change. We are so grateful for the opportunity, and the support received from Leslie Lapage, the festival organiser. The acceptance into the festival has allowed an unglamourous and secret condition to play out in the glamourous and public world of film, where opportunities abound for audience engagement. Film festivals lay out the red carpet and radio show hosts can ask probing questions, ‘So I gotta ask why this subject, you know my mum has this and I gotta say we need to talk about this!’ (Michael Sanchez 2023). Darkened auditoriums flicker with the visuals of films that show protagonists and how they respond to the call to adventure. What does our hero want and what is in their way? We can share their journey from dark night of the soul to finding fresh inspiration (Synder 2005). This is potentially the first time that the postpartum experience of prolapse has been shown on the big screen and women are responding to seeing their experience represented in film for the first time, ‘This made me cry!! Well done and thank you’ (Kerrieaki 2023). The activism continues and this article is part of that: a way to continue the conversation and reach more women.

**Notes**

[1] The term vagina is used here to refer to external female genitalia. There is no word in english to represent a collective term for the vulva, labia, clitoris and vagina.

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