



Midwifery Café.

Let's Talk About Midwifery

Editors Zalka Drglin, Ph.D., and Irena Šimnovec



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Illustration and design: Tajda Pavletič

Photos: personal archives, Maja Rokavec

The electronic version in English Midwifery Café. Let's Talk About Midwifery is available on:

<https://praviceporodnice.org>

The electronic version in Slovene Babiški kafé. Pogovorimo se o babištvu is available on:

<https://praviceporodnice.org>

Electronic file format: pdf

Published: 2024 in Ljubljana, Slovenia, EU

Kataložni zapis o publikaciji (CIP) pripravili v Narodni in univerzitetni knjižnici v Ljubljani

[COBISS.SI-ID 214977539](#)

ISBN 978-961-95882-4-6 (PDF)

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Published by: Natural Beginnings – Society for education, free choice and support in pregnancy, childbirth and parenthood

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The document has been developed in the project »Babiški kafé«, supported by the Ministry of Culture, Republic of Slovenia.



REPUBLIC OF SLOVENIA
MINISTRY OF CULTURE

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Midwifery Café: What is midwifery and who are the midwives?

Zalka Drglin, Ph.D.

Childbirth affects parents, families and whole communities profoundly. During childbirth, experienced midwives offer support to women giving birth. Midwifery stems from the need women giving birth have for supporters who accompany and help them in this unparalleled life event in many ways. Childbirth and the onset of motherhood transform a woman and influence her life very deeply but it also has a great influence on her closest ones.

Awareness of the cultural and social value of midwifery is on the rise and the December 2023 entry to the Unesco List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity sheds a new light on it as well. Practice of midwifery unites great knowledge of contemporary scientific findings, know-how, gained by critically weighing traditions of midwifery assistance and experience. Knowledge of our own tradition, the evolution of others and understanding of the past and the present world are conditions for further developments of midwifery beyond the narrow definitions of health profession.

So what is modern, progressive midwifery? In its core, it's about deeply respecting a woman, her body and the processes required for her to carry a fetus, give birth and breastfeed her baby, to give her or him care and attention. This is reflected in the knowledge, skill and attitude towards a woman. It's important for progressive midwives to profoundly understand social and cultural factors that also shape the circumstances of motherhood and to engage in those factors that lead to empowerment of women. A midwife always relates to the expectant mother in a special and personal, individual cooperation while respecting and safeguarding her rights. Unesco's very important recognition of midwifery acknowledges the complex role of midwives, calling for a realisation in everyday lives of women in Slovenia.

At Natural Beginnings Society, we named the cycle of public discussions with midwives and an obstetrician *Midwifery Café* – and formed it as an invitation to consider, discuss and reflect on the topic that concerns all of us: modern-day midwifery. Pregnant women, expecting couples, mothers, fathers, midwives and all who are interested in childbirth can rediscover midwifery at the *Midwifery Café*. Although the bond

between the midwife and the woman giving birth is temporary, the magnificence of childbirth stays lifelong. A poor bond can spoil the experience which stays negative for the woman, while good support, care and assistance have the potential to strengthen her faith in a fellow human being. What a responsibility and what a gift!

[This e-publication in English](#)

[Use the link](#) to access the more extensive e-publication in Slovenian.

Midwife – a woman's ally and guardian of physiological processes



Photo: Maja Rokavec

Nina Radin, independent graduated midwife and graduated painter

Nina Radin is the longest active independent graduated midwife in modern Slovenia. For the last ten years, Nina has been helping with home births and taking care of women in their pre- and post-natal period. In her work, she is aware that all stages of childbirth can be a beautiful, tender and empowering experience for the newborn, the mother and the father. She recognizes the ability of a woman's body to become pregnant, to give birth, carry a baby to term and feed it. For her, the woman, the child and the family are at the centre of midwifery care. She believes it's about time midwives in Slovenia to reclaim their lost or taken away autonomy, regardless of their working environment, public or private.

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My own childbirths lead me to understand the value of heartfelt and respectful midwifery care. During my two births I experienced over-medicalisation of care. I didn't feel that that care relates to the basic role of a midwife – to stand for physiological processes, loving and respectful professional care for a woman and her baby.

My decision to study midwifery originates from my desire to improve women's childbirth experiences. My studies at the Faculty of Health Sciences in Ljubljana did not offer enough practical knowledge. It was mostly focused on medical procedures instead of turning to the basics of midwifery: to support the birth process and respect woman's needs. Although childbirth is in most cases a normal event in a woman's life, routine procedures suggested otherwise: enemas, shaving, continuous

fetal monitoring, insertion of an intravenous cannula, offering painkillers even to women who have expressed that they do not want them, inducing and/or accelerating labour, blind lights, talking loudly as if it were normal, not a particularly solemn day, washing women before childbirth as if childbirth were a surgical procedure, cutting the perineum, cutting the umbilical cord when it is still full of blood, only brief contact between the mother and the newborn immediately after birth ... During the practical part of my studies, I never witnessed a vaginal physiological childbirth. Attending births as a doula in the maternity hospitals and attending midwifery trainings abroad, I acquired most of my midwifery skills. I decided to become an independent midwife.

Women need a woman-centred care and supported physiological process in all environments, but physiological childbirths often lack support in Slovenian maternity hospitals. Every midwife should be trained to provide physiology-oriented midwifery support and care regardless of the birth setting, using available resources thoughtfully and in accordance with the needs and wishes of the woman, and, above all, providing as calm, intimate and warm environment as possible, where the aim is to minimise disturbance to the birthing woman and to the bonding with the newborn, while ensuring the safety of the both. As women become more aware, the demand for a midwifery approach that supports physiology increases. It would be necessary, with appropriate training, to increase the number of midwives in Slovenia and to change the entry requirements for midwifery studies. The staffing norm in clinical settings should be changed so that one midwife cares for only one birthing woman.

Midwifery and obstetrics are two different professions that meet and work together at certain points. For autonomous midwifery to become established, we need a strong community of midwives. We require other types of birth settings to enable births other than at home and in maternity hospitals, like midwife-led birth centres. Pluralism and the maturity of society should also be reflected in the choices women have when deciding where to give birth and with chosen midwife, as well as in the study and career options available to midwives.

Midwifery is much more than just birth assistance



Photo: personal archive

Špela Rebernak, graduated midwife

Špela Rebernak is a graduated midwife who works at the Trbovlje maternity hospital in the birthing room, at the post-natal department and gives midwifery consultations on pregnancy. She cooperates in the Preparation for birth and parenthood program in primary health care centres of Trbovlje and Zagorje. She is striving to upgrade and expand midwifery knowledge, studies content- and implementation-related educational options to inform and raise awareness of women about their bodies and natural abilities for a good and safe childbirth and breastfeeding. She discusses established midwifery practices with her colleagues and develops advanced midwifery approaches that build on experience and recommendations.

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When I tell people that I am a midwife, they are often impressed. People indeed respect our work but also forget that midwifery is not just birth assistance and newborn care. It's much more. Midwives accompany a woman during pregnancy, give advice and support in preparing for birth, coming of a new life and becoming a family. Unfortunately, this part of the midwifery activity is often neglected, underestimated and in some cases completely overlooked. We live in a time of information overload, which is why midwives' support and guidance for pregnant women in finding their way into motherhood is so important. Expectant mothers also face different birth-related fears. We need to respond on them properly, show the woman that her fears are completely normal, that she is not alone and that we are here to help her.

Childbirth is more than just bodily processes, it is one of the most emotional experience for a woman and her partner, too. A woman remembers it life-long. We support a woman to trust in herself and her body

and empower her during childbirth. After birth, we take care not only for the newborn, but for the mother to feel strong and ready for her new role as well; we make sure they can bond. I strongly believe that a woman who is empowered, self-confident, the kind who believes in her abilities to give birth and motherhood, also raises such children. Caring for a woman in her way into motherhood, is in turn, caring for society.

Being a midwife does not mean a mere presence in the birthing room. It stands for comprehensive care for a woman and her baby during pregnancy, birth and in the early phase of motherhood. This is a mission worth our continuous efforts.

Midwifery in the search of balance between the wisdom of tradition and expectations of the present



Photo: personal archive

Mateja Kusterle, graduated midwife, professor of English and Spanish

Mateja Kusterle is a midwife who works in the birthing room at the Jesenice maternity hospital and accompanies healthy new mothers in its post-natal department. Occasionally, pregnant women can consult with her during midwife-led antenatal appointments. She cooperates with the Department of Midwifery at the Faculty of Health Sciences in Ljubljana, Slovenia. Her humanist background – she is also professor of English and Spanish – helps her with the relationship aspect of her work. She draws on experience from her own motherhood and midwifery exchanges in Norway and New Zealand. She is committed to implement continuous midwifery care in maternity hospitals and for a better engagement of partners first days after birth. She is passionate about examining and observing the birth process which is a result of a combination of experience of the mind, body and soul of an individual female and her baby. As an attentive and thorough midwifery thinker, she also focuses on the content and relationship in communication between the woman giving birth and midwife. She works together with other midwives and tries to establish a more constant cooperation. She is motivated by a comprehensive and humane approach to work and the development of midwifery to a family-friendly continuous model of care.

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A midwife, traditional or modern, believes in a woman's ability to conceive, give birth, and breastfeed. She has an important role in supporting a woman throughout various life cycles such as during her menstrual period, pregnancy, childbirth, post-partum, in the time of

breastfeeding, and menopause. Her fundamental role is in maintaining natural processes. Childbirth is a very intense physical and emotional process that realises extremes of strength and vulnerability, control over a woman's body and psyche and a complete openness of the body and the spirit. Every birth experience is unique and calls for a complete presence and acceptance of the moment. At the same time, it is the most fundamental process, occurring every day, that enables the survival of the human species. A woman giving birth needs to be focused on the present but the goal-oriented nature of today's society proves this difficult. Knowledge and intuition a good midwife has support the emotional experience of women during childbirth while she works together with her body and indulges in the process. She is present with the woman, supporting her with breathing, massage her, encouraging position changes, movement, rest, hydration, and nourishment. She empowers the woman, conveying that the birthing process has meaning, and supports her in bonding with the baby and in breastfeeding.

Due to the current fragmentation of maternity care, the emotional burden of midwives is greater, and they often lack support when facing more difficult experiences. A midwife would ideally accompany a mother-to-be through all stages of pregnancy and birth which would enable both a deeper connection and a better understanding of a woman's needs. Respecting the value system of a fellow human and the right to make informed choices are the bases to establish a partnership between a woman and a midwife.

A priority of midwives in Slovenia is to establish contact with women that will go beyond the boundaries of the birthing room and break free to the broader community. In seeking a balanced path forward for women and midwives through the challenges of our time, I would emphasize the importance of a thoughtful and supportive midwifery community, the establishment of a partnership between woman and midwife, and critical reflection from both parties.

Cultural and social aspects of modern-day midwifery in the eyes of an obstetrician



Photo: personal archive

Eva Macun, dr. med, specialist of obstetrics and gynaecology

Eva Macun is a doctor, obstetrician and gynaecologist, who laid the foundations for important steps in the direction of a physiological childbirth in Slovenia with a group of midwives at the maternity department of the Jesenice General Hospital. Among other achievements, she abolished needless routine procedures of enema and shaving before childbirth, turned episiotomy from a routine to an emergency case procedure and promoted movement and upright positions during birth. She puts a woman and her needs in the centre. As an obstetrician, she works closely with midwives to protect and promote natural processes during pregnancy, birth and in the post-natal period. She is an advocate of women rights in childbirth and supports modern-day autonomous midwifery. In 2016, she received the Slovenian Women of the year award for her endeavours related to respectful and safe childbirths. She is also an active mountain rescuer and spent many years as an air ambulance doctor.

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In the majority of Western European countries, midwives work autonomously in maternity care, including prevention, guidance and care during pregnancy, birth and the post-natal period. In Slovenia, after World War II, most births moved to maternity hospitals. Gynaecologists-obstetricians took over the care of pregnant women in community health centres. Midwives were mostly employed as assistants to obstetricians during childbirth in maternity hospitals. For some period, they took care about the mothers and the babies at their homes after they left postnatal department. Education of midwives ceased and re-emerged after several years which resulted in a lack of staff.

Our institution recognizes the value of midwives who conduct regular check-ups and consult women before and after childbirth. Our midwives autonomously assist healthy woman giving birth if no complications are expected. Their knowledge of pain relieving methods without pharmacological means is invaluable and their sole presence reduces a woman's anxiety. They are experts in compassionate, professional and woman-oriented birth care. They rediscovered ancient knowledge of their ancestors, they also train their intuition and share their experiences selflessly. We believe that it is important that we all have a good birth experience regardless how simple or difficult childbirth is. Such a care model turns out to be successful. Pregnant women from all over Slovenia come to our maternity hospital because they believe that with the help of our health professionals, especially the midwives, they will experience the kind of birth they want for themselves, their children and their families. We strive for an ethical, compassionate and professional treatment of all women and their families. Our goal is women to have a quality experience during the fragile life period of becoming mothers.

Midwifery – supporting physiological processes



Photo: personal archive

Sabina Oblak, independent graduated midwife

Sabina Oblak is a graduated midwife who now works independently. She worked as a midwife in the birthing room at the Jesenice maternity hospital for fifteen years; in the last few years as consulter in midwife-led antenatal appointments, too. She was also a breastfeeding counsellor with an IBCLC licence.

She gave birth to four children and stands for natural births and positive birth experiences. Her focus is primarily on maintaining and developing specific midwifery skills, such as methods for protecting the perineum and using various birth positions in the first and second stage of birth. She is dedicated to transfer these skills to her colleagues and students for courses of pregnancy, birth and breastfeeding to be as natural as possible. This is extremely important for the physical and mental health of women and babies.

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I observed the first childbirth during my practice at a secondary medical school, this was my first contact with midwifery. I have experienced what it means female power while giving birth to the child, but also what it means to have an unsupportive midwife who neglects the needs of the woman and forces her to give birth lying on her back. I decided to become a midwife who is different: supportive, respectful and professional, and decisive when necessary, too. During my midwifery studies and practical training, I didn't really learn much about physiological birth, which interested me the most. I immersed myself in literature and came across the issue of excessive birth medicalisation which often leads to needless procedures such as unreasonable or excessive use of artificial oxytocin, fundal pressure and episiotomy. In every birth process I witnessed, the woman giving birth was lying on her back with her feet lifted up and bent towards the body. After my graduation, I gained employment at the Jesenice maternity hospital where on the initiative and guidance of the obstetrician Eva Macun we started to humanise births and abolished routine procedures.

I encouraged the first woman to give birth in a kneeling position in 2011. I saw the satisfaction a woman has after giving birth to her own baby with little or no intervention in childbirth as invaluable and wish for every woman and newborn to be able to experience it. This gave my perception of midwifery a whole new dimension.

In independent practice, I can truly fulfil my mission: to offer women a continuous midwifery care during pregnancy, birth at home or in the maternity hospital, and post-partum. I wish more women in Slovenia had the option of prenatal and postnatal care from a midwife.

True midwifery care prioritizes establishing a trusting relationship, continuously attending to the woman's comfort, safety, and privacy, and supporting her in making informed choices. We encourage drinking and eating as needed. We refrain from »guiding«, instead we monitor birth process, well-being of the woman and the baby. We facilitate and, if necessary, advise on non-pharmacological pain relief techniques and the use of different positions. Throughout the birth process, we are aware that the baby is a living and sensitive being, she/he feels all our »manoeuvres«. We place trust in the woman and in the natural capabilities of her perineum, etc.

By my opinion, as a midwife, I do the most for the woman and the child by not interfering with the birth when it is not necessary and by not taking credit for the woman's birth.

To dare to work well



Photo: personal archive

Tea Bevk, graduated midwife

Tea Bevk is a graduated midwife who used to work in the Izola maternity hospital. Her thesis researched the experience of women of three generations with midwives during their pregnancy and childbirth. She highlights local accessibility of midwives for women and families. She is determined that a midwife belongs among people in a local community where she is close to women and families. A midwife should be professional and compassionate, constantly taking care of her knowledge. She also writes and gives lectures on compassionate maternity care with a deliberate sense of an individual and her child that addresses the needs of the woman, the child and the family.

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I see the decision what kind of midwife I would like to become more important than my decision to become a midwife. Through my work and research, I determined that women are left with a lasting impression of how they felt with a midwife. A woman giving birth wants to be in company of a compassionate midwife who will accept her, who will make her feel safe and accepted as an equal partner in a relationship that is being formed during childbirth. This is definitely not just a fad of modern women. Compassion during birth, which is a unique and profound intimate experience, has a crucial impact. Compassionate cooperation with a woman is far from a blanket patronizing relationship. It means to recognize the needs of a woman and adapt to them.

It is elemental for midwives to be present and accessible outside the birthing room as well. Women need the chosen midwife to be there for them during pregnancy already and until the end of breastfeeding. They need a midwife who makes them feel safe and accepted. Women desire verified and genuine information on pregnancy, birth, post-natal period and breastfeeding.

Midwifery is a field with great potential for improvements. You can start implementing them at once when you come in contact with a woman. May it be in the birthing room, at the post-natal department or in her home environment, but even better, already during pregnancy.

Postpartum home visits in Slovenia are currently carried by community nurses. It would be important for midwives to be close to mothers again and to visit them at home after childbirth for as long they need their support and help.

Even though our education covers a wide spectre of knowledge, we need to keep learning, even after graduation. Using up-to-date knowledge, with compassion and courage, we can push the boundaries and improve the quality of maternity care for all women and their families.

Midwifery as a prototype of woman-to-woman collaboration?

Zalka Drglin, Ph.D.

According to anthropological studies, the presence of others during birth offers evolutionary benefits due to the practical assistance to the woman giving birth and the newborn as well as due to the emotional support in this extraordinary life transition. Midwifery is rooted in the abilities of women to work together.

In practice, midwives in Slovenia rarely have an opportunity to get to know the pregnant woman better and start developing a bond with her. We have sound reasons to expect active endeavours for a better organisation and regulation of maternity care with systemic changes: for a continuous midwifery care with »one-to-one« model of care. Childbirth is a woman activity. Pregnant women require a connection with a caring and compassionate midwife. Thus, we must consider the issue of neglecting these needs within the context of women's status within each specific socio-historical moment, particularly focusing on the status of women as mothers. As a midwife works, she communicates what motherhood is to the society. The key question is: »Who are midwives there for«? They can bring oppressive patriarchal messages and consciously or unconsciously take part in maintaining or even fortifying traditional, subordinated non-autonomous positions, roles and functions of a woman. Or, quite the opposite, midwives can contribute to the empowering women and in offering self-reflection on women as mothers, particularly in regard to their autonomy and self-determination.

Due to the great importance of midwifery to the quality of life of women and children, it's absolutely crucial to also develop and take care of the quality of midwifery. A midwife should always be committed to a pregnant woman who desires such a relationship and not just in exceptional cases or on paper. The »nature« of this otherwise temporary connection between a midwife and a woman cannot and should not be based on a hierarchical relationship but rather on a conscious and reflective encounter. In this relationship, a midwife acts with all she is: an embodied being that feels, senses, thinks and acts using its sensitive body but reflects on these processes as well. Advanced midwives are distinguished by profound contemporary knowledge and skills, as well as repeatedly conscious internal processes that enable them to act within relationships and through relationships.

In creating and cultivating communities and seeking harmonious relationships, we might just find the most effective antidote to the devastating excessive material consumption of today. Midwifery holds the potential to (again) become an ally of women and an ally of children these women carry, give birth to and breastfeed. This excludes any idealization and naturalisation of maternity but includes the awareness of the significance of female autonomy.

For the development of modern midwifery for the benefit of women and children.

About Natural Beginnings Society

Natural Beginnings Society, Non-Governmental Organisation, Slovenia, EU

We care how women give birth in Slovenia. For more than 20 years, we have been striving for excellent maternity care in Slovenia. A woman should have a central role in the care she receives during pregnancy, childbirth and early motherhood. We are committed to women and the quality of family life: we support women and their families in maternity care, help them in time of need, educate future parents and parents who are just starting their journey.

We are a non-governmental, non-profit and voluntary organisation, which carries out family-related activities. We are dedicated to advocating for women's rights, researching obstetric violence, actively highlighting the lack of respectful maternity care, and educating and raising awareness among midwives, women and parents-to-be and mothers, parents, too.

Fields of activity:

- pregnancy, childbirth, breastfeeding, postpartum period
- women's rights in childbirth, patient's rights
- mental health challenges during the perinatal period – depression, anxiety, abuse, traumatic birth experiences, violence
- women's health
- maternity, paternity, parenting, child care, relationships between partners as the family grows, family dynamics and family life
- birth-related choices, respectful maternity care
- midwifery, obstetrics, birth cultures, doulas

Activities:

- advocacy for women and families during maternity care
- information and education, creating choices
- assistance and guidance on pregnancy, childbirth and post-natal period
- assistance and support in dealing with birth-related distress
- workshops, support groups, lectures
- informing and giving advice by telephone, e-mail, video calls and in person
- lending literature
- researching, writing papers, publications
- translating
- various campaigns, initiatives and collaboration with other NGOs, institutions, experts and the media

Cornerstones:

- focusing on a woman's centred care during pregnancy, during childbirth and during early motherhood
- advocacy regarding women's rights in childbirth
- empowering women and parents
- supporting development of advanced midwifery
- maternity care based on modern findings (including evidence-based care)
- respecting the relationship between the mother and the child (father or other loving person, taking care of the child)
- supporting development of excellent and respectful maternity care

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NATURAL BEGINNINGS – Society for education, free choice and support in pregnancy, childbirth and parenthood

Naravni začetki, Združenje za informiranje, svobodno izbiro in podpora na področju nosečnosti, poroda in starševstva

Zaloška cesta 54, Ljubljana, Slovenia

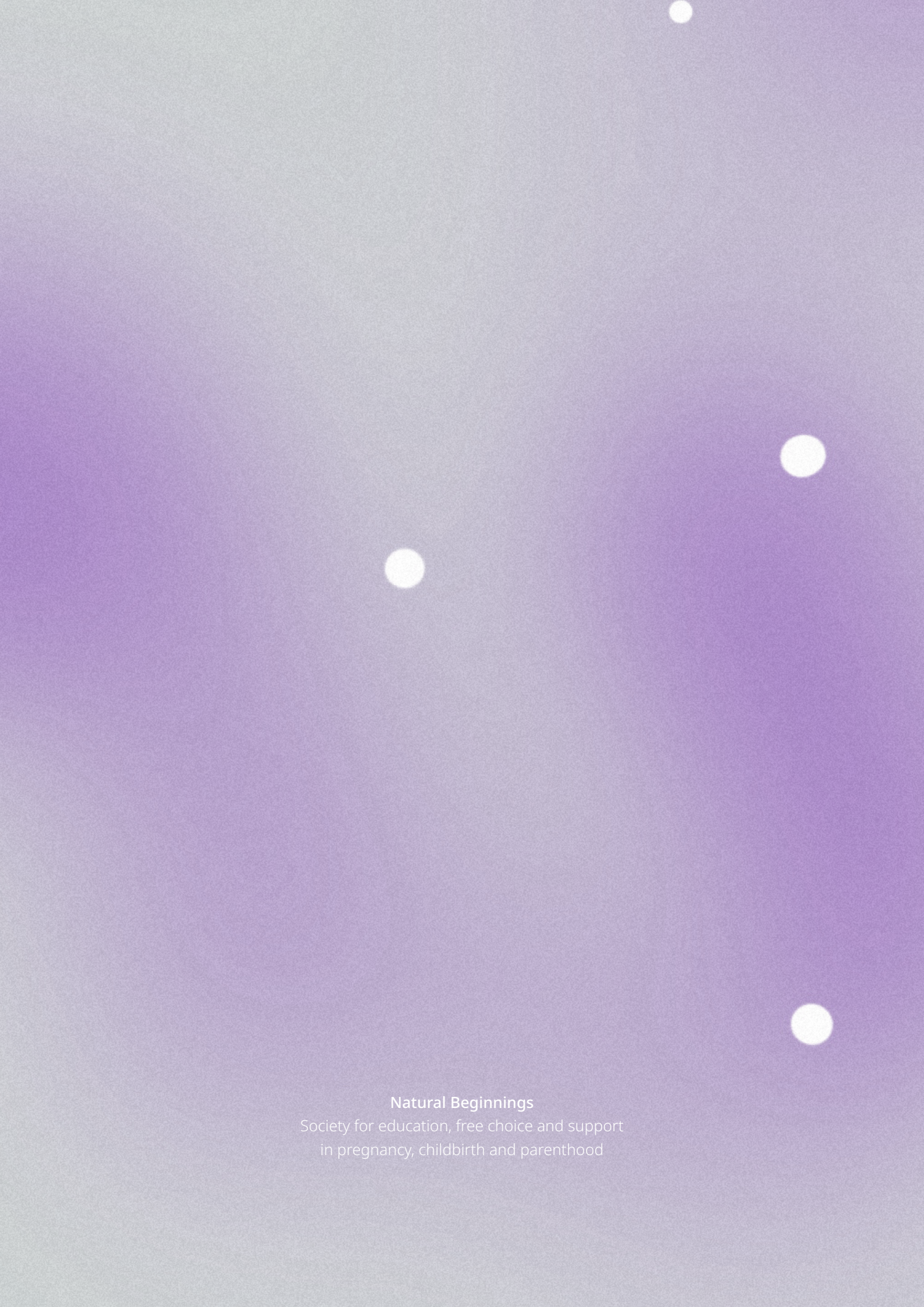
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