Dr Laura Abbott (UK)

Breaking down global barriers: physical and emotional health of pregnant prisoners
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Findings of an Ethnographic Study of Perinatal Women in English Prisons

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What we already know about pregnant women in prison


- Many discover pregnancy on admission to prison. (Kennedy et al., 2016)

- Approx. 600 pregnant women in prison each year, 100 babies born to women in prison. (North, 2006; Corston, 2007; Abbott, 2015 and Gullberg, 2013)
Why research was needed – gaps in the evidence

- Very little known about pregnant women in the prison system globally
- Scarce qualitative research looking specifically at experiences of childbearing in prison
- What is different for the pregnant / perinatal prisoner to the non-pregnant prisoner?
- The experience and voice of the woman who is pregnant in prison?
Methodology: Qualitative research

Ethnography:
- 3 Prisons
- 28 women
- 10 staff members
- 58 interviews
- 260 hours of field work

“It's probably the smallest minority of any other of the kind of groups that we have...It's no wonder that people don't know a great deal about it”.
(Prison Officer)
Findings

- Institutional thoughtlessness
- Institutional ignominy
- Coping strategies
- Negotiating entitlements

“I've got baggy tops, so I just hide my bump, and like most people couldn't recognise that I'm pregnant, so that's a good thing”.

“People look at you as if to say...she must be really bad, her, if she's got two officers escorting her in handcuffs, she must be really bad”.

“If you feel a bit sick...you can only eat at certain times. You can't take your food back, and you've got to eat it there and then”.
‘Layla’s’ experience

Birthing in a prison cell
One woman (Layla) from my study had given birth in her cell without midwifery care and described her experience as I audio-recorded.

"You're delivering a baby and you don't know whether that baby is going to be breathing. We all panic, and hope it's a good nurse that's on."

"She was shoved on the biggest, noisiest wing. She was like eight months pregnant, and she was supposed to be moved up to the MBU... they didn't listen to her, didn't listen when she was saying, 'I think I need to go to hospital, I think the baby's coming,' and she ended up giving birth in her cell."

"no one was trained in delivering a baby. She's just lucky. They're lucky, that nothing happened, they're just really lucky."
Labour MP calls on ministers to end ‘harrowing’ practice of female prisoners forced to give birth without a midwife

Top Labour MP Jess Phillips has called for urgent action from ministers to protect female prisoners forced to give birth behind bars.

‘No ambulance, no midwife and she came out feet-first’: The women forced to give birth in cells

A midwife has revealed how some women are giving birth in cells without access to proper medical care.

Female prisoners in England left to give birth without midwife, report reveals

Exclusive: research reveals lack of proper medical care for pregnant women and babies in some prisons

Sarah Boseley
Tue 13 Nov 2018 06.00 GMT

The study looked at three prisons in England but birth charities say they think it is a ‘systemic issue across the board’. Photograph: Andrew Atkinson/Corbis via Getty Images

Women are giving birth in prison cells without access to proper medical care, according to a startling report shared with the Guardian.
Why is campaigning for change so important?

Safety of mothers and babies!
In the UK it is a legal violation for anyone other than a Registered Midwife or Medical Practitioner to attend women in childbirth, except in ‘sudden or urgent necessity’ (Nursing and Midwifery Order, 2001).

Changing policy - giving evidence, speaking out & working in partnership
Recommendations

- Female staff available
- Access to a midwife – 24 hour phone available
- Basic provisions
- Development of a specialist midwifery role
- Maternity leave
- Specialist support for women separating

- Multi-disciplinary training including emergency births in prison
- Hospital care pathway
- Government websites should include pregnant women and maternity leave entitlements
- Specialised Midwife on Health Inspectorate
It is not surprising to find prison to be a place of tension, stress and loss of autonomy. Pregnant women appear incongruous to the patriarchal prison system. Staff as well as women are left vulnerable with the emotional trauma of separation of a baby from his/her mother with staff attending labours having no consistent recourse to debriefing or specific training. Pregnant women in prison are in a minority but this should not render them invisible (Abbott, 2018).
"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world.
Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

- Margaret Mead.
Grateful thanks to all the women and staff who consented to participate in this research; Birth Companions; The Iolanthe Midwifery Trust and to my research supervisors: Dr Tricia Scott & Dr Kathy Weston.


