



Dr Laura Abbott (UK)

*Breaking down global barriers:  
physical and emotional health of  
pregnant prisoners*





# Breaking down global barriers: physical and emotional health of pregnant prisoners:

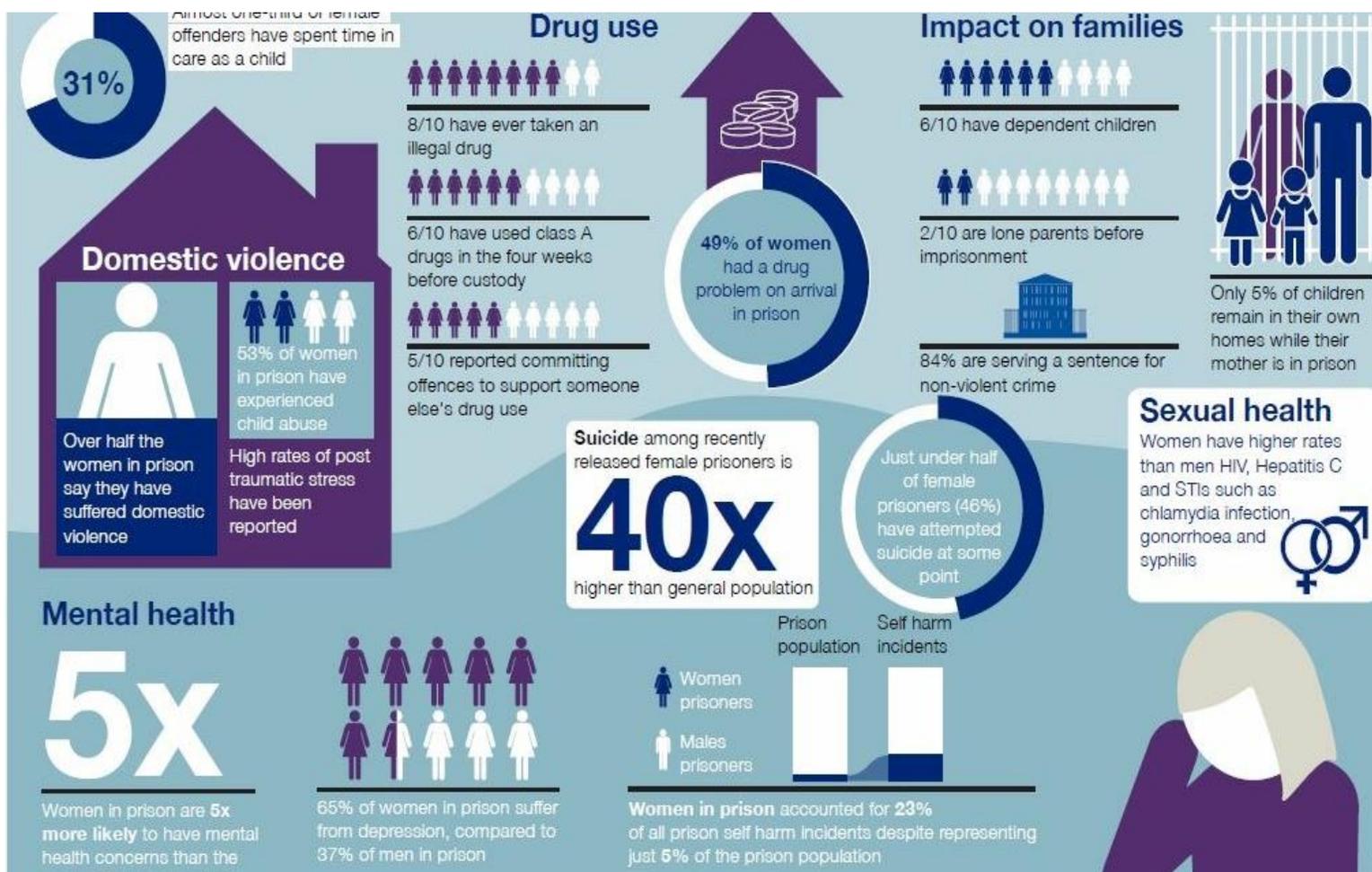
*Findings of an Ethnographic Study of Perinatal Women in English Prisons*



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# What we already know about pregnant women in prison



- Many women report having suffered some form of **sexual abuse in childhood, victims of domestic violence, drug and alcohol dependent and suffering mental illness.** (Corston, 2007, Baldwin & Epstein, 2017)
- 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

Birth in a  
prison cell





# Staff experiences of cell births

**“We all panic, and hope it's a good nurse that's on”**

**“You're delivering a baby and you don't know whether that baby is going to be breathing”**

***“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

Written by: Liz Bates Posted On: 13th November 2018

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

by Heather Saul

17 hours  
Tuesday November 13th 2018

SHARE THIS ARTICLE



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



**Dr Shona Minson** @ShonaMinson · Nov 13  
Female prisoners in England left to give birth alone in their cells, report reveals. Well done @midwife4teacher on this research. Treating women & babies like this is wrong. There must be immediate changes @royalcolobst to prevent avoidable loss of life.



**Female prisoners in England left to give birth without midwife, report ...**  
Exclusive: research reveals lack of proper medical care for pregnant women and babies in some prisons  
theguardian.com

4 62 57

**Kacey Ainsworth** @kaceyainsworth · 22h  
Replying to @LucyBaldwin08 @midwife4teacher and 18 others  
Brilliant laura a very important issue most people have no clue how barbaric conditions can be for pregnant women in prison x

**Birth Companions** @BirthCompanions · 14h  
Vital work by Birth Companions and @midwife4teacher. Proud that @laurabriggs works so closely with this inspiring team.

**Birth Companions** @BirthCompanions  
Thank you @CElmore for raising this issue in Parliament. Our Birth Charter contains a comprehensive set of recommendations for ensuring that pregnant women in prison receive the maternity care they need: [birthcompanions.org.uk/BirthCharter](http://birthcompanions.org.uk/BirthCharter) [twitter.com/CElmore/status...](https://twitter.com/CElmore/status...)

6 13

**Birth Companions** @BirthCompanions · 15h  
'No ambulance, no midwife and she came out feet-first': The women forced to give birth in prison cells. More important coverage of research by @midwife4teacher shining a spotlight on the risks faced by pregnant women and babies in prison in England

**Chris Elmore MP** @CElmore · Following

Today @midwife4teacher and the @Guardian revealed that some female offenders were giving birth in prison cells & without access to midwives. Govt stands no chance of improving rehabilitation if they can't get the basics like healthcare right. My question to Justice Ministers:



Chris Elmore MP  
Standing up for Devon

5:47 PM - 13 Nov 2018

### Health

## 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

f t e 3,716



▲ The study looked at three prisons in England but birth charities say they think it is a 'systemic issue across the board'. Photograph: Andrew Aitchison/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).

Nursing and Midwifery Order, 45 Statutory. (2001). Department of Health.  
[http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2002/253/pdfs/ukxi\\_20020253\\_en.pdf](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2002/253/pdfs/ukxi_20020253_en.pdf)







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Dr Laura Abbott and Naomi Delap  
give evidence to the Joint  
Committee on Human Rights

1 April 2019



Wednesday 6 March 2019 Meeting started at 3.13pm, ended 4.58pm



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

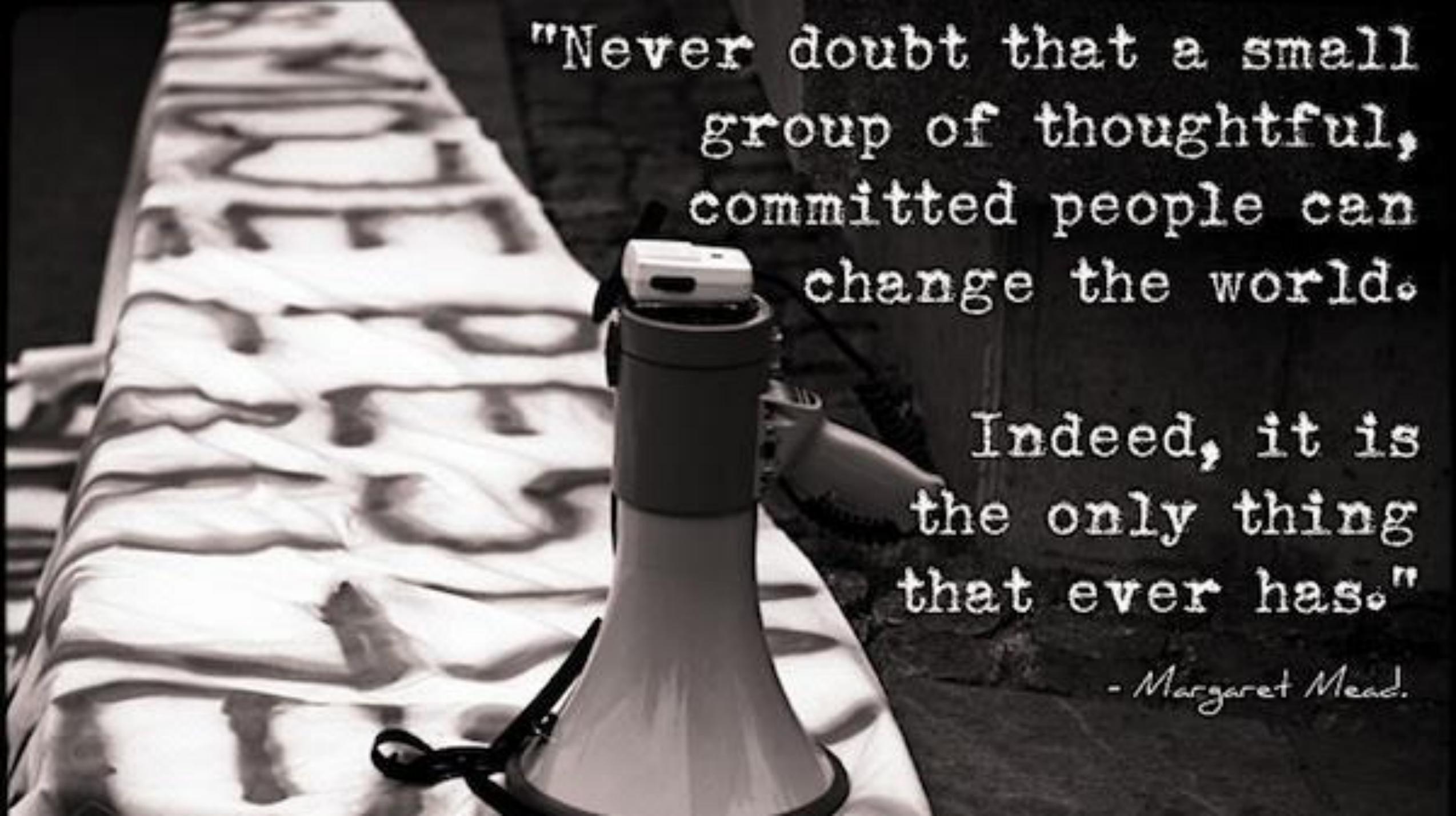
# Recommendations



- 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).



A black and white photograph of a megaphone with a smartphone on top, resting on a striped fabric. The megaphone is white with a dark top section. The smartphone is white and is placed horizontally on the top of the megaphone. The background is a dark, textured surface, possibly a wall or a large piece of fabric. The overall mood is one of communication and impact.

"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.*



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