

## **The Incarcerated Pregnancy: An Ethnographic Study of Perinatal Women in English Prisons**

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(Submitted to the University of Hertfordshire in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Health Research (DHRes) - February 2018)

It is understood that many women in prison come from a background of disadvantage. Indeed, it is reported that as many as 80% have a mental health diagnosis of varying severity. Unsurprisingly, many women have been looked after as children, have endured violent relationships, childhood abuse and as many as 70% are thought to be substance abusers. Approximately 600 women a year are thought to be pregnant in prison in the UK although accurate figures are not kept. Until now, there has been very little research which looks specifically at women's experiences of pregnancy in prison and my doctoral study set out to understand more about how women experience pregnancy and becoming a mother in prison.

My research took place in 2015 and 2016 and I spent time observing 3 English prisons and interviewed 28 women and 10 members of staff. Whilst prisons are notoriously difficult places to inhabit, my research has shone a light on how perinatal women experience that environment and the potential impact upon her. I found that women experienced frustration and stress which impacted upon their emotional wellbeing. Being unable to access basic comfort and adequate nutrition and fresh air was commonly expressed by women. The fear of potential separation from their baby was an underlying stress. Indeed, 50% of women separated soon after birth, however, the 'not knowing' was especially difficult as women found it difficult to bond or let go of their unborn. Some women wanted to hide their pregnancies by wearing baggy clothes – whilst the threat of violence was often perceived, women were often frightened about the potential threat to their unborn.

The woman's experience of being pregnant in prison suggests a deep rooted psychological pain which appears to punctuate all aspects of her incarceration. Where physical pain exists, little comfort is offered as women are left 'begging' for a softer mattress or 'crying' for pain relief to ease the normal discomforts of pregnancy. Ignored or negated by the system, the 'institutional thoughtlessness' (Crawley, 2005) of the prison organisation defines their experience. Bodily suffering is heightened by their being unable to satiate the normal cravings or ease normal pregnancy discomforts. The hunger that the women would feel often caused distress and suffering. For some

pregnant women, however, prison is a refuge or 'safe haven' and a unique 'turning point' and catalyst for change, especially when they are given the opportunity to keep their baby.

With limited autonomy or choice, the pregnant woman's emotions are suffused with frustration. Her identity is concealed, wanting to 'forget' she is pregnant or trying to 'ignore' her pregnancy. Suppression of emotions causes stress for the woman as she tries to act like a 'normal prisoner', often 'hiding' her abdomen. 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 recourse to debriefing or specific training, loosening boundaries between care and security. Pregnant women in prison are in a minority but this should not render them invisible.

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