

The Incarcerated Pregnancy: what is the experience being pregnant in prison?

Notes of Sustainability, Environment and Well-Being Team Speaker Meeting held on 23 May 2016

The evening was divided into two parts – the first was a talk from Laura Abbott, Senior Midwifery Lecturer and University of Hertfordshire Doctoral student and the second was from Naomi Delap, Director of the charity Birth Companions.

Helen Byrne gave the opening welcome speech to a large audience of both members and visitors.

Laura Abbott began with a number of statistics:

- 6% of 4,000 women in prison are estimated to be pregnant
- 46% are victims of domestic abuse
- 50% had suffered sexual abuse in childhood
- 30% had been in care at some time in their childhood
- 205 have no permanent address
- 60% -70% are drug and/or alcohol dependent, and
- 80% suffer from mental health illness
- 17,000 children are affected in some way or another when women are in prison.

Laura's research is to discover the impact the prison system has on the pre- and post-natal lives of women giving birth in prison by undertaking fieldwork in several prisons and carrying out in-depth interviews with 8 women in prison and 6 women post release. She has also interviewed staff.

Her findings revealed that pregnant women prisoners suffer unwanted attention from other prisoners and raised levels of stress, anxiety and fear. Their hunger and cravings may remain unsatisfied. Rather than looking forward to the birth of their child they experience what is known as 'attachment ambiguity' as there is frequently uncertainty as to whether they will be able to keep their baby or distress knowing that the baby will be taken in care or fostered.

On a more positive note, the pregnant prisoners do receive kindness from staff, build social relationships with other pregnant women and birth companions. Prison may offer a safer place than their situation on the outside. Some prisoners see motherhood as an opportunity for change.

When going into labour the women do not feel able to express their wishes during labour as they remain in the presence of uniformed staff.

Birth companions encourage breast-feeding and the rate of breast-feeding is higher than in equivalent socio-economic groups on the outside.

Some prisoners will go to a Mother and Baby Unit following the birth. On leaving prison women with babies can be very vulnerable as they may have no family support, be miles from home and have to fend for themselves and a new baby.

There is inconsistency when it comes to entitlements. It is a battle to know and receive appropriate essential supplies.

Started 20 years ago Birth Companions has given support to 1,500 women. They work in three prisons out of 12 women's prisons. They run ante-natal groups tailored to the environment, provide emotional support and advocacy and prepare those women who will be separated from their babies.

Laura will be completing her interviews and research in September.

Our second speaker was Naomi Delap, Development Director of Birth Companions. She explained that the charity came about following a distressing channel 4 programme which exposed the routine handcuffing of women in labour in Holloway Prison. This practise was outlawed shortly after and led to the establishment of the Holloway Doula Group which later became Birth Companions.

The aims of the charity are to improve the wellbeing and mental health of pregnant prisoners, to enabled women to receive their entitlements and to influence national policy and practice. To this end this Thursday, 26th May, their Birth Charter is being launched.

The Birth Charter aims to remove inconsistent practices with regards to the meeting of the basic needs of pregnant prisoners, to raise awareness of the critical stages in babies' lives which extend perinatally to the age of 2, and to fight for maternity leave for pregnant prisoners to match the regulations in the workforce outside prison. As well as seeking to improve care in prison the Birth Charter defines standards for care in the community post release. The Charter has the support of the Royal College of Midwives and follows the UNICEF Baby Friendly Initiatives.

The recent speeches by David Cameron and Michael Gove, together with the impact of the current storyline in the BBC Radio 4s the Archers, gives hope that the Birth Charter will be taken up and result in a Prison Service Order to change the treatment of pregnant prisoners. There has been interest in the Charter from the Ministry of Justice and the National Offender Management Services. The launch event on Thursday May 26th will be in London and Naomi will be interviewed by national newspapers and on Radio 5 Live at 1.30pm.

More information can be found on the Birth Companions website <http://www.birthcompanions.org.uk/> and on Twitter @brthcompanions www.twitter.com/brthcompanions .

Laura can be followed on @midwifeteacher www.twitter.com/midwifeteacher

Following a short Q&A session, an SEW Team member gave a vote of thanks and presented the two wonderful speakers with a small gift of LUSH products and a donation of £25 from the Club to Birth Companions. Members and visitors kindly gave private donations during the evening totalling £70.50 bringing the total donation to Birth Companions to £95.50.

Since the meeting details of the Birth Charter have been shared with SIGBI Assistant Directors of Programme for Health and Violence and Conflict Resolution and UKPAC (via Regional Programme Action Officers) asking them to help promote the launch of the Birth Charter and to support Birth Companions in achieving their aims.

SEW Team

Soroptimist International of St Albans & District

Report of event on the Club website - www.sigbi.org/st-albans/2016/birth-companions/

Contact email if you want to find out more: sistalbans@hotmail.com