

## India Sturgis

26 MAY 2016 • 1:33PM

**M**ariam's life had only just fallen into place when the police officers knocked on her door. She had bought a flat in London, started her own shoe business and was six months pregnant when they came to arrest her.

A case dating back several years had caught up with the 26-year-old. Eight years earlier Mariam had lost a job in financial services, fallen in with a bad boyfriend and became embroiled in his fraudulent activities. While he had been sent to jail, Mariam was questioned and released. She cut him off, met a new man and started over, hopeful that that would be the end of it.

But in May last year she was arrested, charged with fraud and received a 12 week custodial sentence. "It was the worst possible time," she says.

With her stomach straining against her clothes she moved into a cell with four other women, in a room roughly the size of a squash court.

"There was no favouritism," says Mariam, speaking eight months after her release, her eyes trained on the floor. "The mentality is you are pregnant; you are a criminal; you are going to be treated like everyone else. I slept on a bed that was so hard it felt like I was on the floor. There were fights, there were people taking drugs. I was allowed no extra food. It was hell."

Her sentence meant she would give birth in custody and spend her first few weeks as a mother behind bars. It took two weeks before Mariam learnt she could apply for a mother and baby unit (MBU) – a secure building set apart from other inmates, where new mothers can stay with their infants until they are up to 18 months old.

**I was bleeding every other day. The doctors said it was because of stress but there was nothing they could do**

Mariam

Every week, two babies are born in prisons in England and Wales, although around 50 per cent are removed at birth and given to either relatives or foster parents. There are six mother and baby units with 64 places - but being allocated a space on one is a laborious, lengthy and often unsuccessful process.

Mariam's acute anxiety over her living conditions, lack of food (even after taking a job in the kitchen and asking for leftovers she was told she was not allowed any more) and uncertainty surrounding the birth reached such heights that she began bleeding.

Deemed a high-risk pregnancy she was then moved into hospital before going into labour. No one packed a bag for her and she was transferred without a mobile phone or any money.

"I was bleeding every other day," she says. "The doctors said it was because of stress but there was nothing they could do. The hospital and the midwives were amazing but they don't make the law. They could only support me going through what I was."

Once she had her daughter, Mariam was transferred to a mother and baby unit with her daughter, where she asked her family not to visit.

"We were far from home and I didn't want to put them through that. My mum was finding it really hard accepting that I was there. That's where her daughter was having her grandchild. It was tough."



The Government has just to action plans to help pregnant women in custody

With around 60 pregnant women held in prison and 100 babies born there every year, Mariam's case is far from unusual. Indeed, to Radio 4 listeners, hers bears all the hallmarks of Helen Titchener from The Archers, who gave birth this week while in custody, and, like Mariam, has been transferred to a mother and baby unit.

Helen's story, as well as transfixing the nation, has outed justice minister Michael Gove as a fan who recently claimed the show "reinforced the case for reform" of women's prisons.

These sentiments build on the Prime Minister's announcement, in February this year, that the Government needs to rethink how prisons deal with pregnant women and mothers - but such statements have yet to bare fruit.

This week, to stoke mounting pressure for change, a birth charter has been published by the charity Birth Companions, an organisation that has worked with women in prisons for 20 years and was consulted by the BBC over The Archers storyline. It sets out a radical 15 point plan for universal standards of care for vulnerable women serving time.

At the moment, says Birth Companions' director and co-author of the report, Naomi Delap, legislation is only 'piecemeal'.

"Conditions vary greatly from prison to prison. Care hasn't been thought about in enough detail. It creates big problems."

Her organisation is pushing for the creation of a Prison Service Order to help staff provide consistent standards of care, as well as championing community sentences and electronic tags as alternatives to hard time for low-level offences.

### Women breastfeed in front of male prison officers and have two guards present at the end of the bed when they give birth

Under the current system, women face such indignities as breastfeeding in front of male prison officers, being handcuffed during trips to antenatal clinics and having two guards present at the end of the bed during labour.

"As a whole we don't think prison is the right place for pregnant women and new mums," says Delap. "For many years organisations have been saying it is mad to send women who are no danger to the public to prison for a few weeks at a time, when that sentence will have a massive affect on their families and homes. That goes for pregnant women and new mums even more."

Studies suggest that increased levels of the stress hormone cortisol, when it crosses the placenta, can affect a baby's development and lead to greater chances of autism or ADHD in extreme cases.

Rachel, 34, spent six months of her pregnancy behind bars at Holloway Prison while serving a two year sentence for a non-violent crime (she is reluctant to recount the details). On arrival, a doctor asked her whether she wanted an abortion. She said no. He asked whether she was sure.

"I felt embarrassed he would even ask me that," she says, eyes stretched with astonishment. "It was offensive. I was upset. Of course I wanted to keep it."

She moved into a cell with four other girls, a toilet in the room and no open windows. "It was horrible," she says.

Despite being pregnant, Rachel dropped from a size 16 to a size 12 because food was either scarce or unappealing. Dinner was at 5pm and breakfast not until 8.30am the next day so she would save bits of lunch to eke out during the long evenings.



There are a limited number of places in mother and baby units in England and Wales

Her application for a mother and baby unit dragged out and she became concerned she would go into early labour without securing a place. Eventually, after her baby stopped growing for a month, she was put on a drip in hospital where nurses told she was dehydrated and starving. She was released afterwards with an electronic tag before giving birth.

Both Rachel and Mariam credit Birth Companions with providing a lifeline during their time behind bars. The charity offers antenatal classes, advice and volunteers to accompany pregnant women during hospital stays.

"They helped me make a birth plan - I didn't even know what that was," says Mariam. "You don't get any information in prison. You don't have Google. On the outside, as a mother or pregnant person you go on Mumsnet or Google if something happens to your child or during pregnancy. We didn't have a clue what to expect."

Since her release in September, Mariam has once again pieced her life together. She has launched Mentor Matcher, an initiative to support women most at risk of becoming marginalised from society by empowering them into enterprise.

“One thing I remember thinking about being in the dock when they said you are going to jail was, what can I do to ensure I am never in this situation again. I did commit a crime, I was wrong with what I did but I’ve paid a heavy price for it.”

[sourcelink]

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/life/drugs-starvation-and-stress-what-its-really-like-being-pregnant/>

[/sourcelink]