



Illustration: Naomi Wilkinson

HEALTH

What does it feel like to give birth while serving a prison sentence?

Rebecca Schiller talks to two women about the reality of pregnancy and childbirth when you're in prison
Added on 28.05.16



By [Rebecca Schiller](#) on 28.05.16

“Being pregnant in prison was a very lonely and dark time in my life – no one to feel your baby kicking except for other inmates. When I was eight months pregnant and had to go for a late scan, I was handcuffed on my way to the appointment – it was so degrading. While I was in labour, I had two prison officers at the end of my bed. I was having difficulties, which I am sure was partly because I was so stressed by having them there.”

Six hundred pregnant women and 100 new mothers like Rebecca (who gave birth during a three-year sentence) are held in prisons in England and Wales each year. Despite, and because of, their criminal records, they represent some of the most vulnerable women on the threshold of motherhood at a uniquely difficult time in their lives.

Their often-reprised dual role as both victim and perpetrator has recently been highlighted by an [ongoing storyline in *The Archer's*](#). The 2008 [Corston Report](#) detailed the complex and distressing issues faced by women in a system designed by, and for, men, along with the impact on the children they must leave behind. The [World Health Organization](#) states that “pregnant women should not be imprisoned except for absolutely compelling reasons”, yet some are still finding themselves firmly on the inside.

[Birth Companions](#) (a charity providing support to pregnant women in detention) has just launched its [Birth Charter](#) to set out minimum standard for pregnancy and birth in prison. Their director, Naomi Delap, highlights excellent practice in some areas and repeated failings in others. As there’s currently no Prison Service Order covering the perinatal period, many pregnant prisoners face significant unnecessary stress. From anxiety about giving birth alone in the cells to inappropriate food and clothing, months of uncertainty about whether they will be accepted on to a mother and baby unit, to coming to terms with being separated from their babies shortly after birth. Delap believes that pregnant prisoners are often punished twice and that their babies and older children are penalised with them.

One morning, I went to see the nurse, who made me do a urine sample and told me I was pregnant. I was in shock and started crying. This was hardly the ideal situation and I felt really confused

That the prison system finds it hard to cope with pregnancy and birth is perhaps unsurprising given how ill-equipped they appear to be in dealing with the [monthly mundanity of menstruation](#). But Naomi Delap thinks that, with [recent focus on the issue from policy makers](#), now is the time for change: “We often talk about the challenges and awfulness of birth in prison, but women are so strong and capable of creating opportunity for them and their babies. Given support and tools this can be a positive and hopeful time. A time to break cycles.”

I spoke to two women who helped write the Birth Charter about the reality of pregnancy and birth on the inside.

MARIAM, 26

“Being pregnant in prison is really not funny. They say they don’t do favouritism, so there’s no extra food, no extra milk.

I had a good start to my career at 16, but then I was made redundant three times and met a bad guy. It turns out that everything about his life was a lie – even his name. When I found out what he was like, I should have got out. I take full responsibility for that. Instead, I got involved in fraud with him. Then he got arrested in a country where they cut off your hands for theft and I discovered he was using my name to create fraudulent identities and commit fraud internationally. I realised how serious it was and stopped. I changed my life, my friends – everything.

Almost 10 years later, I got a knock at the door from the police telling me I had to come and pay back this thing I’d done years ago. By now, I had a successful business and was expecting my first baby. My baby’s father didn’t even know about my past until I got arrested. It was a shock and I thought it was a joke at first.

I could have been given a suspended sentence, but instead I got a 12-week custodial sentence over my due date. It meant I was going to have the end of my pregnancy, give birth and have the first weeks of being a mother in the prison system.

I was visibly pregnant when I started my sentence. I'm a size 6-8, so it was obvious, but the officers refused to believe me at first. Eventually, they accepted it, but I didn't get anything extra for being pregnant. I worked in the kitchen and knew that the food was off sometimes, but they'd tell us to serve it anyway, so I was too afraid to eat anything but toast. I was constantly hungry. You don't have Google in prison, so people were telling me to do my pelvic-floor exercises and I didn't know what my pelvic floor was.

If you came out of the shower a bit late, they'd threaten that you wouldn't be able to go to the mother and baby unit. They'd say it was a privilege, but it shouldn't be a privilege to be with my baby. I should have been transferred to the unit really quickly, but my paperwork got messed up. The people responsible for filling in the forms didn't understand how delicate and important this all was. One spelling mistake and they have to be sent back and someone misses Christmas with their family. It's only because the hospital decided to keep me on the ward close to my due date that I didn't have to go into labour in my cell.

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I don't know what I would have done without Birth Companions. They really believe every woman is unique, that their journey's unique and they don't judge you. Your crime doesn't matter to them. My boobs were growing out of control, so they brought me new bras. They gave me all the information I needed, taught me how to breastfeed and stayed with me 24 hours a day while I was in labour.

Labour and birth was really tough, but the midwives and doctors looked after us and, after five days, we were discharged to the mother and baby unit. I actually think that time together, just the two of us, helped us bond. I didn't want to put my family through visiting me, as I was only meant to be in there for two weeks (though it ended up being four due to more paperwork issues), so it was just me and my baby together all day. Everything's so new in those first weeks, like, "Oh my God, wow, she's done a wee!" But I was lonely, too. It was an emotional rollercoaster. Feeling all that love for my daughter. Realising it's not about me any more. I felt very alone in that time and there was a lot of crying.

While I was in prison, I got to attend workshops run by [Project 507](#) on taking responsibility for my crime and thinking about the victims. They were mentoring me and helped me find positive ways to look at myself. I started thinking that if I'd had that support earlier, maybe I wouldn't have ended up in jail.

I got out when my daughter was four weeks old and set up [Mentor Matcher](#) to pair women up with female entrepreneurs to inspire and support them. We've got all of these great role models on board and I think if I'd had access to this when I was lost in the world at 18, then I probably wouldn't have had my daughter in prison.

Chanelle, 34

I was serving a seven-year sentence for a drugs offence. It was my first time in prison and I had some home leave to visit my family and long-term partner. Afterwards, I started experiencing hot sweats at night and pain in my stomach. One morning, I went to see the nurse, who made me do a urine sample and told me I was pregnant. I was in shock and started crying. This was hardly the ideal situation and I felt really confused as to what I was going to do. But my family were really supportive. There was no judgement from anyone – the friends I shared a room with and the staff were all OK with me.

Within two weeks, I went to a mother and baby unit – I arrived in October and had my baby in January.

We were treated really well there. The cells were carpeted, the food was good and we had cooking classes and other life skills training.

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On the outside, you'd have your family to help you through pregnancy. I wished I was out with them, but I had Anna from Birth Companions instead. She taught me about looking after a baby and helped me write a birth plan. She showed me what my rights were, like I could still have a pool birth if I wanted to.

My contractions started at midnight and I spoke to the prison nurse before going back to sleep. In the morning, I was released on a special license to go to hospital with my family and Anna. The hospital staff were a bit rude to me. It was pretty horrible at times and I don't think I was treated like everyone else.

They spent more time monitoring my visitors than me and the baby.

It was a long labour, but I had a natural birth in the end, after an epidural to get some sleep. When she was born, I couldn't believe she was mine – that I'd done this huge thing. It was a good feeling. But then the hospital staff weren't helpful with breastfeeding. They just kept shoving the baby at me and telling me I wasn't doing it properly. How was I supposed to know how to do it? But luckily I had Anna, so I got through it. I'd have given up on the ward otherwise.

I had five months left to serve of my sentence and I had my daughter was with me the whole time. I've since had two more children and I can see now that time was beneficial in a way – getting that aftercare and having time to get used to being a mother.

I think I had a pretty good experience but, talking to women who given birth more recently, I'm shocked at how the system has degraded. It's not OK for women to go hungry. I really hope something is put in place to help look after women prisoners and their babies. It's a difficult balance, but some prisoners like me could definitely be released. Hospital staff need training so they aren't looking down at women just because they have come from prison. My time in hospital was the worst part of it all for me.

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