



# Using theatre to explore the experiences of pregnant women and mothers in prison

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# Context

- **Undertaking research into pregnancy and motherhood in prison since 2012**
- **215** pregnant women in prison (2023–24); Over **1/3 on remand**
- **92** applied for Mother & Baby Units (MBUs); **51% women** admitted
- Separation during the first **1001 days** risks long-term harm to mother and child
- Tragic outcomes exposing **systemic failings**:

*‘On the day she died, she was informed that she could no longer visit her baby. The sudden change of plan, unavailability of equipment for expressing along with lack of psychiatric review, were likely to increase her sense of loss. In particular, no one asked her about thoughts of self-harm or suicide at a time that she herself had flagged up as being risky.’ (Cantwell et al, 2021; MBRRACE-UK, 2018:56)*

- **No data** collected on mothers separated from babies after birth or upon entering prison
- **Community alternatives** exist but are underused



# The Lost Mothers Project – What We Did



## Qualitative research

**Co-production** – project co-designed with women who have lived experience

*“Nothing about us, without us”*

5 prisons

Total number of participants: **n=74**

## Participant Numbers

Women (**n=29**)

Prison officers (**n=12**)

Midwives (**n=13**)

Social workers (**n=8**)

Community care professionals (**n=12**)

Mother & Baby Board observations  
(**n=5**)



## Data Collection & Analysis

Audio-recorded, semi-structured interviews

Observations of MBU decision-making boards

Thematic Analysis + IPoems

## Ethics & Sensitivity

Ethical approval HMPPS & UH

Trauma-informed

Anonymity, informed consent, and emotional support built in

# The Lost Mothers Project – What we found

- Support is often inadequate, highlighting need for personalised, structured care.
- Women experience emotional distress, invisibility, and threats to maternal identity.
- Staff face emotional strain, lack of training, and work within systems marked by bias and bureaucracy.
- Structural racism, lack of diversity, and systemic challenges hinder effective, compassionate care.

*I had flashbacks for days of that cry that she gave out. **Midwife***

*It was worse than giving birth. I've never felt pain like it...**It was just in here; in my chest; in my heart.** Oh, it was painful. It was the hardest day of my life.*

Charlie

*The officers kept asking me, '**You don't have any thoughts of self-harm, do you?**' I'm not suicidal. I feel helpless, that's how I feel.*

Priya

*We run on a regime, and the training that we receive is still quite old school and disciplined...**Everything's security, discipline, regime.***

**Prison Officer**

# Using theatre to bring our research to a wide audience



# The Lost Mothers Project – Why theatre?



**Behind the  
Scenes from Lost Mothers**



# What needs to change?



**LOST  
MOTHERS**



birth  
companions

**An end to the imprisonment of women during the 1001 days, in all but the most exceptional of circumstances**

**Increased use of community, deferred and suspended sentencing**

**Mandatory 1001 days impact assessments to inform sentencing, license conditions and community orders**

**New policy to guide police, prosecution and probation services in the 1001 days**

**Increased funding and support for community alternatives to custody**

**Improve support for women at risk of separation or separated due to imprisonment**

# Thank you

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