

Good Morning, I'm Dominique Grant, the Campaign & Operations Manager for Women on the Rise, Georgia. Women on the Rise is a membership-based organization led by Black women who are impacted by the legal system. We work closely with women inside of jails and prisons throughout the state of Georgia, including pregnant and postpartum women. Our purpose is to bring about changes to the way the legal system sees and treats women inside prisons and jails.

My journey into this work began with personal experiences: my father's repeated incarceration and my mother's determination to change a system that punishes mental health and substance use disorders. Interning at the White House with the Obama Administration solidified my goal to be on the ground, actively working within the community to affect change. On this topic specifically, I have had my own traumatic birth experience in a local hospital which inspired me to work toward my doula certification.

We are here today to talk about the issue of how pregnant women are treated within Georgia's prisons and jails. Women on the Rise works with incarcerated women at Lee Arrendale State Prison, Fulton County Jail, and Atlanta City Detention Center. Our organization, including its leadership, has observed firsthand the poor treatment of women during their pregnancy and afterward. Incarcerated pregnant women in Georgia's prisons and jails are continuously ignored. For instance, one woman suffered from preeclampsia, which is extremely high blood pressure that could harm the mom or baby. She had awful headaches and swollen feet. Yet, prison staff told her that she "just wanted attention." By the time someone decided to listen, her situation had worsened, and she needed emergency medical care. These women are treated as though they were not human, and incarcerated pregnant women across Georgia are treated this way.

Overall, while pregnant, women do not get the required diet to sustain a healthy pregnancy. The Prison Law Office found that pregnant or recently pregnant women universally reported receiving inadequate nutrition during their pregnancies. The pregnant and incarcerated women we work with tell us all the time that their diets lack fruit and vegetables, and the only additional food they received was an extra snack of bread and a carton of milk per day, which sometimes was spoiled. The lack of access to real food and nutrition worsened their conditions, like preeclampsia and gestational diabetes. Many women also do not have the support from home to receive funds to buy extra food from the commissary. Therefore, a lot of women go hungry, and the quality of food that is being offered at the prison is not a balanced diet to accommodate a growing fetus. And after giving birth, women often return to the prison knowing that their babies needed additional medical procedures or treatment due to being born premature or malnourished, but they were not allowed to be there to support their children.

Not only are women ignored during pregnancy; prison guards also ignore them while they are in labor. When women go into labor, officers would ignore the women inside prison, and many would have to go through extreme measures to get officers to allow them to go to the infirmary and be seen. We once worked with an incarcerated woman who was in labor during a lockdown and the guards ignored her yells for help. Eventually, we all began to yell for help, and it took three hours for a guard to get her. Even while in active labor, the guards did not believe she was having a baby because her water did not break. She was then transported to Atlanta Medical Center where she was handcuffed to the bed until time to push for delivery. Because she was incarcerated, she was not believed or treated in a humane way.

When these women give birth inside the prison or at a hospital, they are alone or with strangers during a very vulnerable time. After giving birth, a new mother has a few hours to bond with her child, but how long she has depends on the guards' attitudes. Then, she must turn her newborn baby over to family, or most of the time, to foster care. Once the child is taken away, the mother waits to be taken back to the prison, typically up to two days. While she waits, she is often handcuffed to the bed. This happens for most women that we work with. The lack of bonding time creates a wedge between mother and child, and many studies have shown that the bonding time is crucial the first few months of pregnancy.

When returned to prison, the new mothers are depressed and despondent due to just giving birth and having to turn their child over. They are never screened for postpartum depression. Women have been put in solitary confinement if they had to have a c-section, while other women have been placed back in the general population, where they are vulnerable to conflicts or even physical fights that could be fatal. Not only do they endure the mental anguish but the physical pains of giving birth, but they are barely provided with Tylenol for the pain. Prison staff will give them a hand full of pads but don't provide any others after that. Women have had to make pads out of tissues and sheets to help themselves and others through.

Reunification for these women and their children is also extremely difficult. A baby cannot transport itself to prison and coordination with the current caregiver for visits can be difficult. The facilities also do not have areas that are family and child friendly. Along with the basic challenges of reentry like finding housing and employment, mothers are either forced to fight for custody to get their children back or put in positions where their child is given back to them immediately and they do not have resources. Part of the work we do at Women on the Rise GA is ensuring that mothers are stable through employment, supportive services, and a sisterhood to make healthy mothers.

We all know that pregnant women require special care during and after pregnancy. We ask that we start to recognize incarcerated women as human. These women are Mothers, Daughters, Sisters, and Aunts.