Everyday Struggles, Everyday Strength

Capturing the voices of women living through pregnancy and addiction

Pregnant women who are substance using are at a dangerous intersection of difficult to navigate medical and criminal justice systems.

Our women and families struggle to be healthy and safe in communities that have become battlefields in the war on drugs; we have lost our loved ones to incarceration, addiction, and overdose. **At Young Women United we understand that access to appropriate care and treatment is a reproductive justice issue.**

Young Women United organized a series of working groups with women who had previously been pregnant and substance using at the same time. YWU collected and assessed experiences of these women in attempting to access prenatal care and treatment across New Mexico.

Key Findings

- The strong majority of participants described intense feelings of fear that guided their decisions and behaviors as pregnant women who were using.
- The overwhelming majority of participants faced judgment while attempting to access prenatal care.
- These participants had limited access to a range of resources needed for a healthy pregnancy.

1) **An overwhelming majority of participants described being really scared that their kids would not be healthy, and that they were at fault**

"I was so scared that I would hurt my babies or lose them. It was one of the worst times in my life. I was on edge the whole time."

2) **A majority of participants report that they were fearful of being reported to the authorities and losing their baby, as well as other children in the family**

"My biggest fear while I was pregnant was going to the doctor. I was afraid that they would call CYFD or call the police to report that I was using."

3) **Whether they chose to disclose or hide substance use, a majority of participants were terrified to tell the truth, because of risk to their families**

"I got prenatal care late because I was scared to tell the truth about using while pregnant. I wasn't honest with the doctor, I lied and lied and lied."

1) **Several participants shared that some in the medical community allowed their own opinions on addiction to impact the care they provided, whether their actions are sound or legal**

"My daughter was cleared for me to take her home by CYFD [Children, Youth, and Families Department]. But the nurses refused to release her to me because they told me, "You didn't watch her kick, you put her through hell." I had to call CYFD and the cops for the hospital to release her. They weren't even punished by the Presbyterian [local hospital] head chief."

2) **Women shared that they were treated without basic respect or kindness**

"The nurses treated me mean because a lot of blood work is done while being pregnant. I had no useable veins so someone from inpatient had to be called to hit my artery. I went through a lot of pain and judgement. A nurse told me, 'Once a junkie always a junkie.'"

3) **Women shared experiences of being threatened with inaccurate information**

"First time my trusted family doctor was not there, another doctor said 'You know they are going to take those kids away from you?'... after that I would only see my family doctor or people I trusted."

1) **For someone who is using and pregnant at the same time, it is difficult to access prenatal care that incorporates treatment, or treatment related to pregnancy**

"When I was trying for suboxone a prenatal care doctor turned me down-- she said she couldn't take any more suboxone patients."

"The doctors knew I used but they never tried to help me. Being in my addiction was too hard to quit."

"I was sharing info with doctor, saying what I used. I didn't feel I was given any resources other than being told, 'Don't use anymore.'"

2) **For many families, treatment is only affordable and available when facing criminal charges**

"It took me nine felonies and two years to finally get treatment."

3) **Substance using women, like all people should have access to information and resources to make real decisions about their own bodies and lives. Many pregnancies are not planned.**

"I tried to drink a lot and smoke a lot of cigarettes to have a miscarriage. It didn't work so I had an abortion. I didn't have money or health insurance to get on birth control."

4) **For mothers struggling with addiction or dependency, residential treatment is too often inaccessible because they cannot take children with them, nor have any where safe to leave children in their absence**

"When she got into a program they told her she couldn't talk to her kids. There is nothing, no treatment."

These women understand substance use to be incredibly complex and are working through ways to interrupt the popular thinking which says moms who use must love their drugs more than their kids or that if addicts really loved their kids they would simply stop using.

Mother created artwork:

YWU is a community organizing and policy project by and for young women of color; together we build community and create change around issues impacting our lives. At Young Women United we believe that all people deserve access to the education, information and resources needed to make real decisions about our bodies and lives.

From a gendered lens, YWU advocates for policies that decriminalize drug use and encourage health-based approaches to substance use, including alternatives to incarceration.

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