REVIEWS

Tutwiler
by Elaine McMillion Sheldon
Boston: Frontline PBS (2020) 34 minutes

Reviewed by Lindsay McVicar

Tutwiler is an essential and devastating documentary that gives an intimate look into motherhood through the stories of incarcerated, pregnant people who give birth and are forced to say goodbye to their babies 24 hours later. Set at Alabama's notorious Julia Tutwiler Prison for Women, the film raises critical questions about the growing number of incarcerated mothers, the role of doulas within the prison and healthcare system, and the children who must start their lives separated from their mothers.

The film centers on protagonist Misty, 36, who is nine months pregnant with her third child. Viewers follow Misty as she participates in the childbirth program and other activities in preparation for birth while behind bars and witness the experiences of other individuals in the program.

Since 2016, the pregnant population at Tutwiler have been offered support through the Alabama Prison Birth Project. This program provides weekly childbirth education classes and doula services. A lactation program was also implemented for those who give birth during their sentence that provides a breastfeeding space and coordinates the milk delivery to their babies outside of the institution.

Although doulas are a core service offering in the Prison Birth Project, the role of the doula is not a central element in Misty's story in the film. Misty is matched with a doula in her ninth month of pregnancy and helps confirm her birth plan in what appears to be a single meeting. The intake conversation is straightforward and transactional. As the film unfolds, we gather that the women in Tutwiler are each other's only source of support through their childbirth experience.

In a group session, an incarcerated mother interrupts the doula with a request to facilitate a meaningful discussion about how they are going to raise their babies, how they are going to keep their babies, and how they are going to be good mothers, rather than focusing on basics such as holding a baby. Most of the women already have children, and this conversation highlights the depth of their understanding contrasted with the simplicity of what they are expected to know and want to learn.

Several mothers show photos of their babies and talk about their experience of separation. One mother had to leave her baby in the NICU after only 24 hours; another does not know where her week and a half old son is. Many babies are placed in foster care or with relatives, while some go to a private group home called Adullam House.

In a moving sequence of voice overs, the women express their fears: "We're scared, because we don't know what's happening outside these walls". Collectively, they wonder about their children: "how much she weighs, what she's doing, does she sleep good, is she happy, is she calling somebody else mom"? In a system set against comfort, safety and recovery, the women must comfort each other.

To create a sense of normalcy, staff host a baby shower with games, confetti and cake for Misty and her baby Elijah. Yet it is also used as an opportunity to provide a "lesson in recovery" and highlight the importance of marking milestones without using drugs or alcohol.

The women later share feelings of loss and guilt: "You don't want to give birth because you at least want to feel them and have them with you. You feel so empty, your heart just stops. Twenty-four hours to bond with a baby is not really much. When it's over [and you're separated], that's the hardest thing in the world".

As Misty returns to prison, her baby Elijah is picked up from the hospital and taken to Adullam House, quiet, alone, alert, in the backseat of the car. The film ends with Misty, stoic throughout, being hugged and comforted by a group of women who know her pain.

The film exposes how easily programs that exist to serve the needs of incarcerated people are co-opted to justify and expand the carceral infrastructure. In response to a 2014 investigation into the rampant sexual abuse of Tutwiler's population, the prison added hundreds of security cameras and increased the number of guards. In the wake of this report, Tutwiler administrators recognized the potential for the doula, childbirth, and lactation programming to rehabilitate their reputation across the state and spoke with pride of their vision to build a new prison that would allow mothers and babies to stay together for up to a year. Within the logic of the carceral setting, safety is improved by increasing the tools of punishment and security, and building more prisons is the way to address the needs of incarcerated pregnant people and their babies. In this milieu, the film asks

us to question whose agenda these programs support, and how "support" itself is defined and carried out by different stakeholders.

The film, Tutwiler, is essential viewing for those in the justice, child welfare and healthcare fields, as well as the general public. In her work "Are Prisons Obsolete?" activist and abolitionist Angela Davis states: "We take prisons for granted but are often afraid to face the realities they produce". Tackling a subject that is often covered in fictional stories, this documentary film forces viewers to face the realities of incarceration, and the traumatic impact on mothers, babies, and their future of family.

ENDNOTE

[1] Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rWv66yLetI4&ab_channel=FRONTLINEPBS%7COfficial

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Lindsay McVicar, MAd.Ed. is a consultant and organizational change management professional with a background in adult education, research, project management, and public service leadership. She is a lecturer at Saint Francis Xavier University in adult education and the chief of operations for Wellness Within.