

THE AGONY OF FEMALE PRISONERS IN NIGERIA

“All human being are born free and equal in dignity and right. They are endowed in reasons and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood”

Women and children in Nigeria prisons across the country are plagued with several concerns ranging from minors serving jail time or awaiting trial parallel to adult detainees in the same prison facilities. Besides, the plight of female inmates is more disturbing as some of them serve with pregnancies while nursing mothers are incarcerated alongside their babies. Although, the problem of prison congestion in Nigeria rests primarily with the courts and the slow judicial system. Nigeria has the highest number of awaiting trial detainees in Africa. A situation where over 70% of prison inmates are on the awaiting trial list.

Female prisoners have needs that differ greatly from those of their male counterparts. However, there are relatively no gender specific programs in place to meet the needs of women in the Nigeria criminal justice system. Besides, many of these female inmates are also responsible for their young children whose interests are often overlooked by the society while their mothers serve jail time. The criminal justice system in Nigeria is riddled with corruption, delays in justice dispensation, and sometimes downright denials of justice. Access to justice is still denied to a good number of people, especially the poor.

The plight of female prisoners in Nigeria is deplorable as most of them are exposed to other dangers, besides health issues. Majority of them are deprived of their freedom. Moreover, their situation is compounded by frequent sexual abuse and harassment in the hand of male warders. Also, because of the frequent harassment by male officers, some of them become pregnant and give birth while still being incarcerated, a situation that have further worsened their health problems in the form of insomnia, depression, and illnesses. Nothing is more terrifying for female prisoners than going through labor alone with little or no support system. This situation creates both emotional and psychological trauma for the pregnant female prisoner, coupled with the misgivings and uncertainty about whether they can keep their babies

The outcome of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century” called for, inter alia, policies and measures to address, on a prioritized basis, the gender aspects of emerging and continued health challenges, such as malaria, tuberculosis, HIV/AIDS and other diseases having a disproportionate impact on women’s health, including those resulting in the highest mortality and morbidity rates. It also called for the allocation of the necessary budgetary resources to ensure the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health, so that all women have full and equal access to comprehensive, high-quality and affordable health care, information, education and services throughout their life cycle as well as full attention to the promotion of mutually respectful and equitable gender relations and particularly to meeting the educational and service needs of adolescents to enable them to deal in a positive and responsible way with their sexuality.

Several studies have been conducted to address the issues of women in prisons and their health needs all over the world, including in Nigeria. For example, findings from World Health Organization research titled *Women's Health in Prisons: Correcting Gender Inequity in Prison Health* and involved women's prisons in most African countries in 2012 revealed that majority of female inmates are there for non-violent crimes such as shoplifting, drug-related, and petty theft. Moreover, the results also showed that the prevalence of mental illness in prisons is much higher for women than in men. Other problems of women in prisons points to the fact that the number of women giving birth in prisons has jumped significantly, and that not all prison facilities are equipped or prepared to handle a growing baby population. Besides, it is not uncommon for women in prison to discover that they are both pregnant and HIV infected. Therefore, there is a much greater need for adequate nutrition and exercise for female prisoners, especially for those who are pregnant. Additionally, there is also a need for the provision of thorough hygiene and cleanliness standards throughout prison facilities in Nigeria.

In Nigeria, most of the toiletries used by inmates are provided by non-governmental and religious organization which is a problem for the female prisoners who might be nursing mothers or pregnant. The government has failed to provide welfare for inmates, without the support of nongovernmental and religious organizations that provides free counseling, foods, and clothing to inmates, the situation would have been worse. The situation in Nigeria prisons is in sharp contrast with those of developed countries where friends of inmates can visit and even stay overnight; where inmates have access to vocational and educational programs, as well as access to good healthcare and decent feeding.