

SI Where We Stand Statement Criminal Justice Systems

Soroptimist International calls attention to the fact that, despite reports dating back two decades calling for reform, women are still mistreated in criminal justice systems worldwide. Women are susceptible to criminal activities given their lower socio-economic positions, less access to financial and social capital, and subjection to numerous forms of stigma and discrimination. They are often guilty of petty, minor, and non-violent crimes. Yet, despite these mitigating factors, the percentage of female prisoners is increasing more rapidly than that of males.

Soroptimist International urges governments to:

- Implement with immediate effect the “Bangkok Rules” which govern the treatment of women in prisons;
- Ensure that domestic criminal justice systems respect, protect, and fulfil the human rights of all women;
- Recognise that many women in the criminal justice system have been sexually or physically abused, have untreated mental health diagnoses, or are suffering with substance misuse, and roll out programmes accordingly;
- Review laws and sentencing to increase community-based sentences in appropriate cases, as these have been shown to be more effective for women in reducing reoffending rates;
- Eliminate all forms of violence against women in prison, including but not limited to physical abuse, harassment, and rape;
- Realise women’s human rights by guaranteeing access to educational opportunities in the criminal justice system for increasing life choices;
- Finance the refurbishment or rebuilding of prisons to meet the specific needs of women;
- Legislate that pregnant prisoners give birth in hospitals, ensure that infants are not taken away from their mothers, and uphold women’s roles as mothers and caregivers by removing overly restrictive rules on visitation.

Soroptimist International will continue to:

- Work with local communities to develop solutions that address the causes of women’s offending to reduce the growing numbers of women in prisons;
- Encourage prison reform to provide a level of care, service, and understanding which is designed to rehabilitate and empower, not denigrate, neglect, and ignore;
- Advocate for the realisation of the human rights of women in criminal justice systems, including through arrest and custody, pre-trial detainment, trial, sentencing, and in prisons;
- Champion women’s access to formal, non-formal, and informal educational opportunities for women in prisons;
- Address shortcomings in release and reintegration programmes;
- Support programmes which offer mental health care, safe housing, and social support for women leaving the criminal justice system;
- Recognise and address the fact that criminal justice systems were designed by and for historically patriarchal societies and are the site of many forms of structural violence against women.

Soroptimist International:

- **Uses education** as a tool both to address the underlying causes which drive women into criminal activities and as a tool to help women rebuild their lives, including providing educational opportunities to women in prisons;
- **Empowers** women in prisons with confidence and skills to rebuild their lives and ensure that any human rights violations are immediately addresses and rectified;
- **Enables** women leaving prisons to reintegrate into society through providing support and opportunities.

For more information see www.soroptimistinternational.org