



Women in Prison in Russia: At a Glance

Background

There are approximately 864 000 inmates in 45 prison colonies and pre-trial detention centres in Russia. Among these there are approximately 69 000 women and 846 babies and young children who are accompanying their mothers in special units within women's colonies. Women's colonies are spread out across this very large country so many women serve their sentence thousands of kilometers from home, which can lead to a loss of family and social ties. Russia has been undergoing a process of reform of the criminal justice system over the last 20 years but there is still far too little consideration given to the promotion of gender equality and protection of the rights of women and girls in conflict with the law.

Specific Problems:

Gender Discrimination

Women prisoners in Russia face the same challenges as women prisoners across the globe: the prison system was built for men, from the infrastructure to access to services. In addition to this, in Russia there are no gender sensitive alternatives to custody tailored to meet the specific requirements of female offenders in order to reduce re-offending, there is a lack of comprehensive pre and post release reintegration programmes, which take into account the gender specific needs of women and there are no gender specific training programmes for personnel working with women in prison.

Conditions

Women's colonies are often overcrowded with as many as 60 women in the same large dorm style room. Bunk beds are situated in two rows and each woman has a bed, chair and a half of a small bed-side table. Women have access to sinks and toilets at all times but only have one "wash day" once a week where they can shower. This limit on personal hygiene is one of the main complaints of women prisoners. Women in prison colonies have no opportunity to spend time alone, which is also a major complaint. Women are obliged to wear a uniform.

Health

There is a huge disparity between women prisoners and men prisoners in access to health protection. Men have more access to substance abuse programmes and TB treatment - there are 59 colonies offering treatment for TB in male colonies and only one for women. Women prisoners also do not receive the same maternity treatment as women outside of prison.

Mothers in Prison

In Russia mothers are not involved in the day-to-day caring for their child, it is common practice for female prisoners to live in separate quarters to their baby or young child, with the exception of two colonies where joint accommodation is provided. This absence of a main care-giver affects the physical, psychological and mental development of the child. It also limits the opportunity for mothers to bond with their children and develop the maternal skills they will need on release. Mothers in prison do not receive sufficient support from prison personnel because the personnel have not been trained specifically to deal with female prisoners incarcerated with their children.

Policy

There is an absence of clear government policy on women in conflict with the law, based on the special needs of women as prisoners and offenders. There is also an absence of clear policy and procedures aimed at protecting the rights and well-being of babies and young children incarcerated with their mothers.

PRI's work in Russia

PRI has been working in Russia since 1998. PRI has a long standing relationship with the Russian Prison Administration (FSIN) with whom it has signed an agreement of cooperation.

PRI's work includes:

- Establishing rehabilitation and education services for minor female offenders
- Facilitating communication between prison staff and NGOs to encourage more community based services
- Working with prison departments to increase access for mothers to see their children, including the provision of joint accommodation for mothers incarcerated with their children
- Lobbying for state policies to improve conditions for babies and children incarcerated with their mothers