

# International Women's Day

## UNODC hosts 'Pathways to Women's Imprisonment Webinar,' focused on Alternatives to Incarceration

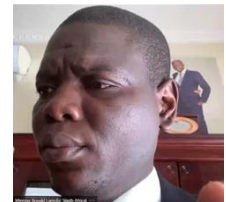
*International Women's Day (IWD), celebrated each year on March 8, puts the spotlight on women and women's rights. Beginning in the early 1900s, IWD is "a global day celebrating the social, economic, cultural and political achievements of women. The day also marks a call to action for accelerating women's equality," according to the official IWD website. The theme of IWD 2021 is: "Let's all choose to challenge. We can all choose to challenge and call out gender bias and inequality."*

It is under this banner that the UNODC Regional Office for Southern Africa raised the issue of the special needs of women in conflict with the law who, in many instances, face continuous discrimination in the criminal justice system. Whilst women prisoners consist of a small proportion of the South African prison population, they remain disproportionately affected by a penal system designed for men and not sensitive to the unique nature and circumstances of women offenders. Firstly, women are often detained in adverse prison conditions characterised by overcrowding, violence, exposure to infectious diseases, insufficient resourcing and lack of consideration for their unique gendered medical and rights-based needs. Secondly, female offenders who become incarcerated tend to have unique pathways that reveal a pattern of victimhood, making them most unsuited for incarceration. This is especially the case for victims of trafficking, exploitation by criminal networks and gender-based violence. Most of these women commit non-violent and victimless crimes such as using drugs, suggesting that incarceration may neither be the most appropriate nor proportionate response. Further, female offenders tend to be linked to some common underlying social determinants rooted in, among other things, exposure to extreme violence, coercive relationships, mental health issues, lack of gainful employment and poverty ([UNODC assessment report](#)).

Working to raise awareness of this important issue, UNODC ROSAF team, in collaboration with the South Africa Department of Justice and Correctional Services, organised the 'Pathways to Women's Imprisonment' webinar on March 8<sup>th</sup>, 2021. The main objective of this webinar was to promote alternatives to incarceration for women and discuss how the gender-sensitive approach can be further integrated in the South African criminal justice system.



*Ms. Zhuldyz Akisheva,  
Regional Representative  
UNODC*



*Hon. Ronald Lamola,  
Minister of Justice and  
Correctional Services, SA*

**Opening Remarks:**  
**Ms. Zhuldyz Akisheva**  
 Regional Representative  
 UNODC ROSAF

**Keynote Speaker:**  
**Hon. Minister R. Lamola**  
 Minister of Justice and  
 Correctional Services

**Speakers and Panelists**

1. Ms. Marie-Claire Van Hout – Independent Consultant
2. Mr. Pelmos Mashabela – Dept of Correctional Services
3. Ms. Jakkie Wessels – Regional Court Judge, Limpopo
4. Ms. Caroline Peters – Cape Flats Womens Movement
5. Ms. Wilna Lambley – Legal Aid SA

The webinar served as a platform to launch the assessment of relevant national laws, policies, and practices in South Africa, aiming to identify legal and practical gaps and obstacles for implementing alternatives to imprisonment with a specific focus on women arrested or detained for drug offences.

During the opening remarks, UNODC Regional Representative for Southern Africa, Ms. Zhuldyz Akisheva, called attention to the importance of adopting alternative measures to

*Programme of Events, March 8th, 2021*

incarceration for women and addressing special needs of women in prisons. Minister of Justice and Correctional Services for South Africa, the Honourable Mr. Ronald Lamola, affirmed that “We are carefully examining the criminal justice system in areas such as sentencing so that incarceration does not become the only option for specified categories of crimes. Alternatives or non-custodial sentencing realizes that imprisonment is not suitable for all crimes and can have a severely detrimental impact on certain types of offenders in particular women... Some of the inmates may be incarcerated for what is deemed to be minor crime related to the use of drugs or possession of drugs for a personal use. We should explore possibilities to offer treatment instead of imprisonment for these women” ([Link to the Statement](#))

In addition, several expert panelists joined the webinar: Ms. Marie-Claire Van Hout – Liverpool John Moore’s University, Mr. Pelmos Mashabela – Dept. of Correctional Services for South Africa, Ms. Jakkie Wessels – Limpopo Regional Court, Ms. Wilna Lambley – Legal Aid SA, Ms. Caroline Peters – Cape Flats Women’s Movement, in addition to the Keynote Speaker, Mr. Ronald Lamola.

Throughout the webinar, Marie-Claire Van Hout spoke on the application of a gender-sensitive approach to prison release, stressing the crucial aspect of successfully re-integrating former inmates into society. Following this, Pelmos Mashabela highlighted the need to focus on the effectiveness of Substance Abuse Treatment programmes for incarcerated women. Next, Jakkie Wessels delivered a presentation on improving training for judicial officers. Wilna Lambley underscored the need to look beyond conviction statistics and determine how to best help individuals facing incarceration. Finally, Caroline Peters addressed gender-based violence and support groups for women with Substance Abuse Disorders in South Africa.

Dynamic and emotional discussion illustrated the urgent call for measures that address specific needs of women in Criminal Justice domain. Establishing sentencing guidelines that are rights-based, gender-sensitive and trauma-informed will lead to a more positive outcome in the protection of women in South Africa.



*Women’s Incarceration Webinar attendees and participants, March 8th, 2021*