

MARIA'S STORY

Maria* is a single mother of two from Makeni living in the Eastern region of Sierra Leone. She was diagnosed with epilepsy, which she has been managing all her life. Maria due to the cultural and social norms of the normalisation of domestic violence found herself in an abusive relationship. One day when she had a fight with her boyfriend, she had an epileptic attack during the fight. Maria lost consciousness and when she regained it, she was informed that her boyfriend had died by hitting his head against a stone when he fell.

Maria was arrested, charged to court, and convicted for murder. Our social worker met her in 2018 a year after she had been sentenced in the Freetown Correctional Centre. One of AdvocAid's paralegals advocated for Maria on her behalf.

During the 2020 presidential pardons, Maria was granted release, but it came with a condition that her mental health conditions need to be treated after assessment. Maria was transferred to the Kissy Psychiatric Home. AdvocAid was also doing monitoring and following at Kissy Psychiatric Home where Maria was staying.



"It is important for judges to consider mitigating factors before sentencing because most of these women have gone through severe S.G.B.V and domestic violence issues over time, they are also bread winners of their family"- Maria.

Maria's boyfriend was cheating on her and being both physically and emotionally abusive. She was also stigmatized because of her epileptic condition in the community and within her family too.

While incarcerated Maria's family didn't want anything to do with her. She had a sister who used to visit but also stopped most likely due to financial constraints coming from the Provinces to Freetown. Her family had no contact numbers, and the sister was in a difficult position to visit her frequently. AdvocAid was Maria's main support mechanism.

While in the Freetown Correctional Centre, Maria found it very difficult to interact or relate with other women because of the discrimination she was facing from her condition, epilepsy. This discrimination affected her mentally while in detention.

Maria felt lonely a lot of the time as she felt she was not receiving the support she needed from her family. AdvocAid continued to support Maria by providing psycho-social counselling and welfare support including clothes, food, and sanitary items.



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AdvocAid continued to provide Maria support after her presidential pardon. AdvocAid provided Maria with welfare support and follow up wellbeing meetings to show her that she had all the necessary support before reuniting with her children and relatives. After four months of assessment and treatment, Maria was discharged.

Our social Worker conducted a client exit-interview to assess the impact of AdvocAid's support throughout Maria's journey from incarceration to being released.

We supported Maria with achieving her dream of becoming a professional teacher by paying her college fees to continue her course at the Freetown Teachers College(FTC). We also supported her with one year house rent and a small business start-up grant to help her start a new life.



"The lack of understanding of your rights always impacts your case because you will not be able to defend yourself if you don't know your rights"- Maria.

Maria is now a member of the AdvocAid Go-Bifo women's support group, a group consisting of formerly incarcerated women that AdvocAid is supporting with emotional and other social support to ensure their reintegration process into their communities is successful.

Maria aspires to break the barrier to become a professional teacher. She wants to ensure the best education to help make an impact to create a brighter future for her kids and the children in her community.

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