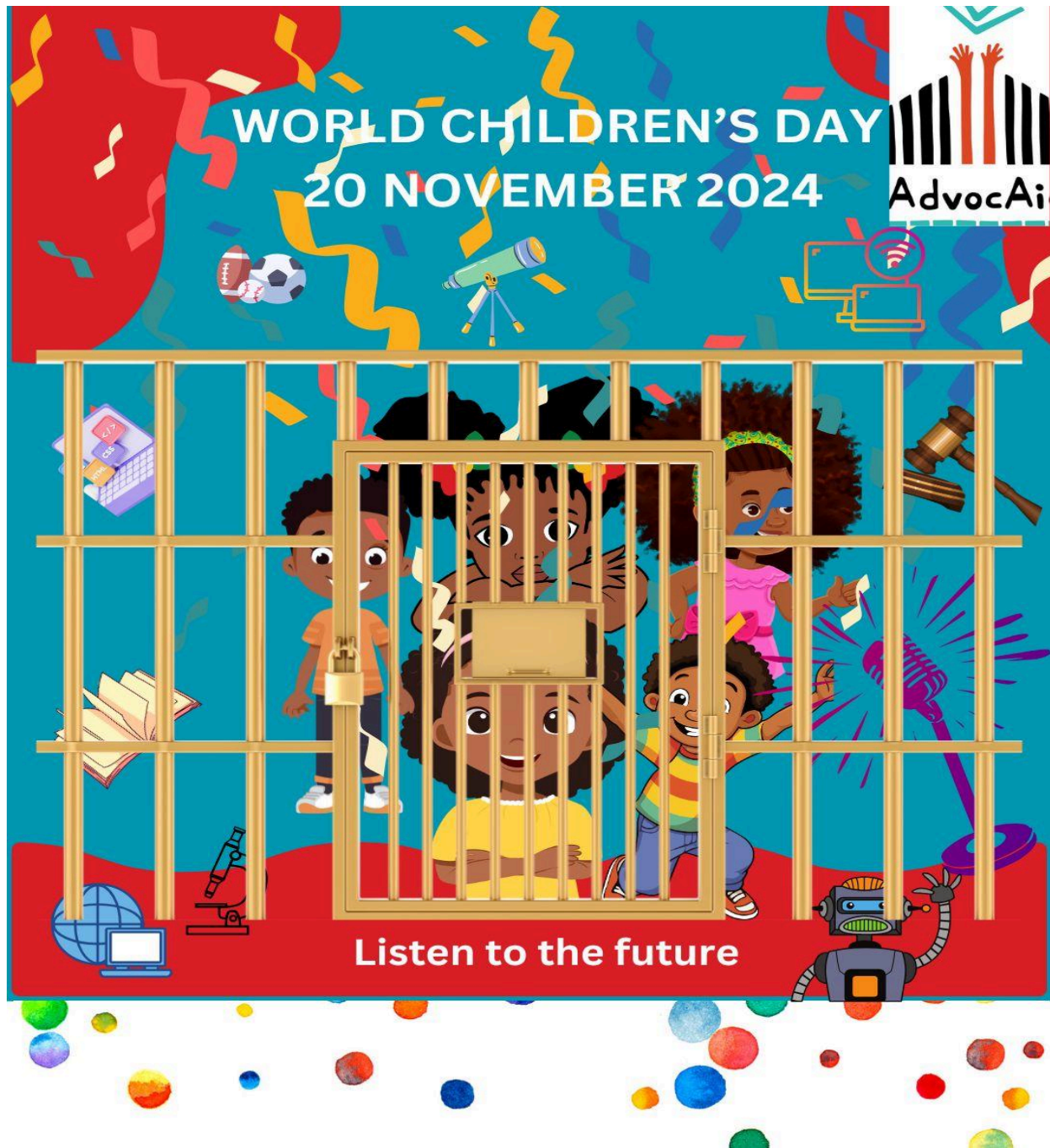


While Mothers Are Incarcerated, Their Children Are Targeted and Bullied!



Today as we celebrate [#WorldChildren'sDay](#), it's crucial to reflect on the plight of children separated from their mothers due to incarceration—a situation that often stems from the lack of gender sensitivity in the criminal justice system.

A poignant study titled [Women Wahala na Prison](#) sheds light on the devastating impact of maternal imprisonment also known as mother imprisonment, revealing how these children, left to fend for themselves, become easy targets for bullying and stigmatisation by their families and communities. [Bangkok Rule](#) clearly provides that *"women with caretaking responsibilities for children shall be permitted to make arrangements for those children, including the possibility of a reasonable suspension of detention, taking into account the best interests of the children..."*. The disruption of family structures is inconsistent with this rule, not only does it rob children of a nurturing home and family environment, but it also jeopardises their emotional and psychological development. These children are forced to navigate a world that is often hostile and unwelcoming.

Many miss out on vital stages of growth and forced are to learn to cope with distress in unhealthy ways as they confront the harsh realities of their new circumstances. As clearly stated in [The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child \(CRC\) 1989](#), Article 27: *States Parties recognise the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development and Article 29: States Parties agree that the education of the child shall be directed to (a) The development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential.* These two articles highlight how the justice system has dismally failed to address the needs of these children.

As we gather to observe this day, we must think of how we can continue to advocate for the decriminalisation and declassification of petty offences in Sierra Leone. It is everyone's responsibility to critically reflect on the theme of

#listentothefuture by asking: what kind of future we are creating for the children when their mothers are detained and arrested for offences related to livelihood or survival or defending themselves against years of abuse and to reflect on excessive pre-trial detentions? Excessive pre-trial detentions result in mental health issues—such as anxiety, depression, and even suicidal tendencies—not only that, but they also disrupt the nurturing environment that children desperately need. Upon reunion, these mothers may struggle to provide the emotional support and stability that their children require, ultimately jeopardising their futures.

If we are truly **#listentothefuture**, we must prioritise the development of alternatives to incarceration that embrace community-based solutions. We must dedicate all efforts to addressing the pathways to women coming into contact with the law. These measures must allow mothers to maintain family ties, especially with their children, thus reducing the devastating effect on their children and their futures. If we truly **#listentothefuture**, we must prioritise the development of alternatives to incarceration that embrace community-based solutions. We must dedicate all efforts to addressing the pathways to women coming into contact with the law. These measures must allow mothers to maintain family ties, especially with their children, thus reducing the devastating effect on their children and their futures.

It is essential to address the systemic issues such as poverty, low levels of education for women, lack of economic opportunities for women, discriminatory gender norms, etc, leading to the incarceration of mothers, recognising that their children are collateral victims of a flawed system. We must ask ourselves: What

becomes of these innocent lives when their primary carers are lost to the confines of the prison system?

Lastly, as we observe **World Children's Day 2024**, let's think about these two articles from [*The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child \(CRC\) 1989*](#)
*The Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989 (CRC) is the specific international instrument intended to secure specific children's rights. Article 3 (1) of the CRC reads as follows: In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, **the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration**".*

Let us push for reforms that prioritise the well-being of children and dismantle the stigmas surrounding mother imprisonment/maternal imprisonment. By raising awareness and advocating for change, we can ensure that every child has the opportunity to thrive in a safe and supportive environment, free from the shadows of their parents' struggles. Together, let's build a future where children are not punished for their mothers' mistakes but are instead provided with the love and support they deserve.