

Celebrating Nelson Mandela's Efforts in Worldwide Prison Reform

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"No one truly knows a nation until one has been inside its jails. A nation should not be judged by how it treats its highest citizens, but its lowest ones."

- Nelson Mandela

International Nelson Mandela Day was established by the United Nations in 2009 to honor Mandela's birth date and his contribution to peace, reconciliation, and freedom. The day calls for individuals to dedicate 67 minutes of their time to community service - representing the 67 years Mandela spent fighting for social justice. The day serves as an annual reminder that each of us has the power and responsibility to contribute to positive change in our communities. It emphasizes that freedom and justice are not gifts to be received, but responsibilities to be fulfilled through active participation in building a more equitable society.

On August 5, 1962, Nelson Mandela was sentenced to five years for inciting workers to strike and leaving the country illegally. In 1964, during the Rivonia Trial, his sentence was extended to life imprisonment for sabotage and conspiracy to overthrow the government. This began a 27-year journey that would fundamentally shape his understanding of human dignity, justice, and the power of rehabilitation over retribution. He spent those years in a number of different local and federal prison facilities.

The prison conditions Mandela faced were deliberately harsh and dehumanizing. Political prisoners on Robben Island were classified in the lowest category, receiving the poorest food, the thinnest clothing, and the most demanding labor. They were forced to work in lime quarries under the blazing sun, which permanently damaged Mandela's eyesight. Cells were tiny, cold, and damp, with only a thin mat for sleeping. Despite these conditions, Mandela transformed his prison experience into an opportunity for learning and leadership. He earned a Bachelor of Laws degree through correspondence with the University of London, taught fellow prisoners to read and write, and established what became known as "Mandela University" - informal education sessions where prisoners shared knowledge and skills.

Rather than becoming bitter or seeking revenge, Mandela used his prison years to develop what he called "the art of forgiveness." He learned that true strength comes not from dominating others, but from understanding their humanity and finding common ground even with one's oppressors.

Mandela's approach to prison reform began with his own behavior. He treated guards with respect, learned Afrikaans to communicate with them more effectively, and worked to improve relations between prisoners and authorities. He organized hunger strikes and protests against poor conditions, but always insisted on non-violent resistance and maintained his dignity throughout. His leadership extended to mediating conflicts between different political factions among the prisoners, establishing fair systems for sharing resources, and creating a sense of community and mutual support. These experiences taught him that lasting change requires changing hearts and minds, not just policies and laws.

Mandela's prison experience occurred during a period when international human rights standards for prisoners were being developed. The United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (now known as the Nelson Mandela Rules) were first adopted in 1955, but it was Mandela's own experience and advocacy that gave these principles moral authority and practical meaning.

The **Nelson Mandela Rules** emphasize that imprisonment itself is the punishment - prisoners should not be subjected to additional suffering beyond the loss of liberty. They establish principles including:

- Respect for human dignity and inherent worth of every person
- Access to healthcare, education, and meaningful work
- Protection from torture, cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment
- Preparation for successful reintegration into society
- Contact with family and the outside world

Mandela's experience led him to advocate for restorative justice - an approach that focuses on healing harm rather than inflicting punishment. While retributive justice asks "What law was broken, who broke it, and what punishment do they deserve?", restorative justice asks "What harm was done, what needs to be repaired, and who is responsible for this repair?"

Mandela's approach was based on philosophy, education and dignity of human life.

Ubuntu Philosophy: Mandela often spoke of ubuntu, the African philosophy that translates to "I am because we are." This principle emphasizes our interconnectedness and shared humanity, recognizing that we cannot be truly free while others remain oppressed or excluded from society.

Education as Liberation: Mandela famously said, "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world." In prison, he witnessed how education transformed both prisoners and guards, creating opportunities for understanding and growth that punishment alone could never achieve.

Dignity and Respect: Even in the harshest conditions, Mandela insisted on treating everyone with dignity - including his captors. He understood that dehumanizing others ultimately dehumanizes ourselves, and that lasting change requires appealing to people's better nature rather than their fears.

Nelson Mandela's legacy in prison reform reminds us that true justice is not about punishment but about restoration - of individuals, relationships, and communities. His 27 years in prison taught him that even in the darkest circumstances, we have the power to choose dignity over degradation, understanding over hatred, and hope over despair.

As we observe International Nelson Mandela Day, we are called not just to remember his sacrifices, but to continue his work of building a more just and compassionate world. In the realm of criminal justice, this means working toward systems that reflect our highest values and our deepest commitment to human dignity and the possibility of redemption.