



LEGAL AND HUMAN RIGHTS CENTRE

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Success Story- Death Penalty and Justice

Rehema Ndoje's Post Prison Story, Survivor of Death Penalty by Hanging 26 Years in Prison life

A. Background Information

Legal and Human Rights Centre (LHRC) has documented a tragedy story of Ms. Rehema Ndoje who spent 26 years in Prison in Tanzania after being sentenced to death by hanging for the alleged murder of her eight-month-old child. Rehema Ndoje is a Tanzania citizens and resident of Mwitikila Village, Bahi District in Dodoma Region, Tanzania.

Rehema was arrested in Dar es Salaam in 1999 and later sentenced to death in 2007. However, her appeal remained unheard for more than 19 years because crucial court records disappeared. As a result, she continued serving her sentence in several prisons without her appeal being reviewed within a reasonable period.

Life in prison was filled with suffering, uncertainty, and endless waiting for justice that seemed never to come. Rehema explained that she was transferred between several prisons, including Segerea, Keko, Isanga, and Mbeya, while continuously waiting for her appeal hearing. Finally, on February 12, 2026, the Court of Appeal acquitted and released her after determining that her fundamental right to have her appeal heard within a reasonable time had been violated.

On May 24, 1999, she was arraigned before the Kinondoni District Court and charged with the murder of her eight-month-old child. In 2001, the case was transferred to the High Court. After years of court appearances and witness testimonies, she was convicted on November 8, 2007, and sentenced to death by hanging.

In her own words, Rehema recalled;

"When I returned to prison, the officers were shocked. They said my case should probably have been treated as manslaughter, which would have resulted in a shorter sentence, not the death penalty, because I had no intention to kill."

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B. Journey to appeal

While at Segerea Prison, the prison commander called her into his office and advised her not to lose hope but to file an appeal. He told her that many prisoners had stayed in prison for years and later succeeded in their appeals. Following that advice, on November 13, 2007, she filed an appeal at the Court of Appeal of Tanzania while imprisoned at Keko Prison.

Rehema then spent nearly 19 years waiting for her appeal to be heard. The process stalled because critical appeal records were missing, and she was transferred to Isanga Prison. After spending years in prison, in 2015 she was transferred back to Dar es Salaam at Segerea Prison to facilitate her appearance for appeal case. In 2019, Rehema was again returned to Isanga Prison in Dodoma as her court records were not found.

She said;

“There were moments when I became exhausted. I kept asking myself why my case was different. I was constantly transferred from one prison to another Mbeya, Isanga, Segerea all supposedly to change my environment, in prison you have no family, no freedom, and you are always under guard.”

Although death row inmates were not normally assigned duties, Rehema volunteered to help with cooking, washing dishes, and caring for children born and raised in prison. At one point, she was entrusted with caring for another inmate’s child because the mother was experiencing mental health challenges.

According to Rehema’s mother, the incident that led to her imprisonment stemmed from a family conflict after Rehema’s husband allegedly refused to accept responsibility for the child. It was alleged that the baby had been poisoned through porridge. Following the incident, the husband reportedly fled, while Rehema was arrested and prosecuted.

C. How LHRC intervened in Rehema’s case

In 2024, Legal and Human Rights Centre (LHRC) was approached by the Ex-Prisoner Foundation Tanzania Organization to provide legal assistance to Rehema Ndoje following prolonged uncertainty surrounding the status of her appeal since 2021.

In response, LHRC initiated a close legal follow up of the matter by visiting Rehema at Isanga Prison to obtain detailed information and key facts regarding her case. Thereafter, LHRC formally wrote to both the Officer in Charge of Isanga Prison and the Registrar of the High Court of Tanzania seeking clarification on the status of her appeal and requesting the relevant court records and documentation necessary to facilitate the hearing of her case.

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Following these interventions, the Tanzania Prison Service transferred Rehema in April 2024 from Isanga Prison back to Segerea Prison in Dar es Salaam to enable her appearance before a panel of three judges of the Court of Appeal of Tanzania.

Given that the matter involved a murder conviction, the Judiciary appointed legal counsel to represent Rehema during the appeal proceedings. Nevertheless, LHRC continued to play a supportive role by conducting a watch brief throughout the proceedings, closely monitoring the progress of the case, and maintaining regular prison visits to ensure Rehema remained informed about the developments, legal procedures, and key aspects of her appeal.

In addition to legal follow up, LHRC also provided Rehema with psychosocial encouragement and basic support during a period marked by prolonged uncertainty and emotional hardship after spending more than two decades in prison awaiting justice.

The appeal case went for two (2) consecutive years, eventually the judge's panel ordered the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions to search for the missing files so that the appeal could proceed, the prosecution sworn affidavit that they have not succeeded reconstruct and found key court document to enable the hearing of the case. Finally on 13th February 2026 the Court of Appeal of Tanzania ordered her release after concluding that her constitutional right to a timely hearing and appeal had been severely violated.

Rehema recalled crying uncontrollably on the day she left prison, overwhelmed with joy and gratitude to God that her long journey of pain, loneliness, uncertainty, and the disappearance of her case file had finally come to an end.

D. Call for criminal justice reforms

Her case has reignited debate about the effectiveness of Tanzania's criminal justice system, particularly concerning delays in court proceedings and poor management of judicial records.

Article 13(6)(a) of the Constitution of the United Republic of Tanzania, 1977, every person has the right to equality before the law and the right to appeal. In addition, Section 342 of the Criminal Procedure Act recognizes a prisoner's right to appeal against death sentence.

Therefore, detaining Rehema for more than two decades without hearing her appeal represents a serious violation of human rights and exposes major weaknesses in the justice system that require urgent reform. Beyond domestic law, Tanzania is also a signatory to several international and regional human rights instruments that protect the right to a fair hearing, including, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), 1948, the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR), 1981 and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) 1966.

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These instruments emphasize the right to a fair trial within a reasonable time, the right to appeal, and protection against cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment.

Today, Rehema is trying to rebuild her life outside prison. She says the greatest lesson she learned is the importance of patience, tolerance, and avoiding conflicts that can destroy lives for many years.

Her case reflects deep structural problems within Tanzania's criminal justice system that require urgent and comprehensive reform. Keeping Rehema imprisoned for more than 20 years without hearing her appeal constituted a clear violation of Article 13(6)(a) of the Constitution of the United Republic of Tanzania, which guarantees the right to appeal.

E. Lessons and call for reforms

1. Rehema's case suggests there may be other prisoners with delayed or abandoned appeals, undocumented administrative failures, and systemic violations hidden within prison populations, therefore there is a need for immediate action by the government to conduct a special prison audit to identify inmates whose appeals have stalled due to administrative failures so they may receive justice in a timely manner.
2. The existing criminal justice system requires continuous oversight, accountability, inter coordination, and constitutional safeguards to prevent miscarriages of justice.
3. Where legal systems are vulnerable to administrative failure or delayed justice, the risk of irreversible punishment becomes significantly more dangerous. Therefore, government should provide both psychological and economic compensation to Rehema and other victims.
4. The Government and Parliament to implement reforms in the criminal justice system and abolish the death penalty as it is cruel and violates human dignity.
5. Future decisions, Courts must provide meaningful remedies where systemic failures result in prolonged injustice. Constitutional rights become meaningful only when courts are prepared to enforce them decisively.
6. There is a need to conduct resentencing programs by criminal justice institutions to address related incidents like Rehema Ndoje.

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