



CRIMINAL JUSTICE AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN NIGERIA: THE IMPERATIVE ROLE OF SOCIAL WORK

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Abstract

The Nigerian criminal justice system plays a vital role in upholding law, order, and the protection of citizens' rights. Despite constitutional guarantees and international commitments, it continues to face systemic challenges such as arbitrary arrests, prolonged pre-trial detention, torture, extrajudicial killings, and prison overcrowding. These violations erode public trust and highlight the gap between justice administration and the protection of human rights. This study explores the intersection of criminal justice and human rights in Nigeria, with particular emphasis on the often-overlooked role of social work. Drawing on human rights-based and social justice theoretical frameworks, the paper argues that social workers can serve as advocates, counselors, mediators, and agents of systemic reform, promoting restorative justice and offender rehabilitation while safeguarding victims' rights. Empirical studies demonstrate that integrating social work into policing, judiciary, and correctional institutions enhances fairness, accountability, and reintegration. The study concludes that meaningful reform of Nigeria's justice system requires moving beyond punitive approaches toward rights-based and restorative models in which social work plays a central role. Recommendations include formal policy recognition of social work in justice processes, increased funding for rehabilitation programs, and nationwide campaigns to reduce stigma and strengthen community reintegration.

Key words: Criminal justice, human rights and social work.

INTRODUCTION

The criminal justice system in Nigeria occupies a central position in the protection of citizens, maintenance of social order, and enforcement of the rule of law. However, despite constitutional guarantees and Nigeria's commitment to international human rights treaties, the system has often been criticized for persistent violations of human rights, including arbitrary arrests, prolonged pre-trial detentions, torture, extrajudicial killings, and prison overcrowding (Alemika, 2010; Amnesty International, 2020). These systemic challenges undermine public confidence in the justice system and perpetuate cycles of inequality and social injustice. Human rights, as enshrined in Chapter IV of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria and supported by instruments such as the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, remain fundamental to the dignity and freedom of every individual. Nevertheless, weak institutional frameworks, corruption, and inadequate rehabilitation programs have impeded the actualization of these rights in practice (Olong, 2010). Consequently, there is growing

recognition that legal reforms alone are insufficient to ensure justice; rather, a multidisciplinary approach is required.

Social work emerges as a vital profession capable of bridging the gap between criminal justice administration and human rights protection. Social workers are trained to provide advocacy, counseling, and rehabilitation services, particularly to vulnerable groups such as victims of crime, incarcerated individuals, juveniles, and marginalized communities (Adebayo, 2019). Their involvement within the justice system aligns with global best practices, where social work contributes to offender rehabilitation, victim support, and the promotion of restorative justice (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2018). By integrating social work principles into Nigeria's criminal justice framework, the system can become more humane, rights-based, and effective in fostering both accountability and reintegration. This paper therefore examines the interplay between criminal justice and human rights in Nigeria, emphasizing the imperative role of social work in advancing justice, protecting human dignity, and promoting systemic reform.

Statement of the Problem

The Nigerian criminal justice system is confronted with deep-rooted challenges that continue to undermine its effectiveness and credibility. Despite constitutional guarantees of fundamental rights and Nigeria's ratification of several international human rights instruments, persistent violations remain widespread. Issues such as arbitrary arrests, prolonged pre-trial detention, prison congestion, and the use of torture in custodial facilities reflect systemic weaknesses that erode public trust in the justice system (Amnesty International, 2020). For instance, data from the National Human Rights Commission (2020) revealed that a significant proportion of inmates in Nigerian prisons are awaiting trial, with some detained for several years without conviction. These realities point to structural inefficiencies and disregard for human dignity within the justice process. Moreover, the criminal justice system has historically focused on punitive measures rather than rehabilitation and reintegration. This punitive orientation has resulted in high recidivism rates, stigmatization of ex-offenders, and marginalization of victims who are often left without adequate support (Alemika, 2010). Such an approach fails to address the social and psychological dimensions of crime, thereby perpetuating cycles of violence and social inequality. The lack of comprehensive support for vulnerable groups—including juveniles, women, and the poor—further illustrates a gap between justice administration and the protection of human rights.

Against this backdrop, the role of social work remains underexplored and underutilized within Nigeria's criminal justice system. While social workers possess skills in advocacy, rehabilitation, mediation, and psychosocial support, their contributions are rarely integrated into justice processes. This absence weakens opportunities for restorative justice, offender reintegration, and the promotion of human rights in custodial and non-custodial contexts (Adebayo, 2019). The problem, therefore, lies not only in the systemic inefficiencies of the criminal justice system but also in the failure to leverage social work as a professional force for reform, rehabilitation, and human rights advocacy.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA)

The Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA) is a framework that emphasizes integrating human rights principles and standards into laws, policies, and institutional practices. It is grounded in the idea that every person is a **rights-holder** entitled to dignity, equality, and protection, while the state and its institutions are **duty-bearers** obligated to respect, protect, and fulfill those rights (United Nations Development Programme, 2006). HRBA highlights key principles such as participation, accountability, non-discrimination, empowerment, and the rule of law. By prioritizing these principles, HRBA ensures that justice systems are not only punitive but also responsive to the inherent dignity and rights of all individuals. The HRBA provides a useful lens for examining persistent violations within the criminal justice system. Reports of arbitrary arrests, unlawful detentions, torture in custody, and denial of fair trial rights illustrate how

the justice system often fails to uphold the fundamental rights guaranteed under the 1999 Constitution of Nigeria and international treaties such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Amnesty International, 2020). The failure of state institutions to serve as duty-bearers results in widespread human rights abuses, especially against vulnerable groups such as the poor, juveniles, and women.

Social workers adopt a rights-based perspective by advocating for systemic reforms, empowering marginalized groups, and holding institutions accountable for abuses (International Federation of Social Workers, 2018). Within Nigeria's criminal justice system, social workers can apply HRBA by ensuring that inmates have access to humane treatment, victims of crime are supported, and justice processes adhere to international human rights standards. For example, in cases of prison overcrowding, social workers can advocate for non-custodial sentencing and community-based rehabilitation, thereby promoting both justice and human rights. Thus, HRBA is significant to this study because it provides a conceptual framework for understanding the failures of Nigeria's criminal justice system and highlights the indispensable role of social work in promoting fairness, accountability, and respect for human dignity. By operationalizing HRBA, social workers contribute to transforming Nigeria's justice system from one that perpetuates violations to one that protects and upholds human rights.

Social Justice Theory

Social Justice Theory, propounded by John Rawls in 1971, is rooted in the principle that every individual deserves equal rights, opportunities, and fair treatment within society. It emphasizes fairness in the distribution of resources, the protection of rights, and the elimination of discrimination and oppression (Rawls, 1971). At its core, the theory argues that justice should not only be about enforcing laws but also about ensuring equity, dignity, and fairness for all members of society, especially the marginalized and vulnerable. John Rawls' perspective on social justice, for instance, stresses the importance of fairness as the foundation of a just society, proposing that institutions must be structured to protect the least advantaged.

Social Justice Theory provides a critical framework for analyzing the deficiencies of the criminal justice system. Nigeria's justice system has been widely criticized for systemic human rights violations such as arbitrary arrests, prolonged detention without trial, overcrowded prisons, and extrajudicial killings. These issues disproportionately affect poor and marginalized groups, revealing an imbalance in the protection of rights. From the standpoint of social justice, such practices contradict the principle of fairness and equality before the law, as guaranteed in the Nigerian Constitution and international human rights charters. This is where the role of social work becomes imperative. Social workers are trained to advocate for social justice by addressing systemic inequalities, protecting vulnerable groups, and promoting the dignity of all individuals. Within the criminal justice system, social workers

can push for reforms that prioritize rehabilitation over punishment, ensure humane treatment of inmates, and protect the rights of victims as well as offenders. For instance, they can advocate for alternatives to imprisonment, provide counseling and reintegration services to offenders, and work with victims to ensure their voices are heard in justice processes. Thus, Social Justice Theory not only explains why Nigeria's criminal justice system needs reform but also highlights why social work is essential in ensuring that justice is not only legalistic but also humane and equitable. The theory underscores that justice is incomplete if it excludes human rights, dignity, and fairness, making social work a critical force in bridging the gap between criminal justice administration and human rights protection in Nigeria.

CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

Criminal Justice

Criminal justice refers to the system of practices, institutions, and processes established by governments to uphold social control, deter and mitigate crime, and sanction individuals who violate established laws. It is comprised of three primary components: law enforcement, the judiciary, and correctional institutions, which collectively function to investigate crimes, adjudicate offenders, and administer punishment or rehabilitation (Siegel, 2016). The criminal justice system operates not only to protect society from criminal behavior but also to safeguard the rights of individuals, including those accused of crimes, thereby balancing security with justice. In Nigeria, criminal justice is constitutionally anchored in the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, which guarantees fundamental human rights and outlines the duties of law enforcement agencies and the judiciary. However, the practical implementation of justice often faces significant challenges such as corruption, delays in trial processes, prison overcrowding, and human rights violations (Alemika, 2010).

The criminal justice process in Nigeria has historically leaned more towards punitive measures, with less emphasis on rehabilitation and reintegration of offenders, thereby contributing to cycles of recidivism and public mistrust. The concept of criminal justice also extends beyond punitive action to include restorative and rehabilitative dimensions. Modern perspectives stress that justice should not only punish wrongdoers but also address the harm done to victims and reintegrate offenders into society (Braithwaite, 2012). This is especially relevant in Nigeria, where systemic inefficiencies have often resulted in prolonged pre-trial detentions and violations of the rights of both victims and suspects. By adopting a more human rights-centered view of criminal justice, the system can promote fairness, dignity, and accountability. For social works, criminal justice is highly significant. Social workers engage in the justice system as advocates for victims, counselors for offenders, and reformers who challenge structural inequalities that fuel crime and injustice (Adebayo, 2019). Their role emphasizes the importance of rehabilitation, psychosocial support, and human rights protection, making the integration of social work principles essential for creating a fair and humane criminal justice system in Nigeria.

Components of the Criminal Justice System

The criminal justice system operates through three interdependent components: **law enforcement, the judiciary, and corrections.**

Law enforcement: Law enforcement agencies, particularly the police, serve as the first contact between citizens and the justice system. Their duties include crime prevention, investigation, arrest of offenders, and maintenance of public safety (Dammer & Albanese, 2014). In Nigeria, the police face challenges such as inadequate training, corruption, and human rights violations (Alemika, 2013), but they remain a crucial gateway to justice.

The judiciary: The judiciary is responsible for interpreting laws, ensuring due process, and adjudicating disputes. Courts determine guilt or innocence, provide remedies for victims, and ensure fairness in the application of the law (Reichel, 2017). A functional judiciary safeguards against abuse of power by law enforcement and ensures justice is administered impartially. In Nigeria, issues like judicial corruption and prolonged pretrial detention undermine efficiency but do not diminish its critical role.

Corrections: Corrections cover prisons, probation, parole, and rehabilitation services, with the dual goals of punishing offenders and rehabilitating them for reintegration into society (Clear, et al., 2018). In Nigeria, correctional facilities struggle with overcrowding, poor funding, and limited rehabilitation programs (Civil Liberties Organisation, 2019). Effective correctional practices should balance punishment with reform while adhering to human rights standards.

Social Work

Social work is a professional and academic discipline committed to enhancing human well-being, promoting social change, and addressing the needs of vulnerable and marginalized groups in society. It is rooted in principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility, and respect for human dignity (International Federation of Social Workers, 2014). Social workers engage individuals, families, groups, and communities to address personal and structural barriers that hinder people from achieving their full potential, while also advocating for policies that promote equity and inclusion. The profession operates on the premise that human behavior is shaped by the interaction between individuals and their social environments. Thus, social work seeks to intervene not only at the level of personal problems but also within broader societal contexts such as poverty, discrimination, crime, and systemic inequality (Payne, 2020). The integration of practice, policy, and research distinguishes social work from other helping professions, as it combines direct service with advocacy for social justice. Key values underpinning social work practice include service to humanity, respect for human dignity, integrity, competence, and the pursuit of social justice (National Association of Social Workers, 2021). These values align closely with human rights principles, making social workers important actors in safeguarding rights and promoting fairness within justice systems.

Social work is particularly relevant in addressing issues of poverty, youth restiveness, human rights violations, gender inequality, and the shortcomings of the criminal justice system. For instance, social workers play vital roles in rehabilitating offenders, reintegrating them into society, supporting victims of crime, and advocating for fairer justice policies (Okoye, 2020). By bridging the gap between law enforcement, judiciary, correctional institutions, and communities, social work contributes to a justice system that is both effective and humane. Therefore, social work is not only a caring profession but also a critical mechanism for advancing human rights and ensuring that the criminal justice system operates in line with fairness, dignity, and equity.

Roles of Social Workers in Society

Social workers play diverse roles that contribute to social development, justice, and individual well-being.

Counselors and helpers: Social workers provide counseling and psychosocial support to individuals and families dealing with issues such as trauma, abuse, addiction, or family conflicts. This role promotes mental health and resilience (Payne, 2020).

Advocates for rights and justice: They advocate for vulnerable populations by lobbying for policy reforms, engaging in community activism, and challenging discriminatory practices that hinder access to justice and social services (Reamer, 2018).

Mediators and facilitators: Social workers mediate conflicts within families, communities, and organizations. They also facilitate access to resources by linking individuals with welfare services, healthcare, or legal aid (Segal et al., 2019).

Agents of social change: At the societal level, social workers contribute to social reforms by addressing structural inequalities, raising awareness of social issues, and participating in community development projects (Banks, 2012).

Human Rights within the Criminal Justice System

Human rights are central to the legitimacy and fairness of any criminal justice system. They provide a framework that ensures law enforcement, judicial processes, and correctional practices respect the inherent dignity and rights of individuals. In the criminal justice system, human rights include the right to a fair trial, presumption of innocence, freedom from torture or degrading treatment, and access to legal representation (United Nations, 2015). Protecting these rights ensures that justice processes do not become instruments of oppression but rather uphold democratic values. In Nigeria, constitutional provisions such as Chapter IV of the 1999 Constitution guarantee fundamental rights, including the right to liberty, fair hearing, and freedom from unlawful detention (Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999). This means that every actor within the system—police, judiciary, and corrections—has a duty to respect and uphold these rights when engaging with citizens.

The Role of Social Work in Criminal Justice and Human Rights Protection

Social work plays a crucial role in strengthening criminal justice systems and ensuring that human rights are protected within legal and correctional processes. By its nature, social work emphasizes dignity, social justice, and advocacy, making it indispensable in addressing the human dimensions of crime, punishment, and rehabilitation (National Association of Social Workers, 2021). Within criminal justice systems, social workers serve as advocates for vulnerable groups, facilitators of rehabilitation programs, and watchdogs against human rights abuses.

Advocacy for human rights within the justice system: One of the foremost roles of social work in the criminal justice system is advocating for the protection of human rights. Social workers act as mediators between vulnerable individuals and the justice system, ensuring that fundamental rights are not violated during arrest, detention, prosecution, or incarceration. They draw attention to issues such as unlawful detention, police brutality, torture, and the denial of fair trial rights, which are still prevalent in many justice systems, including Nigeria (Okoye, 2020). By collaborating with legal practitioners, civil society organizations, and human rights institutions, social workers play an active role in demanding accountability from law enforcement agencies while promoting reforms that strengthen justice delivery (Reamer, 2018).

Rehabilitation and reintegration of offenders: Beyond advocating for fairness, social work emphasizes the rehabilitation and reintegration of offenders into society. This role is critical in shifting the criminal justice system from a punitive model to one that is restorative and reform-oriented. Social workers provide counseling, vocational training, mental health support, and skill development programs aimed at preparing offenders for life after incarceration (Roberts & Springer, 2019). In the Nigerian context, where prisons are often overcrowded and lack adequate rehabilitation programs, social work interventions help reduce recidivism and promote community acceptance of reformed individuals. By fostering reintegration, social workers contribute to both the protection of human rights and the long-term stability of society.

Victim support and community-based interventions: Another crucial role is the provision of victim support and community-based interventions. Victims of crime often face psychological trauma, social stigma, and systemic neglect. Social workers intervene by offering counseling, psychosocial support, and advocacy services to ensure victims' needs are met (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2018). In communities, they design preventive programs such as youth empowerment, substance abuse prevention, and community mediation to address the root causes of crime and violence. By engaging both victims and communities, social workers not only safeguard individual rights but also promote peace-building and social cohesion, which are central to a fair justice system.

Promoting restorative justice approaches: social workers are pivotal in promoting restorative justice approaches within

criminal justice systems. Unlike conventional punitive justice, restorative justice focuses on dialogue, reconciliation, and repairing harm caused by crime (Zehr, 2002). Social workers facilitate mediation between offenders, victims, and communities to promote healing, accountability, and reintegration. This approach reduces adversarial conflict, respects human dignity, and upholds fairness, thereby aligning with human rights principles (Braithwaite, 2002). In Nigeria, where mistrust of formal justice institutions remains high, restorative justice practices promoted by social workers can serve as culturally appropriate alternatives that enhance community trust and justice delivery.

Agents of systemic change: Social workers serve as **agents of systemic change** by highlighting inequalities, promoting policy reforms, and partnering with civil society organizations to ensure accountability in justice administration. In Nigeria, this means challenging corruption, addressing gender-based violence, and advocating for alternatives to incarceration, particularly for vulnerable groups such as juveniles and women (Okoye, 2020).

Challenges of Integrating Social Work into the Criminal Justice System in Nigeria

The integration of social work into the criminal justice system in Nigeria faces several challenges that hinder its effectiveness in promoting justice, protecting human rights, and rehabilitating offenders. These challenges stem from structural, institutional, socio-economic, and cultural barriers that limit the visibility and influence of social work practice in justice delivery.

Limited recognition of social work as a profession: One of the major challenges is the **low recognition of social work as a distinct profession** within Nigeria's justice system. Unlike in many Western countries where social workers play a clearly defined role in prisons, courts, and probation services, in Nigeria, their functions are often overlooked or subsumed under other professions such as psychology or law (Okoye, 2020). The delayed enactment and weak implementation of social work regulatory frameworks further diminish the profession's authority, thereby restricting its impact on criminal justice processes.

Inadequate policy and legal frameworks: The Nigerian criminal justice system lacks comprehensive **policy and legislative provisions** that formally integrate social workers into policing, judicial, and correctional structures. While the Nigerian Correctional Service Act of 2019 emphasizes rehabilitation and reformation, it provides limited operational guidelines for social workers' involvement (Akinlabi, 2021). Without clear policies mandating their participation, social workers remain on the margins of justice reform efforts, weakening their ability to advocate for human rights and offender reintegration.

Resource and capacity constraints: Social work practice in Nigeria is hampered by insufficient funding, lack of training, and poor infrastructural support. Most correctional facilities, for instance, are underfunded, overcrowded, and ill-equipped

to support meaningful rehabilitation programs (Agboola & Rabi, 2019). Social workers often lack access to adequate tools, research resources, and continuous professional development, which reduces their effectiveness in engaging with offenders, victims, and communities.

Societal perception and stigma: Another critical challenge is the **negative societal perception of both offenders and social workers**. In Nigeria, offenders are often stigmatized and rejected by their communities, making reintegration difficult even when rehabilitation programs are available (Adebayo, 2019). Similarly, the role of social workers is sometimes misunderstood or undervalued, leading to limited collaboration with other criminal justice actors such as police officers, lawyers, and correctional officials. This perception undermines the holistic approach required for effective justice and human rights protection.

Systemic corruption and human rights violations: The Nigerian justice system is plagued by **corruption, political interference, and systemic human rights violations**. Social workers advocating for fairness and accountability often face resistance from entrenched systems that benefit from the status quo (Onuoha, 2017). Police brutality, unlawful detention, and overcrowded prisons remain pressing concerns, and the absence of strong institutional will to reform limits the extent to which social workers can intervene effectively in promoting justice and protecting human rights.

Weak interdisciplinary collaboration: The integration of social work is hindered by **weak interdisciplinary collaboration** among criminal justice professionals. In many cases, police officers, judges, and correctional officers do not fully understand the contributions that social workers can make to rehabilitation, advocacy, and restorative justice (Eze, 2021). This lack of synergy fosters institutional silos that undermine collective efforts to strengthen justice and protect human rights.

EMPIRICAL STUDIES

Ngwu & Iwuagwu, (2022) examined the needs, challenges of effective collaboration and similarities between social workers and lawyers in Nigeria, in the service of clients so that each profession can increase its understanding of the other discipline. It considers also the location of relationship between social work and law practice and explores areas of convergence. We employed in-depth interviews (IDIs) as instruments for data collection for this study, using a sample of 10 social work educators and 10 practicing lawyers at University of Nigeria, Nsukka and Enugu campus respectively, targeting participants with long working experience. The interviews focused on the strengths and weaknesses of collaborative models which use all of their valued knowledge, training and ability to care for clients. The data collected were analyzed thematically. Findings showed that the law and social work professions are interwoven professions given their similarities. Results also showed the importance of collaboration between lawyers and social workers as well as the barriers that has impeded such collaboration among professionals. It is therefore of utmost

importance that right measures are taken to overcome these impediments and laying a foundation for effective collaboration between the two professionals.

Androff, & Mathis (2022) explores social work practice with immigrants and asylum seekers in a legal service organization. A qualitative research study asked social workers, lawyers, and administrators ($n=27$) to discuss the relationship between human rights and social work. Data from key informants were collected in five focus groups and one individual interview. Findings indicate that the participants see social work practice as an important response to the attack on immigrant and asylum seekers' rights. Social workers identified human rights as a primary motivation for their practice, and integral to the profession. The findings also reveal that this legal service organization applies a rights-based approach by integrating social and legal services. Participants described how this rights-based approach protects and promotes the human rights of immigrants and asylum seekers. This paper illustrates the value of rights-based approaches and how they can be incorporated into social work practice.

Imenger & Oyeboode (2024) examines alternative dispute resolution platforms and their application in the settlement of criminal matters, specifying the principle of restorative justice. This paper explored secondary methods of data collection. The libertarian theory of right guides the discussions in this paper. It is argued that ADR platforms are suitable and exhibit timely settlement of criminal matters. The parties' satisfaction, cost cuts and avoidance of human rights violations are achievable. This article concludes that from the perspective of restorative justice, ADRs guarantee the inherent values of penitence, forgiveness and reconciliation. It is recommended that alternative dispute resolution processes be involved and given legal support in the settlement of criminal matters. Awareness and training are needed for general adoption and seamless ADR processes within the judicial system of Nigeria.

Ado, et al., (2024) x-rays the criminal justice system, and crime control and prevention in Nigeria. The objectives of the study are to assess the impact of institutional reforms on the effectiveness of law enforcement agencies in Nigeria, evaluate the influence of socio-economic factors on crime rates and patterns in Nigeria, investigate the role of corruption in undermining the integrity and efficiency of the criminal justice system in Nigeria, examine the effectiveness of community oriented policing initiatives in enhancing collaboration between law enforcement agencies and local communities, and analyze the challenges and opportunities for addressing transnational crimes in Nigeria through international cooperation. The adopted theory was the Social Disorganization Theory. This theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the social and environmental factors that contribute to crime rates and patterns in Nigeria. The study employs a qualitative research method to capture the complexity of criminal justice system, and crime control and prevention in Nigeria. The results of this study highlight the importance of institutional reforms in

enhancing the effectiveness of law enforcement agencies in Nigeria, the findings underscore the significant influence of socioeconomic factors on crime rates and patterns in Nigeria, moreover, the pervasive issue of corruption poses a significant threat to the integrity and efficiency of the criminal justice system in Nigeria. The study recommends that; comprehensive institutional reforms should be implemented within law enforcement agencies, the judiciary, and correctional facilities to enhance professionalism, accountability, and efficiency, and investments in education, job creation, and social welfare programs should be prioritized to address underlying socioeconomic disparities and reduce the risk factors associated with crime.

CONCLUSION

The Nigerian criminal justice system is central to maintaining order, enforcing the rule of law, and protecting the rights of citizens. Despite constitutional and international guarantees, the protection of human dignity within justice processes remains inadequate. This reveals the limitations of a system that has historically prioritized punitive measures over rehabilitation and reintegration. Social work emerges as a critical discipline capable of bridging the gap between criminal justice administration and human rights protection. By drawing on values of social justice, dignity, advocacy, and empowerment, social workers can complement legal reforms with rehabilitative and restorative interventions. Their roles in offender rehabilitation, victim support, community-based crime prevention, and rights advocacy position them as indispensable actors in transforming Nigeria's justice system. A justice system that integrates social work will not only hold offenders accountable but also uphold fairness, ensure victim support, and promote long-term social stability. Therefore, achieving a humane and effective criminal justice system in Nigeria requires a paradigm shift toward rights-based and restorative approaches in which social work plays a central role. Without this integration, systemic abuses, cycles of recidivism, and public mistrust will continue to undermine justice delivery.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Nigerian government should formally integrate social workers into all aspects of the criminal justice system—policing, courts, and correctional institutions—through clear legal frameworks and policy reforms.
2. Adequate funding, training, and infrastructure should be provided to support social work practice within the justice system, including rehabilitation programs, victim services, and community-based interventions.
3. National campaigns should be launched to sensitize the public on the role of social work in justice and rehabilitation, thereby reducing stigma against ex-offenders and increasing support for community reintegration.

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