

PRISON SERVICE JOURNAL

March 2014 No 212



Special Edition
**Everyday Prison Governance
in Africa**

Prison Officers in Sierra Leone: paradoxical puzzles

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Introduction¹

'There are precious few resources for internationally comparative data on prison staff'²

Prison officers in sub-Saharan Africa are often stereotyped and stigmatized. Rarely are they taken seriously either as professionals or as objects of study. Disinterest and indifference is the norm. This article represents an attempt to contextualise the Sierra Leonean prison officer by considering some of the factors affecting him/her in his/her job. It draws on the knowledge and experience of Prisons Watch, Sierra Leone (PWSL) a local human rights organization, and on long-term fieldwork conducted since 2006 by the first author. In addition it reports on and discusses a survey conducted in August 2011 about the general conditions of service and circumstances of prison officers. The survey was designed and conducted by PWSL in collaboration with DIGNITY — Danish Institute Against Torture. The guiding assumption behind the survey was that prison officers — though often neglected — are central actors in any attempts to transform prisons. The article aims to inform the wider public about the conditions under which prison officers operate and function and to supplement the sparse but growing scientific literature on prison staff.³

Sierra Leone presents us with a post-colonial, post-war context characterised by transition/inertia, material and policy deficits, a backdrop of weak state structures and a history of hefty meddling by the executive in the work of the judiciary (e.g. the use of imprisonment for political gain). There is little analytic literature on prisons in such contexts. We hope that our presentation of prison officers' conditions and circumstances in Sierra Leone might contribute to ongoing debates about

working conditions, staff attitudes and occupational cultures and subcultures in prisons elsewhere.

Background

Sierra Leone is located on the west coast of Africa. It has an estimated population of six million people. There are seventeen active prisons incarcerating around 2500 people.⁴ Of these less than a third are convicted and the vast majority are male. The largest prison is in the capital Freetown. When built its capacity was 324. Today it typically houses more than a thousand prisoners. The prisons are centrally administered by the Sierra Leone Prisons Service through a national headquarters under the Ministry of Internal Affairs. There are also four regional headquarters. The main functions of the prison are, in the official terminology, the safe custody of prison inmates, the welfare of inmates, and their reformation and rehabilitation. There are currently 1166 members of prison staff, 896 male and 270 female. Prisoners are accused of crimes ranging from treason through homicide to larceny and loitering. Living in conditions of intimate proximity with others is a key characteristic of confinement in Sierra Leonean prisons. In Sierra Leone prison staff are primarily carers, controllers, overseers and co-ordinators. Whilst there is an official discourse about rehabilitation it is not matched by facilities or resources that would make such a project even remotely feasible.

The survey we report on below was inspired by a presentation made by Alison Liebling (Director of the Institute of Criminology's Prisons Research Centre at the University of Cambridge) whom PWSL staff had met at a workshop held in Copenhagen 26th — 30th September 2011 attended by PWSL and DIGNITY's other international partners. Ultimately, however, the desire to focus on staff and to assess their attitudes and perceptions about their circumstances was rooted in

1. We would like to thank the prison officers who participated in the study and the prison management for granting us permission. We are likewise grateful to team members Berthan Lamin Bangura, Chief Detention Monitor and Eleanor Gloria Mercy Kanul, Psychosocial Coordinator, and to Connie Macdonald Arnskov and Christel Nellemann for help with the analysis. Extra special thanks to Nadisatu Nyajei Feika.
2. King, R. (2007) 'Prison staff: an international perspective' in J. Bennett, B. Crewe and A. Wahidin (eds.) *Understanding Prison Staff*. Cullompton: Willan Publishing.
3. The article targets uniformed staff given that the Sierra Leonean Prison Service is a para-military service without teachers, social workers or chaplains/imams.
4. ICPS, International Centre for Prison Studies, <http://www.prisonstudies.org>, 16.09.2013.

PWSL's long-standing belief that prison officers are central to any reform endeavour. From this perspective the prison cannot be better than its officers, and understandings of prison staff are vital foundations for the development of meaningful intervention strategies. The survey aimed to explore questions related to the background of the officers and how they see their situation. Based on many years' experience of monitoring prisons, providing psycho-social support to inmates and lobbying the authorities, PWSL were also aware of how much sense it makes in Sierra Leone to conceive of the prison officer him/herself as confined. The survey, in the form of a structured questionnaire, was designed by PWSL and reflected experience gained through the implementation of a previous survey on the socioeconomic impact of pretrial detention.⁵ Staff of PWSL implemented the survey in August 2011 during a month-long, nation-wide, consultative inspection tour of prisons. Based on the assumption that many prison officers are not particularly literate the questionnaire was administered by PWSL staff. Questions were read out to officers and answers were written down. The survey targeted officers who had served 10 years or more though on occasions when no-one who matched this criteria was available others were included.

On general conditions of work

Generally and formally speaking conditions of work for the prison officer revolve around custodial duties (counting, inspecting, securing prisoners) and 'housekeeping' (maintaining prisoners and prison order). Prison officers, in Sierra Leone as elsewhere, are thus to varying degrees managing tensions between control and care. They work in risky, anxiety-provoking places. The work is characterised by insecurity, the possibility of force or violence as well as an unusual level of domesticity as compared to other professions such as police and army that also include a mandate to use force when necessary. Prison staff engage with prisoners in intimate and mundane everyday practices, often in the long term, which entails familiarity,

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accommodation and cooperation as key elements of the job. One officer described the anxieties associated with lengthy, ongoing relationships with prisoners. For example, prisoners get to know staff and their families, their locations and can easily come into contact with them. There is also the risk of the displacement of aggression whereby guards become targets of aggression that is really meant for someone else. Relationships within Sierra Leonean prisons are more intimate, entangled and proximal than one typically imagines relations within prison to be. Prisoners and guards can be characterised as occupying shared social worlds both inside and sometimes outside the prison. It

follows from the conceptualisation of the prison as an essentially tense or hostile environment that staff can also suffer its brutal and dehumanising effects. Under headings such as 'the other prisoner', researchers have theorised staff as co-confined and co-victims of the prison experience. This is also the case in Sierra Leone. Sometimes officers jokingly refer to their 'sentences' as longer than those of most prisoners and they do often have lengthy careers with little by way of promotion or anything to look forward to.

In the Freetown Central Prison at any one time during the day shift around 100 officers are reportedly on duty, but they are largely invisible, either hidden among prisoners or occupied inside one of the various

workshops or offices, or perhaps taking a nap in one of the cells, even while on duty.⁶ (Others are assigned to Judges of the High Court of Sierra Leone or the homes of other senior prison officers as orderlies. Every senior prison officer has orderlies attached to him. These orderlies enjoy special privileges and their promotion is assured. They accompany the senior officer both at work and home and often on other business too. Becoming an orderly is one of the most sought after positions.)

During visits to prisons one is often faced with the problem of discerning who is who. Around the gate area, witnessing prisoners being prepared for court, it is usually relatively obvious. Prisoners are cuffed together and officers wear uniforms. But in the inner reaches of

5. Carried out by Timap for Justice and Prison Watch Sierra Leone in collaboration with UNDP and Open Society Foundation. See report published 2013. <http://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/publications/socioeconomic-impact-pretrial-detention-sierra-leone>
6. See Kaufman, K. (1988: 189) *Prison Officers and Their World*. Harvard University Press, on practices of officer concealment.

the prison the distinction sometimes seems to become almost meaningless. Not only are prisoners and guards indistinguishable from one another in terms of their appearance; they are at times also indistinguishable from one another in terms of function: prisoners are delegated to carry keys to the cell blocks and the internal gates, and they open the cells of their fellow inmates in the mornings and lock them in the evenings. In a blatant merging of identities, the house-master (prison officer) of the block occupies one of the cells. In this regard we might talk about a fusion of function.

In interviews and conversations officers typically express extensive complaints about their sufferings, about poor salaries, about the lack of materials to conduct vocational training, about inadequate housing, and about the general difficulty of making ends meet. 'We are tired', they say. 'I don't have much time to rest; that's why I look so haggard... And the money they pay us is so small...' Some officers appear to feel ashamed of their job as illustrated by one officer's practice of travelling without uniform even when on official prison business, for example to collect his staff's salaries from the Capital:

Uniform means I have to be carrying the rank. I prefer not to be travelling in uniform so I am not known as an officer who has been marginalised or deprived of something.

'The service is killing us,' another officer opined. 'How can I wear uniform and walk in the rain or in the dust of XXXX? (name of town withheld)'. One officer even suggested that 'some prisoners look better off than prison officers. Officers look haggard.' And certainly the officers do not stand out because they look well-fed, well-groomed or healthier than prisoners. In sum, complaints made by guards were often more plaintive than the complaints made by prisoners.

It is widely recognised that the prison officer is no automaton and that the demands of the job — be these relational or related to dilemmas around the appropriate use of power and authority or simply 'getting through the day' involves emotional energy. PWSL staff's regular interactions with prison officers present some examples of the emotional labour that

officers engage in. Some of this relates to frustration, lack of recognition and resulting low morale. PWSL report that on Bonthe Island, the location of one of Sierra Leone's more remote prisons, the police and military contingent stationed on the island, get free transport to and from the island. Prisons officers are not afforded the same privilege, which creates resentment and adds to their sense of inferiority. Likewise the President's tribute to armed forces, police and firefighters (and not prison officers!) during Mayong Day (a military holiday) created bitterness amongst the upper echelons of the prison hierarchy.

Survey demographics

The survey presented some interesting findings

that throw some light on the backgrounds of staff, including their reasons for joining the prison service and their levels of satisfaction with the job. We present some of the details below. Eighty-two prison officers participated, ten women (12 per cent) and seventy-two men (88 per cent). More than four out of five (81.5 per cent) were married, seventeen percent single and one was divorced. Approximately forty percent were Muslim and sixty percent Christian. A majority were members of one of the three largest ethnic groups in the country (19 per cent Temne, 21 per cent Limba, 27 per cent Mende).⁷ Most had an education

equivalent to either junior secondary school (JSS) or senior secondary school (SSS). Approximately six percent stated that they had never attended school or only primary school. Almost thirty-two percent of the respondents had finished JSS, and fifty-five percent had finished SSS. Seven percent had taken another form of education. The average length of service was eighteen years. Most had joined the prison service by formal application. Only approximately six percent (5 officers) had joined via recommendation by either a relative within the prison service (2) or someone outside the service (3). This is somewhat surprising given the prevailing idea that prison work runs in families and the beliefs held by PWSL staff about the role of extended family and intergenerational links in recruitment.

The data suggests a basic ignorance about salaries and entitlements or a reluctance to reveal such

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7. Compared to their proportion of the population, Limba were overrepresented amongst the prison officers. But security is the traditional trade of the Limba and this can explain their overrepresentation. There was also an overrepresentation of Krio, but they are generally very active in the civil service. Kono were underrepresented (Personal communication, Mats Utas).

information. A vast majority of respondents either did not know or failed to state how much they earn per month either because they do not actually know or because they are ashamed what a paltry sum it is given the hardship involved.

Approximately seventy-five of the prison officers who participated in the survey lived in staff quarters. A vast majority of the remaining respondents lived in rented accommodation. Some of them indicated entitlement to a housing allowance. Provision of staff quarters has been a high priority in interventions seeking to better the working conditions of prison officers. But surprisingly this study found a negative relationship between staying in staff quarters and job satisfaction. A larger proportion of respondents who stayed in staff quarters indicated that they were not happy being prison officers compared to those who stayed elsewhere. Forty-three percent of those residing in staff quarters indicated dissatisfaction compared with twenty-eight percent not living in staff quarters. Our hypothesis is that acquiring one's own place of residence (even rented) can be seen as a sign of personal achievement and status whereas for those who do live in quarters it is rather a sign of 'stuckness'⁸ and the inescapability of the job.

While the results reported above speak to the basic demographics of the respondents, what follows allows us to access in a little more depth the attitudes and perspectives that officers themselves have about the job. Below, we consider reasons for joining the prison service and levels of satisfaction before turning briefly to the interdependent relations between prison occupants within a highly politicized context.

Reasons for joining

Respondents were asked to state why they joined the service. When we listed the various responses and grouped them in categories we could see that three main reasons emerged. A third of respondents joined the prison service because they felt passionate for the work (30 per cent). Another third joined because they

had no other job option (34 per cent). Around one sixth (17 per cent) of respondents could be categorised as joining because they wanted 'to serve the nation'.⁹ It is striking that over sixty percent of respondents can be situated in almost diametrically opposed categories: thirty percent joining because of love for the job; thirty-four percent because they had no other options. This suggests a sharp divide within the workforce. The remaining respondents reported joining for different family-related reasons such as following in father's footsteps, to protect the family against exploitation, or to generate income for the family.¹⁰

Sixty-two percent of respondents declared a preference for prison work compared to police, military and the fire force, which are typically grouped together as different extensions of the state security apparatus. Most respondents who expressed a preference for prison work attributed that to their fondness or commitment to the job.¹¹ There is some unexplained dissonance between this talk of fondness and commitment and passion for the job and the general impression we have from our more qualitative interactions with staff about disillusionment and low morale. We believe there is the strong probability that those who indicated love for the job, identify strongly with the prison administrative regime and that those who do not are positioned as opposed to the regime,

perhaps due to ethnic affiliation or family ties. Patron-client relations strongly characterize recruitment and selection processes. Further, we see evidence that those who identify with the regime are very possessive, to such a degree that comments like 'Na we yon government' meaning 'this is *our* prison regime,' are common.

Our analysis suggests a link between reason for joining the service and whether the respondents would stay in the service if they were given the opportunity to move. Amongst those, who entered the service due to interest, three out of four would remain if given a choice. Approximately four out of five, who joined because they wanted to serve their nation, would also remain. But more than half of the respondents who

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8. The theme of stuckness was central at a recent conference on confinement held in Copenhagen organised by Aalborg University's Global Refugee Studies programme and DIGNITY: *The Stuck, the Mobile and the Dislocated: Reflections on Life in Ghettos, Slums, Camps and Prisons*. October 30 - Nov 1, 2013.
9. This latter finding matches data about Nigerian prison officer recruits. The idea of serving the nation is strong amongst the paramilitary services in West Africa. What this means exactly for the conduct of everyday prison officer life is less clear.
10. Individuals who fell outside these categories described their reasons for joining as because of sports (2); because it was a calling (2); because of close proximity of prison to place of residence (1); because of a desire to use trade skills (1); because of practical experience (1).
11. 18 per cent would choose military, mostly because of a belief in better conditions and facilities, and for a minority a belief in higher status. 15 per cent would choose police, mostly because of a belief in better conditions and facilities. None of the respondents would choose the fireforce.

joined because they had no other option would leave if given the opportunity.¹²

More than half of the respondents (56 per cent) wished to pursue further studies or career development in a wide range of areas such as tailoring, auto electrics, construction, accounting, computer science, business, law and psychology. There are few opportunities to fulfill such aspirations.

Happiness / job satisfaction

Surprisingly, more than sixty percent of respondents reported that they were happy being prison officers, while approximately forty percent reported that they were not. By posing questions about reasons for joining and current happiness PWSL were interested in understanding motivation and passion for the job. They wanted to know whether this was a job staff had chosen gladly or whether they were constrained to do it as the only available option. PWSL believed that there would likely be a link between the capacity to make decisions about one's own life situation, individual motivation and job satisfaction. They were interested in whether prison officers were *living* their working lives or simply *existing*. Our view today is that prison officers exist rather than live. They exist according to the dictates of their circumstance. They have little control over their working conditions or even their life conditions; their orientation to work can best be characterized as resigned. They are obliged to simply accept their fate. This resonates somewhat with the discourse of Nigerian prison officer recruits who talked repeatedly of the need 'to endure'.¹³ From an outside point of view conditions of service do appear deplorable. Nevertheless, some staff are more comfortable than others. Officers attached to the prison headquarters or the Freetown central prison, for example, seem more motivated compared to those in the rural areas. Those stationed at headquarters

receive more positive attention from the prison administration and enjoy more benefits. They are the first to be considered for promotion and can be identified by the neatness of their uniforms.

Prison officers with higher levels of education tended to be less satisfied than those with lower levels of education. Two thirds of those with junior secondary school reported being happy with their work whilst one third reported being unhappy. The group with senior secondary school education was split in half with regards to happiness at work. Fifty percent were satisfied and fifty percent were not satisfied. Reasons for satisfaction varied. For some it was connected with changes in government regime and changes at the top of the prison hierarchy that made them feel as though their 'time had come'. Having one's own 'man' (see below) in a position of authority can make all the difference to one's possibilities and hence satisfaction; for others it was due to them having been transferred from a particularly remote prison to one more conducive.¹⁴

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Relations of interdependency

Before concluding we would like to briefly address the theme of relationships within the prison. Relations within the prison are highly ambiguous. Sometimes one hears reference to classic 'us versus them' relations. But often and more striking are the accounts of positive, or at least accommodating, attitudes. One experienced officer referred to

himself in relation to prisoners as 'mentor, torchlight, forebearer' and talked about his role:

to see cases speedily sat on, to take sentenced prisoners as your children, to see they are well-fed, listen to their complaints, see that other officers do not encroach on their human rights...

He explained,

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12. We might ask ourselves why the latter figure is not even higher. Perhaps the answer lies in simple resignation? Conditions and circumstances are such that imagination is stifled. The exercise of thinking about 'what if things were different' is seen as a waste of time and energy.
13. Jefferson, A.M. (2004) *Confronted by Practice: towards a critical psychology of prison practices in Nigeria*. Unpublished Phd Thesis. University of Copenhagen.
14. The island prison at Bonthe for example is seen by many officers as a punishment posting though one officer reported pleasure at being posted there because it brought him closer to his kinsfolk. Motivations can vary.

they are in the majority. You have to listen to them. Have to like them, to love them. Then they will like you.

He told how on the numerous times rebels had held him hostage during the civil war that former prisoners pleaded for him. On four of six (!) occasions former prisoners arranged his escape. When asked about the particular threat to prison officers he said, 'If you have been wicked, unkind, callous you could be killed. They would assess you.'

The volatile nature of Sierra Leonean politics is one reason why 'accommodation' and the maintenance of patronage networks even between prisoners and guards are important. Within a political climate where power changes hands unpredictably it is wise to treat at least significant prisoners with discretion.

The prison service itself like other (post-colonial) state institutions is also rather politicised. Networks of grace and favour permeate the work place both in individual institutions and nationally. Below we consider some of the local terms that are used to describe these dynamics in order to give a flavour of the governing logics that permeate the prisons. Authority, power and favour are distributed more often than not according to lines related to kinship, region or ethnicity than according to official policy.¹⁵ 'Mymanism' (referring to 'my man') is one way of referring to this. Another vernacular reference in relation to the distribution of authority is talk of the 'P and G factor' referring to the smoothing of palms with palm oil and goat. The acronym GYM (Get Your Man) is also in common usage with reference to transfers and postings with particular managers keen to have their own people close by. We observed numerous incidences of Officers in Charge and their Second in Commands having common career trajectories. Supplementing 'Getting Your Man' is the notion of 'the Pa's eye' meaning that those who belong to 'the man' also owe 'the man' and one way of repaying the debt is by being the eyes and ears of 'the man' out, for example, in the provinces. In addition, those not in the 'good books' of the 'sitting Pa' are often sent far away to rural postings where opportunities are even fewer than in the provincial capitals. Under such conditions there is little solidarity to be found. Solidarity can exist temporarily in relation to

illegal transactions but it is typically rather unstable. For example, during illegal transactions the prisoner must always acquiesce to the officer's demands. Even if the inmate feels cheated he must behave in a way not to arouse the slightest suspicion because he is dependent on the officer for future transactions. It is also the guard who decides who visits or does not or decides whether to take disciplinary action or not. In a radically discretionary environment the officer is always in the ascendancy and our sense is that the slightest opportunities to exploit are taken.

Conclusion: paradoxical puzzles

In conclusion, the survey results combined with our collective experience of interacting with prison staff in researcher and activist capacities leaves us with a rather depressing impression. Undoubtedly there are committed prison officers within the Sierra Leonean Prison Service; we meet them regularly. But statements about love for the job ring hollow in the general light of our findings and experience. In fact, it might be more accurate to speak of shadows than light. For us, the life of the Sierra Leonean prison officer remains a paradoxical puzzle. We observe passion and commitment alongside pessimism and demoralisation. Surprisingly, in the face of deprivation and disparity some officers are able to muster the courage to say, 'I am happy'. But this, in itself, is perhaps a damning indictment of their own circumstances, their stuckness, and the singular lack of available options. Conditions, circumstances and politics are such that without hefty investment in the sector¹⁶ then resignation and demoralisation are likely to continue to cast their shadow over the shards of optimistic light that do occasionally break through, for example the enthusiasm of new recruits and the willingness of the Authorities to open their doors to outside agencies like PWSL. Our hope is that such enthusiasm might be nurtured, that individual merit might become a criteria for promotion and that the Prison Service in Sierra Leone will continue to be open to outside scrutiny and collaboration. Perhaps such small steps might move the service in a direction that will result in renewed prison climates where the shared spaces occupied by inmates and staff might at the very least become more humane.

15. For more details on these dynamics of patronage (and on the entangled relations between PWSL and the Prison Authorities) see Jefferson (2013) 'The situated production of legitimacy' in Tankebe and Liebling's *Legitimacy and Criminal Justice. An international exploration*. OUP.

16. Here we mean the justice sector broadly speaking including a rethinking of the purpose of incarceration and consideration of the possibilities of diversion and decarceration as a means of reducing the impact of inhumane conditions.