

## Belarus Female Prisoners Endure Abuse, Threats

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TALLINN, Estonia, Antanina Kanavalava, 37, spent four years in a Belarusian penal colony as a political prisoner, enduring harsh conditions, abuse, and threats to her parental rights. Authorities nearly revoked custody of her two young children during her imprisonment.

While in prison, Kanavalava's eyesight deteriorated from sewing military uniforms in poorly lit rooms. She was denied basic hygiene products and forced to use rags in unsanitary conditions. "Women in prison go through hell and can't even complain to anyone," Kanavalava said. "The head of the prison told me straight out that people like me should be put against the wall and shot."

Belarus currently holds nearly 1,200 political prisoners, many of whom face unheated cells, isolation, and limited medical care. Human rights officials say women are particularly vulnerable. Pavel Sapelka, a lawyer with the Viasna Human Rights Center, said female prisoners often experience abuse, humiliation, threats of losing children, and neglect of medical problems. One notable case involved Hanna Kandratsenka, who died of cervical cancer months after release, having been denied treatment while imprisoned.

Independent U.N. experts describe Belarusian female prisons as “appalling,” noting a “blatant lack of accountability” for mistreatment. President Alexander Lukashenko, in power for over three decades, has faced criticism for suppressing dissent through arrests, detentions, and the closure of independent media and NGOs. The 2020 disputed election sparked widespread protests, with more than 65,000 people arrested.

Among those imprisoned are Nobel laureate Ales Bialiatski and opposition leader Maria Kolesnikova. Although Lukashenko released over 300 political prisoners last year, arrests continue in what human rights groups describe as a revolving door of repression.

Kanavalava, a confidant of opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, was sentenced to five and a half years for “participating in mass riots.” Authorities threatened to place her 6-year-old son and 4-year-old daughter in an orphanage. She described her imprisonment as “real torture” because she could not see her children.

Other former prisoners report similar conditions. Palina Sharenda-Panasiuk, 50, spent 270 days in solitary confinement and was washed with warm tea due to a lack of hot water. Viktoryia Kulsha endured repeated physical abuse and hunger strikes to protest mistreatment in Penal Colony No. 24. Natallia Dulina, 60, recalled being placed in a “shame cage” at Penal Colony No. 4, forced to stand outdoors for hours as punishment.

Former prisoners describe grueling work, 12–14 hours per day, 24-hour surveillance, limited bathing, and routine strip searches. Authorities exploit vulnerabilities to humiliate prisoners, creating severe physical and psychological strain.

Kanavalava now lives in Warsaw with her family, but says the ordeal continues. “The fear of losing my own children haunts me even in my dreams,” she said. “It is difficult to explain to children the high price that Belarusians pay for their desire to be free.”