Senators are calling for stronger government action to enhance legal support for children accused of crimes, urging immediate reforms to improve the judicial process for minors.

“We must address the delays in the justice system and ensure that children receive proper representation,” said Senator Adrie Umuhire, president of the Human Rights Commission. She acknowledged some positive developments, such as the establishment of laws to protect children, but stressed that significant challenges remain.

During a recent Senate plenary session, lawmakers reviewed a report from the Commission on Social Affairs and Human Rights, which outlined the activities of the National Commission on Human Rights for 2023-2024. Senator Umuhire recognized the progress made but emphasized the urgent need for faster action. “Children are the future of this country, and their cases must be handled swiftly and fairly,” she remarked.

Senator Umuhire highlighted several persistent issues, including the delays in juvenile cases and the troubling practice of trying minors as adults. “Children are often treated as adults in court, even when they committed offenses as minors,” she pointed out. “This must change.” She also noted that delays are often caused by lawyers’ failure to attend hearings, and the technology used in juvenile trials is frequently ill-suited for children.

Senator Clotilde Mukakarangwa echoed the call for reform, suggesting the need for specialized lawyers and judges for juvenile cases, similar to how pediatricians are trained to care for children’s health. “Just as we have doctors who specialize in children’s well-being, we need judges and lawyers who are specifically trained in juvenile justice,” she emphasized. Clotilde further recommended that judges visit detention centers to gain a firsthand understanding of the conditions children face. “You cannot represent someone you haven’t met,” she said.

Another concern raised by the senators was the low pay for lawyers representing children in court. One lawyer shared that the compensation for handling juvenile cases is very low, with lawyers receiving only 400,000 RWF per case, barely enough to cover travel costs. “This small amount leads to frustration and burnout among lawyers,” the lawyer said. “Sometimes payments are delayed for months, which makes it harder to provide proper legal support.”

Senator John Bonds Bideri suggested that the Ministry of Justice work more closely with the Bar Association to improve the handling of juvenile cases. “We need to support our lawyers and judges so they can effectively handle these cases,” he said. He also recommended exploring alternative forms of punishment for children, other than sending them to prison.

Senator Pelagie Uwera emphasized the long-term impact of wronging a child. “When a child is wronged, it affects their entire future,” she said. “We must find alternative ways to help children rehabilitate, like keeping them with their families and in school, instead of sending them to prison.”

To address these issues, senators are urging the government to take immediate action. “We need to increase compensation for lawyers who represent children, provide specialized judges and lawyers, and ensure that cases involving children are handled quickly and fairly,” said Senator Umuhire. These changes, they believe, are necessary to give children the support and opportunities they need for a better future.