

In her aunt's house: women in prison in the Middle East

According to an Arab saying, 'Prison is for real men' (*al-sijn lil-jad'an*). But it was also a place for women. The development of female imprisonment sheds light not only on the cultural and social meanings of the prison in the Middle Eastern context, but on how its acculturation intersected with indigenous attitudes towards women and crime.

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Imprisonment in the Middle East blossomed during the 19th century, supplanting older practices of corporal and capital punishment and financial penalties. The confinement of women was not a new phenomenon; previously it had existed within families on a personalized basis. While the traditional women's quarters, the harem, has long had a grip on the western imagination, lesser known institutions such as the *Dar al-Thiqa* (house of trust) – where couples were confined by order of the mufti to work out marital difficulties – existed in Tunisia from the 16th century. Another customary practice, the *Dar Jawad*, a place for the confinement of a disobedient or rebellious woman, represented a more openly repressive instrument of the patriarchal order. By the late 18th century, these practices had extended to women's prisons such as the *Dar 'Adil* (House of Justice), presumably in response to the perceived threat of social deviance and greater insecurity among state authorities. Their emergence marks the beginning of a new development even if the continued use of the word *dar* (house) makes clear the domestic lineage of the institution.

As western political power encroached upon the Middle East, it sought to exert its 'civilising' influence on state institutions and governance. Prisons were particularly targeted. In 1851 the British government conducted a damning survey of Ottoman prisons, but singled out the separate imprisonment of women as one of the few causes for praise, something which one official put down to 'eastern delicacy'. The widespread practice of the time was to hold convicted women in the house of their religious leaders, whether imam, rabbi, or priest, a married state official, the *Bayt al-wali* ('House of the Governor') in Egypt, the guardian of prostitutes in Jerusalem, or even the jailer's family where women were required to per-



Class A inmate in Cairo Prison, 1950s
Prisons Administration, Cairo Prison, Cairo, 1955

form domestic service for the term of their sentence.

Within prisons, the situation was far from uniform and segregation was not always observed. While the prison at Damanhur in the Nile Delta boasted a separate annex for women, others simply confined women to a room in the men's prison. Sometimes women were imprisoned with men, as at Salonica; at Alexandretta, they were occasionally chained because of the lack of a proper prison. Nevertheless, with the progressive consolidation of state institutions, larger scale women's prisons became an increasingly common feature, particularly in centres of the Ottoman Empire, such as the *Zindan* in Istanbul. In Egypt, new women's prisons were built in Bulaq and Shibin al-Kom in the 1890s while at Cairo Prison they were housed in a separate wing. In Algeria, the French administration converted the *Lazaret*, the old hospital in Algiers, into the main women's prison with separate sections for long and short-term prisoners, for those awaiting trial and young detainees.

Across the Middle East, women were proportionally less prominent in prisons than, for example, in France. From the early 20th century women represented between 2 and 5% of all prisoners in Egyptian prisons – a proportion that stayed consistent over the following decades – compared to 12-18% in French prisons during the last quarter of the 19th century. (Elsewhere in the region, the figures seem comparable, although in Turkey the numbers approached 10% in the 1930s). The female prison population reflected the broad character of female society outside: more than 90% Muslim, drawn from the poorer classes, almost entirely illiterate. Married women numbered less than half of all women prisoners though they were more prominent in local than central prisons, suggesting they were held for less serious offences. Prostitutes numbered about a third of all prisoners in central prisons.

Conditions and work

Prison conditions for women varied widely in the 19th century. There was less corporal punishment and women sometimes enjoyed greater comforts: in Algerian prisons, women slept on beds instead of mattresses. Abuses no doubt occurred. Violation of inmates were reported in the women's prison in Damascus; in Beirut, jailers were accused of attempting to convert women to Islam. Other prisons did not segregate the sexes – a great humiliation in a sexually segregated society. In Egypt under British occupation, rights for female prisoners were enshrined in the prison regulations of 1884, which stipulated special consideration for pregnant women and those with young children, and that only female officers search

Female Ward,
Central Prison Cairo
c. 1908 from Arnold
Wright, *Twentieth
Century Impressions
of Egypt*



women prisoners. Women were later exempted from whipping and being put in irons, or, if pregnant, from execution. As with male prisoners, women of higher social status could receive better treatment than those of lower social standing or prostitutes, but this was not routine. By virtue of the Capitulations, foreign women enjoyed better prison conditions; after the abolition of extraterritorial rights, new regulations in 1949 instituted differential treatment for Egyptian women, categorized as class A or B, depending on their social class.

Women were an integral part of the Egyptian penal labour system. From the late 1820s convict labour became part of the programme of economic modernization pursued by Muhammad Ali and women, while not sent to convict prisons, were sentenced to hard labour. By 1856 their numbers required a special workplace: a textile workshop (*iplikhane*) was established at Bulaq in the industrial centre of Cairo. In effect, they became the seamstresses of the prison administration, making clothes for prison guards and inmates. In the *Lazaret* women were employed sewing or making matchboxes. Such work was squarely within the traditional definition of women's activities. Education for women prisoners in Egypt in the 1940s included the teaching of housekeeping and embroidery.

Offending public order

The offences for which women were imprisoned tell us much about the social position of, and expectations placed on women. In Tunisia in the 1860s, women were imprisoned for debauchery and violence, theft and debt in roughly equal proportion. Forty years later in Egypt, the main offences were assault, theft and a wide range of minor violations. That women were found guilty of adultery out of proportion to their numbers is unsurprising, but their conviction in a disproportionate number of defamation cases, an offence of the verbally strong but physically weak, is intriguing. The imprisonment of women for political offences illuminates female participa-

tion in public life; with the development of mass politics, women were detained as anti-colonial nationalists, communists and Islamists. Women were imprisoned not only for offences they had committed, but because of their association with those who had. The principle of collective punishment applied in Algeria by the French, employed particularly in dealing with so-called bandit tribes, meant women suffered internment, relocation and reclusion. Women were also imprisoned when the authorities were unable to apprehend a male family member, or joined their husbands in prison because of economic dependence. Such cases underline the dependent status of women propagated by the judicial system.

Women in prison were not only prisoners. Female guards were widely employed as early as the mid-19th century even if some women's prisons, such as those in Iran in the late 1920s, preferred elderly guards. As visitors to inmates, women provided social contact and sustenance, particularly before the state provided food to prisoners. As the mothers, wives and sisters of prisoners (and even, on occasion, of guards) women were at times vocal in demonstrating and protesting injustices of the system.

Uneven reform

Despite authorities' unanimity on the need for gender segregation in prisons, women did not significantly figure in discussions on prison reform, perhaps due to their relatively small numbers and their marginality within the institution. While a reformatory was set up for male recidivists in Egypt in 1907, no equivalent institution was established for women repeat offenders. Girls were the exception: a reformatory at Giza testified to the belief that youths were more malleable than adult criminals. Public concern with prison conditions, particularly as they affected women, had to wait for women's associations and organizations to take them up. The Society to Stop Crime and Improve Prisons set up in Beirut by Adalayd Rishani in 1928 conducted prison inspections and

delivered clean clothes to inmates. In the 1940s the Iranian Women's Party sought and received permission to inspect women in prison.

Little work has been done on the culture of women's prisons but, as with men's prisons, it is clear that there were established hierarchies. Drug dealers, for example, were at the top of the prisoner pecking order. Emotional and physical relationships between inmates moderated interactions in the prison. Tattoos, such as the name of a husband, were used to emphasize a personal connection, or a professional affiliation, with the symbol of a woman with swords being favoured by prostitutes. Women prisoners made collective demands on authorities who alternatively repressed, negotiated with and accommodated them.

The phenomenon of women in prison in the Middle East offers many complex readings. The prison memoirs of activists such as Nawal al-Sa'dawi and Farida al-Naqqash speak of the relationship between political and non-political prisoners, between women guards and prisoners, between literate political prisoners and uneducated guards. Women were more marginal in prison than their male counterparts, and suffered greater social stigma. Political prisoners suffered a sense of reproach for 'neglecting' their proper duty, their children. Created and controlled by men, the prison system was not separate from society outside, but permeated by its political and social relations. Full of contradictions, it was an encompassing, all-embracing male institution that could still be conceived of in feminine terms: the 'aunt's house' (*dar khaltu*) or the 'great vagina' (*bou daffa*). ◀

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