

Not so Notorious: Crimes Committed by Bahraini Women in the Kingdom of Bahrain

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Introduction*

A notorious female criminal captures the public's attention. She is discussed over tea and coffee, and is the subject of editorials and letters in the local press. The serious nature of criminal behavior shocks and – for better or worse – simultaneously fascinates and entertains. As psychologist Jack Katz has suggested, consumption of crime-related media acts as a “ritual moral exercise” in which people work out their own moral issues vicariously.¹ From this phenomenological perspective, news reports of crime become sites in public life where the moral meaning of crime and punishment is created, consumed, and recreated.

In a country with a low crime rate relative to other developing nations, female offenders are rare in Bahrain. In the last two decades only one Bahraini female was ever convicted of pre-meditated murder. Female criminals in Bahrain are overwhelmingly from other countries and are largely non-Arab. According to statistics from the women's prison in Isa Town, Bahrain, less than 5% of women detained in 2004 were Bahraini nationals, and less than 10% hailed from Bahrain or another Arab country.²

The following analysis shows that on average Bahraini

women are rarely crime suspects, and when they are, the allegations almost always involve non-violent crimes. As such, locating a “notorious” Bahraini female criminal to include in this special issue on Arab female criminals is a challenging task.

Bahrain and Crime: An Overview

From a public security standpoint, Bahrain, a small archipelago in the Arabian Gulf with a population of approximately 700,000 inhabitants, is considered a relatively peaceful country. According to the Ministry of the Interior, there were only 7 murders committed in 2004. In 2003, there was one murder and an average of 4.4 murders in the previous five years, all involving male offenders.

Political unrest in the form of demonstrations occasionally occurs, primarily involving Shi'ites, who make up approximately 60 percent of the total population. Protests have primarily been directed at the Sunni ruling cabinet over discrimination in employment and proposed changes in the country's family law.³

Like most other Arab countries, the criminal penal code is based on a Continental-style civil code. Under Bahraini law, criminal offenses are divided into two major cate-

gories: *jinha* and *junaiya*. *Jinha* are less serious crimes which are punishable by three years of prison time or less and include such things as petty theft and adultery. The police and victims have discretion as to whether reported cases of *jinha* should be sent for prosecution or whether a resolution suitable to the parties involved can be accomplished at the police station through mediation. *Junaiya* are serious offenses, such as murder and kidnapping, which are punishable by more than three years in prison and, whenever alleged, are always subject to public, prosecutorial investigations.

In addition, the penal code criminalizes certain social behaviors, such as public displays of immoral behavior.⁴ These crimes are mainly infractions punishable by fines. Many of the infractions would not be considered criminal in western countries where civil law reigns. Sharia-based (religious) law primarily concerns family law, and has provisions regarding marriage, divorce, child custody and inheritance.

Methodology

This article is based on data collection from a doctoral dissertation on policewomen working in the Women's Police Directorate in Bahrain. The data are ethnographic and archival in nature. Available official records from the Ministry of the Interior and the Women's Police Directorate were analyzed, followed by local newspaper accounts of crimes reported in the *Gulf Daily News* and *Akhbar al-Khaleej* between the years 1985 and 2005. Specific attention was paid to the most recent years available in the *Gulf Daily News* which are 2004 and 2005. Second, over a four-month period in 2005, detailed field observations were made of policewomen interviewing female suspects, in English and Arabic, in a number of the kingdom's local police stations. Finally, unstructured bilingual interviews with Bahraini policewomen were conducted about the extent of crime committed by Bahraini females.

Official Crime Data

In Bahrain, as in nearly all other societies, women are more likely to be victims of crime than perpetrators. Violent crimes against women are typically under-reported in any society, as they most often occur at the hands of spouses or close relatives whereby a variety of factors, such as economic dependence and social stigma, may cause victims to remain silent. According to the Ministry of the Interior, 649 cases of domestic violence against women were investigated in 2004 out of the 32,087 crimes actually reported to police. In 2003, there were 612 investigations into domestic violence against women. However, as suggested above, these numbers are most likely a gross underestimation of actual cases.

Female criminals in Bahrain overwhelmingly commit non-violent crimes. In addition, they are largely non-Bahraini, non-Arab expatriates. According to prison statistics, of the 2,152 women who entered prisons in 2004, either awaiting trial or serving a sentence, 71.5% were South Asians, primarily from Bangladesh, India, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Thailand and Pakistan. Of these, the majority were detained on immigration violations such as illegal over-staying of a visa and running away from a sponsor,⁵ or prostitution and theft.

Based on observation and interviews with policewomen, a significant amount of the charges against female South Asians are leveled against women working as domestic workers in Bahraini families, although no official statistics about incarcerated domestic workers are available. Many human rights groups, such as the Bahraini Migrant Workers Society, as well as local newspapers and many of the South Asian embassies, have extensively documented hundreds of cases involving domestic workers running away from sponsors due to physical and sexual abuse, being overworked and their salaries being withheld.

According to the Ministry of the Interior, drug trafficking is one offense category in which Bahraini and Gulf nationals exhibit a slight majority (approximately 51% of drug trafficking arrests). However, in 2004 only 11 traffickers were women and only 4 of those were Bahraini.⁶ Of Bahraini women detained in prison in 2004, nearly half of them were facing prostitution charges and a quarter of them were jailed for adultery, suggesting that Bahraini women are most often incarcerated for crimes related to socially deviant sexual behavior.

The above data are similar to local female crime rates throughout the Gulf region. For example, according to a recent study on crimes by women in Fujairah conducted by Amina Mubarak Abdullah al-Dhahiri of United Arab Emirates (UAE) University, adultery is the most common crime representing half of known offenses, followed by prostitution (13.3%). Furthermore, more than half of detainees were non-Arab Asians. Furthermore, 40% of the female criminals were divorced.⁷ According to al-Dhahiri's interpretation, female criminals in Fujairah are victims of the social and economic disintegration of the family, driving them to commit crime as a solution to their economic problems and the social stigmas they face.

Crimes by Bahraini Women Reported in the Gulf Daily News

The leading English-language daily newspaper in Bahrain, the *Gulf Daily News*, regularly reports crime stories which are largely accounts of arrests for alleged crimes. Although this does not provide a representative sample of alleged crimes known to authorities, it does provide a

snapshot of potential crimes that are brought to popular attention. In the Gulf Daily News, articles about summary crime statistics are rare, most likely due to the data that is made available to the public from the Ministry of the Interior, and the inclination of newspapers to report only the most serious or violent crimes ("if it bleeds, it leads").

In a content analysis of all crimes reported during the years 2004 and 2005, 57 alleged female criminals were identified as Bahraini and an additional 18 were citizens of another Arab country. Over 1/3 of them faced charges of prostitution, followed by ten women accused of assault, nine accused of theft, and two were accused of attempted murder. Numerous articles outlined police stings against prostitution rings, including one involving an Egyptian restaurant manageress who allegedly forced her expatriate waitresses into prostitution,⁸ and one about the capture of a 19-year-old Bahraini prostitute who claimed that her family pushed her into prostitution after a divorce, which had left her financially bereft.⁹

Interestingly, crimes involving allegations of sorcery are reported in detail, with numerous columns dedicated to these incidents. In one incident, a jeweler claimed he had been hypnotized by three Arab women who made strange gestures with their hands as he was giving them change for their purchase. After regaining consciousness, he realized that approximately BD580 (US\$1,566) had been stolen from the till. The three Arab women remain at large.¹⁰ Another woman was accused of sorcery by her estranged husband who testified in court that his wife had unleashed demons which were harassing him, his mother and his housemaid.¹¹ In later proceedings, the criminal court abandoned the charges.¹²

Ethnographic Observations of Bahraini Female Offenders

Policewomen in Bahrain work primarily on cases involving female and juvenile victims and offenders. Despite spending approximately four months observing policewomen at work at various police stations across Bahrain, it was found that just over a dozen cases (out of approximately 150 observed) involved Bahraini offenders.

Junaiya: Serial Kidnapping and Theft

Zain,¹³ a 27-year-old psychiatric home nurse, was convicted of kidnapping children at wedding receptions and

stealing their gold jewelry. Following the same method in at least five such incidents in 2005, she would pose as a guest at weddings and lure young girls with sweets into the bathroom or into her car where she would take their gold. She later sold it at the Manama gold suq. At the time that this was being written, Zain had been convicted of two of the eleven charges against her, and sentenced to two years and then three months in prison, respectively. She told the police that her motivation was a desperate need for money, and her nurse's salary of BD450 per month (\$1,215) was insufficient. Only gold from her last heist was actually recovered by police.

During one court proceeding, Zain was accompanied by her husband, brother and mother with whom she appeared to have close ties. In addition, she had a lawyer on retainer, which caused one policewoman to speculate that she could only afford this from the proceeds received from the thefts. Despite Zain's confession which was submitted as evidence by police, in court she denied responsibility for the crimes, saying that the confession was extracted from her after a beating (a charge the police denied and the court did not entertain).

According to policewomen, this was not the first time Zain had been brought into the criminal justice system. At age 14, she was found in violation of the juvenile statute prohibiting running away from home. She had been found by police in the street with local male teenagers during the late hours of the night and early morning.

Jinha: Adultery

Khadija¹⁴ arrived at an urban police station after receiving a summons for allegations of adultery. Her son reported her to the police and provided a digital picture as evidence. The picture shows Khadija in a naked embrace with an Indian man who lived nearby. Khadija adamantly denied the accusations, telling policewomen that the picture had been manufactured. According to Khadija, her son was angry about the amount of money his father was spending on her so that she could live in a separate apartment (Khadija and her husband were separated, but not divorced). She said that her son believed this money was better spent on him.

According to the policewoman, this case was later dropped by the son after police mediation between the mother and son at the police station. As one policewoman explained, "Most of the cases involving accusa-

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tions by family members are withdrawn by the plaintiffs," indicating the role non-prosecutorial solutions play in handling female crimes that occur in a domestic context.

Infractions: Having an Affair and Committing an Immoral Act

According to the Ministry of the Interior, 56% of all criminal cases in Bahrain in 2004 were related to social behavior. Of the few cases that were observed ethnographically, most fell into this category of offenses, and are not punishable by prison time.

Mona¹⁵ was summoned to one of the Kingdom's police stations to answer to a complaint registered by her husband. He believed that she was having a romantic affair with another man because he had caught her making phone calls late at night on her mobile. He submitted a copy of her mobile phone records from the previous month. Mona, shocked and concerned about the allegation, explained that she is a customer service representative at a major bank in Manama. The job often required phone communications after normal business hours. She explained that her husband was merely being paranoid and that the complaint was baseless. She pointed out that the after-hours calls were always made to different phone numbers.

At the time this was being written, the case remains open. The policewoman who took Mona's statement indicated that, although it is difficult to find the truth in conflicts between spouses, which are based on accusations, it is suspicious that Mona was taking client phone calls so late at night when she should be spending time with her family. In addition, the policewoman noted that such accusations usually precede divorce proceedings in the family court. "Spouses make these accusations here first in order to set up their case for divorce."

In another case, a policewoman, as part of the new community-oriented police force in Bahrain, described how an unmarried 18-year-old woman called Noora¹⁶ was brought into a suburban police station by a policeman after having been seen publicly with a 20-year-old man. The couple was reportedly "together" in public at the suq, but was not seen displaying any affection towards each other. "I felt like it was a lot of drama for nothing; it caused the girl a lot of fear and anxiety for nothing," the policewoman explained. Although the highest-raking

female officer in the station ultimately let Noora go with a warning, the policewoman indicated that the situation could have been reported to the girl's parents, causing the family pain and social stigma, not to mention a criminal case being initiated. She added that in these situations police discretion plays an important role because full enforcement of certain minor offenses can actually cause more harm than good.

Is there a Notorious Bahraini Female Offender?

Of the above ethnographic observations, only Zain's crimes were covered in the local press. Although the cases provided insight as to how women's social behavior is controlled through criminal law enforcement, none of them seemed particularly juicy or scandalous.

Likewise, in the Gulf Daily News stories from 2004 and 2005, female offenders were reported to be non-violent. With the exception of serial schemes like Zain's, which

involve significant financial loss to the victim and involve child victims, stories about female offenders primarily receive press attention if they involve sexual and religious deviant behavior such as prostitution, adultery and other legally immoral acts. Women's alleged manipulative and secretive nature in conducting clandestine sexual affairs receive the most attention. Allegations from estranged husbands of "sex and sorcery sessions" took top billing.¹⁷

Unable to find a single case involving a Bahraini woman that truly captured the public's imagination in the last two years, I asked several policewomen and a policeman, if

they knew of a case in Bahrain's modern history that might qualify. Each recalled the following case from 1987 and referred me to the archives of the Gulf Daily News and the Arabic language paper, *Akhbar al-Khaleej*.

Wafa'a Jassim: Bahrain's most Notorious Female Criminal

The most notorious female criminal in modern, Bahraini history was herself a victim of violent crime. The story unfolded in a dramatic fashion in the press, starting with the discovery of the victim's body in the desert area of Sakhir on June 5, 1987. Waleed Buallai's body was marred by tire tracks and a knife wound in his lower abdomen. Meanwhile, his missing Range Rover led the authorities to appeal to the public for help in locating it.¹⁸ The car was later found submerged in the sea near Asry

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dry dock.¹⁹ On June 14, 1987, an arrest was made in the case, but the public had to wait several more days before the police revealed that a married couple, Abdulrahman Abdullah Musafar and Wafa'a Jassim Malallah, were allegedly responsible.

The couple was charged with jointly committing a premeditated murder among other charges,²⁰ and prosecutors called for the death penalty.²¹ During the trial, newspapers exposed graphic details of the crime based on confessions given by both the suspects and forensic evidence. Trial testimonies revealed that Wafa'a Jassim met Buallai at a Bahrain country club where she worked and he was a member. According to Jassim's testimony, and backed up by a forensic psychiatric evaluation, she had been violently raped by Buallai over an 18-month period. During this ordeal, he threatened to kill her sister if she did not continue to have sex with him.

At one point, Jassim asked Buallai to marry her because he had taken her virginity. He refused and stated that unless she continued to have sex with him, he would tell her family and friends that she was no longer a virgin. Jassim eventually married co-defendant Musafar, but Buallai continued to request meetings with her.²² According to Jassim's testimony, she did not report the rapes to the authorities out of her fear of Buallai and his threats.²³

Jassim confided in her husband, Musafar, that Buallai had repeatedly raped her and that she desired to take revenge by killing him and she asked him to help her. According to Musafar's testimony, he initially said he would not do it because the penalty for revenge murder in Islam is death. However, shortly before the crime, he changed his mind. The couple then agreed to lure Buallai into the desert on the pretense that Jassim wanted to have sex with him, and kill him by beating him with a baseball bat.²⁴

According to the defendants, and backed by forensic evidence, on the night of June 4, 1987, Jassim encouraged Buallai to drink until he became totally intoxicated. She then told him to drive out to a remote area of Sakhir where she had secretly agreed to meet with Musafar and carry on with the plan. Buallai was lying on a carpet in the desert asking Jassim to make love to him when, in a change of plans, Jassim stabbed Buallai "below the

navel" with a knife she had found in his car.²⁵ Shortly thereafter, Musafar arrived to the scene in his car. Buallai staggered bleeding. Musafar hit him in the head repeatedly with the baseball bat until it broke.

Thinking that Buallai was dead, the couple attempted to leave the scene, but Buallai began to stir and show signs of life. Musafar then repeatedly ran over him with the deceased's car until he died. They left Buallai's body in the desert and dumped his car in the sea. The trial judge found both guilty of premeditated murder, and sentenced Jassim to ten years imprisonment and Musafar to a life sentence.²⁶ According to the judge, Jassim's sentence was reduced from life imprisonment to ten years because she had been Buallai's rape victim.²⁷ Jassim has since finished her sentence and has been released.

The case captured the public's imagination and triggered

some soul-searching about violence against women, and whether revenge killings by female rape victims should be tolerated. Next to daily accounts of trial testimonies, a series of articles about the prevalence of rape in Bahrain was published by The Gulf Daily News, including a tally of known rape cases since 1980 (20 cases), as well as anonymous first person accounts of rape incidents. A special feature on the role of policewomen in investigating rape cases and descriptions of how forensic evidence is collected during rape investigations were also published.²⁸ Jassim, always referred to as a "housewife" despite her prior employment history, was construed as a traumatized rape victim whose scarred psychological

state drove her to kill. Her story sparked a kind of feminist consciousness whereby the violence that women faced from boyfriends, husbands and other family members behind closed doors, was emerging into the light of day.

In *Akhbar al-Khaleej*, the case rarely left the front page and coverage tended to focus on the graphic details of the crime, its revenge aspect (*intiqam*), and the punishment (*aquba*) appropriate under both criminal law and Islamic traditional law.²⁹ Special emphasis was placed on Musafar's testimony, suggesting that Jassim's overwhelming need for revenge and her manipulative talent in convincing him to help her were the true driving forces behind the crime. Jassim was portrayed as an

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irrational woman, and Musafar was caught between trying to control her irrationality, and wanting revenge himself for the harm that had now befallen him through marriage. The central role of a woman's virginity as a symbol of her and her family's honor is a traditional, cultural value in the Arabian Gulf which remains palpable until the present day, despite the multitude of cultural influences from Western media and entertainment. Jassim's desire to take part in the killing of Buallai herself, and not leave it to her male kin, represents a variation on this tradition.

According to the police talking to me about the case, the informal chat in living rooms and cafes around Bahrain was even more tantalizing than what the press had to offer. Bahraini popular opinion reflected a sense that Buallai deserved what had happened to him and that, as one put it, his death was "good riddance." This was echoed by Jassim's lawyer when he argued before the court that Buallai "caused his own death" by perpetrating the brutal rapes.³⁰ The defense attempted to capitalize on public sentiment and sway the trial in its favor, driving the prosecution to make an unsuccessful bid for the trial to go behind closed doors.³¹

However, what went unreported in the newspapers yet was widely known was that Buallai had a reputation of being an adulterer having relations with many women. As a friend of the victim put it, "...he was a man who had many relationships with women."³² Moreover, he had a reputation of forcing women into sex, and one of my police informants suggested that perhaps the government knew this before the murder. According to Bahrainis who remember the crime, Buallai worked for Bahrain Defense Force (BDF) and may have been protected by the military establishment – from reasons of apprehension and accountability – for earlier incidents of sexual violence against women.

Interestingly, newspaper accounts never revealed the victim's occupation, ostensibly to downplay any suspicion that Buallai's prior behavior had been ignored by the BDF. Gulf Daily News accounts consistently referred to him as a "father of two"³³ and Akhbar al-Khaleej referred to him as a Bahraini "citizen."³⁴ Among Bahrainis, the informal discussions of Jassim's murderous intiqam centered on whether worldly justice could ever accomplish

the judicial principles of Islam given the nature of political and military authority in Bahrain. The murder case essentially became a fill-in-the-blank critique depending on one's political perspective. Buallai got away with rape for a long period, and Jassim and Mustafar embarked on vigilante justice, because perhaps – at that time – the government was seen to be corrupt, patriarchal, unrepresentative (Sunni, when the majority are Shi'ite), authoritarian, and un-democratic.

A single, high-profile case can bring out more debate and soul-searching in society than a string of small cases or the welcomed governmental transparency of official crime statistics. Public attitudes are not the result of a cold determination of the facts. This fallacy of a "rational" and "concerned" public lies at the heart of many criminologists' frustration with the media. Instead, public opinion is primarily, and perhaps exclusively, the product of concerns with social power and the related symbolism evoked by crime and punishment.³⁵

Jassim's revenge killing was a morality play for Bahrainis and reflects Katz's notion of ritual moral sagas published for mass consumption. Many asked themselves and each other, referring to Jassim and Musafar, 'What would you have done if you were her, or him?' Answers to this question revealed one's orientation in the socio-political climate of the time. Indeed, from this notorious crime and the surrounding buzz in the media and in cafes, a snapshot of the concerns of the Bahraini public – the meaning of justice in Islam, the legitimacy of the criminal justice system, and the problem of violence against

women – gained visibility.

Conclusion

Since 1987, such a crime has not been repeated. Although many crimes perpetrated by expatriate women have captured public attention, such as an Ethiopian housemaid's brutal slaying of her employer with a machete, Bahraini women are rarely caught committing acts of violence. Bahraini women continue to commit non-violent crimes primarily in violation of social behavior laws. Media constructions of Bahraini female offenders tend to highlight the sexual and religious deviance in their alleged criminal behaviors. With the exception of Wafa'a Jassim, Bahraini female criminals are overwhelmingly not so notorious.

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Endnotes

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5. Unlike other parts of the world, Gulf countries have individual sponsorship laws whereby workers from abroad are sponsored by a specific employer, often for a two-year contract. If the worker no longer reports to work during the two years – or in the case of housemaids, to the sponsor's home – that individual has violated the law.
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25. I killed man after attacks-housewife (1987, July 5). *Gulf Daily News*.
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