

Women Behind Bars: Three Cases from Lebanon

■ Farah Hammoud

Social Worker, Tripoli Prison for Women

The testimonies below were collected directly by Farah Hammoud, the social worker in charge of overseeing the implementation of the project entitled "Rehabilitation, Vocational Training, and Reinsertion Programs for Women in Tripoli Prison" jointly organized by the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World and Dar Al-Amal.

Case 1

"What does the government benefit from locking up a woman of 59?" Kadiriyyah

It happened during the chaotic war years when all hell was breaking loose. Kadiriyyah's son had raped her niece, and she couldn't bear the idea that he refused to marry her (an act that would have absolved him, according to the Lebanese Penal Code), so she killed him. She killed him at a time when the Lebanese government was practically dysfunctional, and individuals were rarely held accountable for their crimes.

Many years passed before her crime was eventually reported. She was imprisoned in the early 1990's at the age of 50. In prison, a new chapter of her life began. She began to suffer from diabetes and asthma. After having lived a life of luxury, she was now forced to live off the lit-

tle money her daughter was sending her, which was barely sufficient to meet her everyday needs.

Kadiriyyah's problems started escalating when her daughter abruptly cut short her visits after hearing the rumor that Kadiriyyah was having a sexual relationship with a young female inmate. Her daughter believed the rumors and immediately condemned her mother without inquiring into the matter. According to her daughter, Kadiriyyah was unworthy of respect or sympathy.

As a result, Kadiriyyah, who was at that time approaching her sixties, had to earn her living by crocheting flowers. The less her daughter visited her, the more sad and lonely Kadiriyyah felt. Furthermore, the more deprived she was, the more attached to money and work she became.

These events took a toll on her health and her asthma attacks worsened. She became reserved about the real reasons her daughter was no longer visiting. She often came up with justifications such as "nobody likes prisoners" and "people take pleasure in your suffering and nobody wants to help you out." She would often ask me to call her daughter and ask her to visit.

Moreover, she urged me to lie on her behalf to the other inmates whenever they asked about her daughter. She wanted everyone to believe that her daughter wasn't visiting because she had traveled to the Gulf and that her daughter was writing to her and sending her money.

Kadiriyyah lacked proper healthcare since the availability of medication was dependent on the funds provided by the civil society organizations working in the prison. Moreover, she was deprived of familial love and of the bare necessities a woman her age requires (I distinctly remember how happy she was at a group Iftar during Ramadan when she tasted food she hadn't eaten in over 5 years).

During her last days, Kadiriyyah's situation worsened and she was rushed to the hospital. It was very painful seeing Kadiriyyah, her hands in cuffs, being forced onto a truck to transport her to the hospital. She tripped several times and even fell down while being escorted by the police officers. Yet, the latter refused to free her hands, claiming that she might escape. How was Kadiriyyah going to escape when she could hardly walk or speak?

After her death, very few inmates expressed pain and grief. In fact, her roommates rushed to divide among themselves what she had left behind in the form of canned goods and clothes.

Prison is no place for sorrow or commemoration. The most important thing is to stay alive.

Case 2

"My entire life changed in one instant. It took me by surprise." Basima

Basima is calm, pleasant, and well-loved by everyone. She always insists she knew nothing about life before she went to prison.

"During the nine months I have spent here so far, many things have changed. I have been repeatedly exposed to sexual harassment by one of the inmates. I witnessed the death of one of my dearest friends, due to acute psycho-

logical distress and a constant fear of living in this place. Prison is a harsh place. I hate it, I hate it."

In the autumn of last year, Basima's 20 year old brother Muhammad eloped with a minor called Leila, with whom he was having a romantic relationship.

Following a two-day search for Muhammad and Leila which proved unsuccessful, Leila's father, Ali, decided to take revenge on Muhammad's family, although they were unaware of their son's intention to get married.

Ali kept Basima and her mother under surveillance that night. He then kidnapped her at gunpoint, drove her to a rugged area in the barren mountains of Dunnyyeh and raped her. He callously beat her and humiliated her until she was in shock. Towards the break of dawn, while he fell asleep from drinking too much alcohol, Basima killed him with his own weapon.

She was caught and imprisoned along with her brother. This is where her harsh and painful journey began.

Basima's conduct inside the prison was impeccable. She was compassionate, loyal, caring, shy and innocent. She managed to preserve her purity and innocence even though she was imprisoned and despite the fact that she was surrounded by inmates who were in prison for various reasons including drug abuse, prostitution, forgery and fraud. Her inexperience along with her parents' dismal economic situation made her more vulnerable to

exploitation by others, who took advantage of her. Basima became known as the cell's "maid": cleaning, cooking, and counseling the inmates in return for food and clothing.

Moreover, she was not assigned an attorney until eight months had passed after her incarceration. Neither Basima nor her brother was called for a single hearing.

Basima, the poor and illiterate woman, needed help on several fronts. The plan was to try and provide her with an attorney who would be convinced of the necessity of defending a young girl whose future was ahead of her.

Prison is no place for sorrow or commemoration. The most important thing is to stay alive.

Basima is learning how to read, and is now able to bead and crochet. This has helped her secure a small income to cover her personal needs. She was even able to send money and gifts to her younger sister.

Basima feels that she is becoming more independent and self-confident.

"Today, ten months after my arrest, I'm trying to look at things with more optimism despite all the problems with this place, and the cruelty of the incidents I endured. Prison can be a place where we define our life's goals in a clear way. Nowadays, I can't wait to start taking hair-dressing class, because I would love to work in that domain once I leave here. I also believe that my self-confidence has become better in prison. The encouragement I get from my friends, their appreciation of my work and creativity, enabled me to hear things I had never heard outside prison."

Case 3

"I will not stay here for ten years. I have to die because I have no life since I killed the one who meant the world to me." Fatima

Fatima shot Mahmoud, her fiancé, whom she loved more than everything.

She worked as a salesperson earning a measly 250,000LL a month. She had also worked as a cleaning lady and an escort. She was driven by an obsession to make as much money as she could to satisfy her desire for clothes and mobile phones, and to fulfill Mahmoud's incessant needs. All those who knew him said he was a temperamental, violent and self-centered drug addict.

"I used to feel ugly and uneducated, so I would exert an extra effort to win Mahmoud's heart; and he knew how to drive me to get him what he wanted."

All the attention she gave him and the sacrifices she made did not stop him from rebuking her, threatening to travel and end their relationship, especially when he found out that she was dating a man he knew for money. It got worse when she refused to steal a gun from the family she used to work for so that Mahmoud could use it to settle old scores. Succumbing to the pressure, Fatima

stole the gun and was ready to hand it over. But that day he got enraged and called her the worst of names. He made it clear to her that he did not love her anymore, and he cursed the day he had met her. He informed her that he intended to marry his cousin in Australia, demanding that she disappear from his life once and for all because he intended to start anew, abroad.

Fatima could no longer tolerate it. She killed him and immediately handed herself in to the authorities. She entered prison carrying his pictures, and refused to talk to anyone about what she had done.

In prison, she didn't quite understand the rules of the game. She remained emotional and impulsively expressed what was on her mind. She would hardly think through or examine what she was about to say, justifying herself by saying that she had lost everything and what had remained wasn't worth preserving.

Six months passed, and she became a person who was disliked by many of her fellow inmates who considered her unable to "humor others and treat them pleasantly." They also considered that she knew too many of the prison's secrets. Fatima was therefore constantly bullied and threatened with transfer to another prison. This was terrifying because it meant she would no longer be able to see her family.

The threats reached their climax when Fatima decided to expose the secrets she knew. The inmates convinced the guards of the need to threaten Fatima and completely silence her otherwise the unimaginable would happen to her. She was terrified. Her last few hours were suffocating and painful. She had an acute asthma attack, while every-

one thought she was faking it.

She was not immediately treated and passed away. The inmates said that she had truly suffered before she died; her health having rapidly deteriorated due to the fear and worry she experienced during her last hours.

Nothing changed in the prison. No one regretted mistreating her. Fatima died as though nothing had happened.

Translated by Ahmad Ghaddar

*My entire
life changed
in one instant.
It took me
by surprise.*