

Incarcerated Arab Women

The year 2001 continued to witness a rise in the number of prisoners in countries all over the world. Detention conditions remain below the set standards and are even life-threatening in many instances. Shocking reports of torture inflicted on incarcerated persons are abundant. The fate of women prisoners is often the most horrific, because they are especially vulnerable to custodial sexual abuse. Indeed, in most prisons of the world, male guards outnumber women guards, and the consequence is higher levels of abuse. Other violations include the detention of juvenile inmates with adults and the absence of separation between prisoners held in pre-trial detention and sentenced prisoners.

This special double issue of *Al-Raida* is devoted to the theme of Incarcerated Women. It represents a contribution to the efforts exerted by many human rights organizations to disclose the conditions under which women prisoners are living, especially in the Arab World, and to learn about the standards and the instruments meant to protect this vulnerable category of persons.

The first article of *Al-Raida* sets the human rights perspective on prisoners, with a special focus on women prisoners. This is done by a review of the international human rights instruments pertaining to the administration of justice and by examining the degree to which they are gender sensitive. In the following section, articles look at the situation and conditions of women's prisons in a number of Arab countries. Mervat Rismahwi, legal advisor at the International Secretariat of Amnesty International, presents a human rights perspective to women in detention in the Middle East, including the reasons why women end up in detention, the conditions they face during incarceration, and the obligation of the state towards them. Rismahwi recommends that all work towards the full implementation of the concluding observations given by the human rights treaty bodies regarding detention and imprisonment.

The article written by Mona Khalaf, Director of the Institute of Women's Studies in the Arab World, is at once a presentation of the results of a survey undertaken in four women prisons in Lebanon, and an analysis of the detention conditions from a human rights perspective, by comparing them with the standards set in the related international human rights instruments. Rana Hussein, a journalist and human rights activist who spearheaded the campaign to eliminate honor crimes in Jordan, recounts how imprisonment may be an instrument to protect "innocent" women against "crimes of honor", hence leading to a dual violation of their civil rights: once by being guilty in the eyes of their family and their society and once by having to endure imprisonment. Shaza Nasser is a member of the Arab Intellectual Forum and a human rights activist. Her article presents the results of a field research on the conditions under which women live in Yemeni prisons that ends with a plea to provide assistance to those women.

A case study on the conditions of women prisons in Egypt is presented by the Human Rights Center for the Assistance of Prisoners. The article urges for the implementation of the Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners in Egyptian prisons. The article includes an analysis of the concept of punishment, its effectiveness and its relation to prison conditions. Abir Hamdar summarizes the very important report published in 2001 by Amnesty International entitled "Lebanon Torture and Ill-treatment of Women in Pre-Trial Detention: A Culture of Acquiescence". The report describes the widespread ill-treatment of women detainees; in particular political prisoners, common law offenders and migrant workers are looked at very closely. Finally, in this section, Dania Sinno's article is a synopsis of her Masters Thesis on "Patterns of Crimes among Lebanese Women". The article describes the attributes and determinants of female criminality, with special reference to variables such as age, marital status, socio-economic background, place of residence, and nature of women's offences.

Three books reviews, written by Arab women, are presented in this special issue of *Al-Raida*. Malika Oufkir's "La Prisonniere" is a story of the rise to power of a Moroccan family, its downfall into 20 years of exile in prison and its journey back to freedom. Fatna El-Beh's "Discourse of Darkness" (*Hadeeth El-Atmah*) recounts also the years spent by Fatna and her comrades in the Moroccan prisons during the 1970s, presenting a feminist view of imprisonment. The book of Mona Fayyad "Prison is a Wild Society" (*Al Sujn Mujtama Barri*) presents the first sociological study of crime and criminals, and a review of the prisons and the prisoners' profile in Lebanon.

A substantial part of this issue is devoted to a review of the organizations that are involved in defending the human rights of prisoners and in promoting their protection against unfair trial and torture. Myriam Sfeir presents an extensive review of these organizations in the Arab countries and Lynn Maalouf describes the work done by L'Observatoire International des Prisons.

This issue of *Al-Raida* includes also the testimony of Khawla Daoud El-Azrak, a Palestinian woman about her imprisonment in Israeli prisons; the testimony is particularly important because of the unconventional and non-traditional relationship that El-Azrak refers to when she talks about her relationship with her husband.

Al-Raida includes also a presentation by Myriam Sfeir on a workshop organized by Omar Nashabe, instructor of human rights and sociology, on two symposiums organized on the topic of human rights and its particular relevance to police officers who handle prisoners cases. Last, Abir Hamdar presents a very interesting opinion on "the prison within".

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