

# Status of Female Prisoners

# in Yemen

## Summary

The present article is concerned with the status of women prisoners in Yemen. It presents the results of a field research undertaken by Shaza Nasser<sup>1</sup>, a lawyer interested in human rights and the rights of women and children<sup>1</sup>. The study reflects the tragic conditions under which women live in Yemeni prisons. The article presents also short case studies on some of the women prisoners, and ends with a plea to provide judicial assistance to those women.

## Physical Description of the Prison

The women's prison in question inhabits about 80 prisoners with their 25 children; they fall in the age group 15-60 years, and they are of Yemeni, Indian and various African nationalities. The prison consists of nine cells, six toilets and one kitchen. The cells are very small in size (3.95m x 4.5m), without any ventilation system; about 12-14 inmates live in each cell. Amidst these very small cells, women cannot have any space for keeping their private belongings; those are usually kept in a bag placed under or beside the bed. The bags contain food, clothes, medicines and other personal items.

Hygienic conditions are very poor. There is no net that prevents mosquitoes or flies from entering the cell. Cells are not equipped with a heating system, and the flooring is made from cement. Lighting is restricted to one or two fluorescent lamps, and the cell walls are painted with a fading yellow and brown color. Toilets are very dirty, old and need repair. Hot water is available only occasionally and without any fixed schedule.

The prison kitchen is gloomy and does not have any lighting. Women inmates prepare food while sitting on the floor, using very elementary utensils. Food is shared among women inmates on an alternate basis. A limited number of prisoners receive food from outside the prison, with the exception of those of non-Yemeni nationality, who rely solely on prison food, which is often inadequate and barely meets their need.

The internal yard of the prison overlooks the cells; it is full of sand. The yard is a curse and a blessing at the same time. It is a blessing because children can play in it and get some fresh air outside the cells' walls. But it is also a curse, because when there is rain, the yard is transformed into a vicious pool filled with mosquitoes posing the danger of disease spreading.

It is also worth noting that no arrangements are made for controlling the spread of infectious diseases, as one of the prison cells is occupied by two prisoners who are infected with HIV/AIDS, without any special measures.

## Health Services

The prison suffers from a serious shortage of medicines to treat the diseases that are widely spread, including skin diseases, gynecological problems, and diarrhea among children. These had been reported by the physicians who work at the prison, but are strongly denied by the prison administration. Physicians complained about the lack of first aid materials, the absence of suitable equipment for emergency transfer of sick inmates, the spread of scabies, eczema and diarrhea, and the shortage of cleaning materials. The majority of pregnant inmates deliver in prison.

The director of the prison noted that he had put a request for obtaining medicines, but to no avail, the main reason given being that the cost of the medicines should be borne by the prison itself. Requests had been put to charity organizations, businessmen and others, but no response was obtained.

## Visits

There is no schedule followed for visits to prisoners; it is left without any organization, principally because of the inability of the prison administration to meet the needs of the prison inmates. Hence, families and parents are allowed to visit prisoners daily, in the mornings and the afternoons.

## Activities

Recreational activities for women prisoners are almost absent. Prisoners are not allowed to make any sport; there are no televisions, except in one of the prison cells, and which was brought in by one of the inmates. The absence of books, coupled with the high proportion of illiterates among women prisoners make reading a very grim activity inside the prison.

Chewing qat and cigarette smoking are the only means available for release. Nearly all women prisoners chew qat and smoke in the cells, without any special attention to the children found with some of the women. Inmates

rise at 6.00 a.m. and they have to sleep compulsorily at around 9.00 or 10.00 p.m.

#### **Prison Personnel**

Most of the supervisors who work at the prison were at one time prisoners themselves, and this is how they were recruited. None of the supervisors holds a degree that qualifies her to work in prison; in fact most of them are illiterate or have received only primary education. Those who were not in prison are generally given an overall orientation on work in the prison setting.

The main reason for not recruiting qualified and experienced women as prison personnel is related to the conservative and traditional character of Yemeni society, which rejects the idea of women working in prisons.

Women wardens do not wear any uniform and it is difficult to distinguish between a warden and an inmate. The director of the prison is a man; his major complaint is that the Yemeni authorities have not provided him with qualified personnel who are able to organize activities and recreational or educational programs for the women prisoners.

#### **Case Studies**

##### **Zeinab, Charged with Murdering her One Week Old Baby**

Zeinab does not know her age; she said that she may be 25 years old or even 50 years old. She is illiterate, married and has 11 children, the youngest being 8 years old. Her husband is an employee. Zeinab was charged with murdering her one week old baby. She has no lawyer. Zeinab stated that she had been to the court three times, and that she was asked to provide a guarantor. She is very depressed and her condition in the prison is weary; she spends her day reading the Quran and praying. Zeinab believes strongly in her innocence; her only plea is to find a guarantor, which will release her from prison and make her go back to her children, whom she misses so badly.

##### **Fatima, Charged with Stealing Gold**

Fatima is 50 years old, but she looks younger. She is married and has seven sons: four of them live in the village and two in Sana'a. Her 6 years old child lives with a school gateman and her 5 years old girl lives with a family. Fatima's husband is sick and no one from her family visits her. Fatima was charged with stealing gold.

##### **Amina, A Teacher**

Amina is the only teacher in the women's prison. She teaches arithmetic, theology, traditions, Arabic and English. Amina has forty students; she teaches daily from 8.30 a.m. until 12.30 pm. Amina has been asking for a school uniform for the female prisoners who attend

her classes, along with shoes, textbooks, exercise books, stationary and educational aids. She also reported that she needs other teachers to help her in the big task she had at hand.

Amina reported that many women prisoners are eager to learn and study. The obstacle however is that most of them have children and there is no one to look after them. Therefore, it is very important to have a nursery for child care.

#### **Recommendations for Action**

A number of recommendations are put forward for the Yemeni Government to consider. These are the following:

- Construction of a special prison for women, in which a separate section will be devoted to girls under 18 years of age.
- Accommodation facilities for the women who leave the prison after finishing their sentences and who do not have any place to go to.
- Hiring of qualified female staff to work at the prison and work towards improving their professional skills through continued training.
- Increasing the number of health and education professionals working with women prisoners.
- Establishment of a nursery to allow prisoners who are mothers to have access to learning and education opportunities and to keep their children under safe and proper conditions and .
- Ensuring the availability of the necessary health services and the required medications.
- Introduction of cultural and recreational programs into the prison.
- Establishment of permanent education programs for prison inmates.
- Provision of legal assistance to women prisoners in coordination with the Ministry of Justice.
- Encouragement of charity associations and businessmen to provide assistance to women prisoners through all possible means.

Edited by Adele Khudr

#### **Endnote**

1. Shaza Nasser is graduate of Charles Karlova University, class 1960. She holds a post-graduate diploma in law and worked at the Legal Affairs Department of Sana'a University. With her colleagues she founded the First Advocacy and legal Consultations Office for pioneering women in March 1990. She participated in monitoring the elections of April 1997 as the assistant secretary general for technical affairs. At present, she has a law office and is a member of the Arab Intellectual Forum. She is interested in human rights and the rights of women and children. She is married and has a daughter.