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.

Anthony Corman

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 hareem, has long had a grip on the western imagination, lesser known institutions such as the Dar al-Shifa (House of Retreat) where couples were confined by order of the mullah 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 19th 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 ‘civilizing’ influence on state institutions and governance. Prisons were particularly targeted. In 1851 the British occupied Egypt, thereby extending to women’s prisons such as the Zindan in Istanbul. In Egypt, new women’s prisons were built in Bulaq and in Alexandria in the 1890s while at Cairo Prison they were housed in a separate wing. In Algeria, the French administration overhauled 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 proportionately less prominent in prisons than, for example, in France. From the early 19th century, women represented between 2 and 18% 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 to have differed; although in Turkey the numbers approached 10% in 1904.) The female prison population reflected the social character of the female society: outside muted, 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, such as those 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 accused of attempting to convert women to Islam. Other prisons did not segregate the sexes – a great humiliation in a sexualiy segregated society. Women from Egypt under British occupation, rights for female prisoners were embroiled in the prison regulations of 1843, which stipulated special consideration for pregnant women and those with young children, and that only female officers search 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 extra-territorial 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 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 1867 their numbers required a special establishment. The women’s prison at the Lata ‘erat (House of the Governor) in Egypt, the guardian of prostitutes in Jerusalem, or even the jailer’s family where women were required to perform 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 al-Sayyid in the Nile Delta boasted a separate annex for women, others similarly confined women to a room in the men’s prison. Sometimes prisoners were imprisoned with men, as at Salonica; at Alexandria, 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 in Alexandria in the 1890s while at Cairo Prison they were housed in a separate wing. In Algeria, the French administration overhauled 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.

The offences for which women were imprisoned told us much about the social position of, and expectations placed on, women. In Tunisia in the 1890s, 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 disproportionately number of defamation cases, an offence of the verbally strong but physically weak, is intriguing. The imprisonment of women for political offences illuminates female participation 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 exclusion. 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 19th century, preferred older guards. As guards to inmates, women provided social contact and sustenance, particularly before the state provided food to prisoners. As mothers, wives and sisters of prisoners and even, on occasion, of guards, women were at times vocal in demanding and protecting 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 test- tified to the belief that youths were more malleable than adult criminals. Public concern with prison conditions, partic- ularly as they affected women, had to wait for women’s associations and organizations to take them up. The Soci- ety 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-Naqaais speak of the relationship between political and non-political prisoners, between women guards and prisoners, between literate political pris- oners and uneducated guards. Women were more marginal in prison than their male counterparts, and suffered greater social stigma. Political prisoners suf- fered a sense of reproach for ‘neglecting’ their proper duty, their children. Creat- ed and controlled by men, the prison system was not separate from society outside, but permeated by its political and social relations. Full of contradic- tions, it was an encompassing, all-embracing male institution that could still be conceived of in feminine terms: the ‘aunt’s house’ (dame khali or the ‘great vagina’ (bâbât du doha).

Bibliography


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