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Tales From the Dead: Women and Health in a Kurdish Women's Prison

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Abstract: We conducted interviews with nine women incarcerated in the Sulaimani prison for women. We asked them about their past and present lives, and about their physical and mental health. Neither the prison itself nor the women's lives bear any resemblance to the way in which prisons, especially Middle Eastern prisons, are portrayed in popular culture and in the media: the inmates had only praise for the prison food, housing, grounds, staff, and policies, they suffered deeply from their severance from kinship; many expressed their suffering somatically. The importance of one's family role and family identity in Kurdish tradition cannot be overstated, and stripped this identity, the women live in a state of resigned limbo. Relationships between inmates were civil but shallow, and no interviewee revealed any sense of individualism or self-determination that would allow her to start over, remake herself, or build a new life.

Keywords: Gender, Family, Mental health, Prison

Introduction

The prison for women and children in Sulaimani (Barewbarayty chaksazy zhan w mndalan, literally the Directorate of Women's and Children's Reform) is a clean, well-managed, attractive, humane, and even kind place, complete with the mechanism for true rehabilitation, i.e., education. Despite the positive atmosphere, we were also struck by the liminal existence of all nine women we interviewed. Whether incarcerated for a few weeks or for years, and whether scheduled to be released within the year or sentenced to death, all of the inmates were isolated in body and spirit from their home community and at the same time unable to form any deep community in prison. They had lost the close kinship of their families, and kinship was replicated only in very superficial ways in prison. One of the long-term inmates, Ms. Roonak, considers herself as dead. She is like a bird in a cage, she tells us, at first trying to escape the cage, and now used to it. "How can I have hope?," she asks us. "I am telling tales from the dead."

Indeed, despite the prison's pleasant touches—the cheerful murals, the helpful guards—the inmates have condemned themselves to social death. The cultural contexts of female shame, of suspicion of outsiders, and a lack of being able to make oneself over—that is, of the inability to escape the identity into which one was born—result in living life as ghosts: invisible, inconsequential, and isolated. Their deep regrets, their resignation, and their crushed dreams manifest in a wide array of psychosomatic issues—psychosomatic in the sense of the interrelation between mind and body. This prison setting would never transfer into a good drama, nor is it fodder for a journalistic expose. Only the ordinariness of the women's lives, even in their deep withdrawal from society, is notable. They exemplify and affirm the constraints of their society in every way. At the same time it is these constraints that form their resignation and self-imposed exile.

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Project Overview

We visited the prison each time as a trio: Ms. Goshan Mohammed, who is fluent in Kurdish, conducted the interview, and later carried out additional interviews of the prison staff and administration. Bilingual speakers translated for Dr. Lynn Rose, who took and transcribed the notes. (We thank Ms. Roza Aziz Abdullah, Mr. Davar Mohammed Abdullah, and Mr. Shko Shwan Fuad for their translations.) Interviews were strictly voluntary. All names of the prisoners are pseudonyms; this is the only element that has been altered.

Timeline

We began this project in the summer of 2018, submitting and receiving Institutional Review Board approval in July. We began the interviews in early October 2018 after receiving permission from the prison management and after an introductory session with all the prisoners, explaining our project to them and fielding their several questions. Six interviews took place between October 2018 and February 2019. Because of tightened regulations from the Ministry of Social Affairs, the final three interviews, between March and May 2019, were monitored. After May 2019, regulations tightened even more, and we would have had to seek permission in person from the Ministry of Social Affairs in Erbil before we would be admitted again. At this point we decided to work with the nine interviews we had completed.

Limitations and Constraints

There were, of course, limitations and constraints to this project. While the prison directors and staff were always welcoming and accommodating (and we thank Ms. Umeda Abdulrahman, the director, Mr. Fuad Jaza, the deputy director, and Ms. Kwestan Anwar, Mr. Akeel Ali, and Ms. Rozh Jamal, social workers) this was, in the end, a prison. While we were allowed to take in our own paper and pens, we were not allowed to use a laptop, or to take photos, nor were we allowed to record audio or video. As a result, we have only short direct quotations from the interviewees. We were forbidden to ask the inmates about their crimes, though they were free to volunteer the information. After completing the required paperwork and starting the interviews, the regulations tightened, and we had to interrupt our work while more paperwork went through the Ministry of Social Affairs. After this, a member of the prison staff was required to be present during our interviews; in our case, this was a young, quiet, and polite art teacher. Although not intrusive, and while we do not believe that her presence swayed our three interviewees, we would have preferred not to be monitored. Finally, this is a small number of interviewees. This essay is a narrative overview, not a statistically representative report. Ours was a pilot project out of which more thorough investigations should, and we hope will, be conducted, both in this prison and beyond. A 2018 account of female prisoners in Erbil, Iraqi Kurdistan's capital just three hours north of our home, the city of Sulaimani, painted a similar dreary picture. "These women have lost all hope in life, in their families, in the food they eat and the things they see," report the Wadi Erbil Team members Kurdistan Rasul, a social worker, and Payam Ahmed, a lawyer ("Lost all hope," para. 6).

The Prison

The prison has a capacity to hold fewer than 100 women. A few are condemned to die by hanging, though the sentence is rarely carried out, and is understood to mean life without parole. About a quarter of the population at any given time falls into each of the four main criminal categories: white-collar crime such as embezzlement; drugs; prostitution; and murder. Of the first two, the crimes are usually committed under the direction of someone else, ordinarily a man, as a small part of a larger scheme. Drug transport, not use or sales, is the most common of drug charges. When the economy is bad, as it often is, the incidence of prostitution rises. Women rarely work as prostitutes in their own village or city, but are caught and convicted in neighboring cities. Most of the women who were sentenced to hanging and life sentences without parole had been convicted of murder. The most common murder victim is the husband.

Administration Background

Previously under the direction of the Kurdish Regional Government's Ministry of Interior Affairs, the prison was renamed the Office of Community Development in 1999-2000 and placed under the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs. When this ministry was divided in 2002, the prison remained under control of the Ministry of

Social Affairs. The prison serves Halabja Province and the Sulaimani Governorate, including the Raparin and Garmian regions. The regions of Erbil and Duhok, both under a political party that is different from that of Sulaimani and Halabja, have their own Community Development Offices.

Physical Surroundings

The prison is a small facility located approximately 30 minutes from the city of Sulaimani. It is located within a military province, surrounded by military institutes, training grounds, and official departments. In fact, the prison is a repurposed military building that was used in the time of the Ba'ath regime of the 1970s and 80s. The women's prison compound is directly adjacent to the men's prison, which by comparison is significantly larger and more fortified than the women's prison. The women's prison compound consists of a collection of four small buildings, one of which is allocated for the incarcerated women. Adolescent offenders are also held within this compound. The size of the compound is a stark reflection of the number of female and young offenders, as compared to male.

The women's prison consists of a single-floor elongated building and a small garden surrounded by a fence, with an iron framed door. The building housing the inmates is notably worn; the prison administration names the actual structure of the building as the feature most in need of improvement. Not only is it old, the administration tells us, but also it was not built with community development in mind. When entering through this iron door, there are small cubbies to the right for bread making, where the incarcerated women can bake bread as a means of income generation. In the middle of the buildings is a small lawn with a statue of a woman situated in the middle, and two locked rooms located at the far end of the garden, which we were told were once offices, but were now being used as storage rooms, and were crowded with furniture, papers, and boxes. We utilized one of these rooms for some of our interviews. When entering the main building, immediately to the left is the office of one of the social workers, Ms. Kwestan Anwar, a woman of considerable presence. The room is furnished with worn, comfortable chairs and sofas, and supplied with tissues and sweets for guests. We conducted some interviews in this room. When walking beyond this room through the small corridor, one is met with a desk where two female officers sit, who take visitors' names and escort them into the main part of the building. Through the large rectangular lobby, with iron doors on each side, is a light, open space, with colorful murals painted on the walls of gardens, plants, and a large portrait of the beloved Kurdish teacher and benefactor Hafsa Xani Naqeeb. There are phones attached to the right wall, and a few portable plastic chairs scattered here and there. Often we would observe the women congregating in this lobby, or sitting in small groups at the building's entrance. Indeed, there was a great deal of freedom of movement. When we toured the prison, for example, small groups of women would wander with us for a while, and then break away and go about their business.

There is a carpeted library at the end of the corridor, with plastic chairs, a large wooden round table, and three small desks with computers that appear antiquated but in use. The room is large enough to hold all of the inmates, and it was here that we spoke to the entire population of women to explain our project and recruit interviewees.

Directly through the entrance's iron doors are the cells. Each cell has six to eight bunk beds, many of which had neatly folded, colorful quilts and blankets at their foot. None of the cells was occupied at full capacity during the months of our research. Each cell has a shared bathroom space, consisting of some toilets and two to three shower rooms, all cleaned to a gleaming polish. We noticed that some of the bathrooms had been converted into kitchenettes. The cells were extremely clean and tidy, and minimalistic in terms of furniture and decoration. The walls, as in the corridor, were light pink, and the floors were tiled. The extreme cleanliness and the absence of personal touches gave the cells a clinical, temporary feel rather than a sense that this was home for the women.

The Interviewees

Of the nine women we interviewed, eight were Kurdish; one was of mixed Arab and Turkmen descent. All spoke Kurdish. The youngest was born in 1999, the oldest, in 1944. Five were born in cities and four in villages, but only two grew up and remained in their village before incarceration. Their amount of time incarcerated at the time of the interviews ranged from six months to 14.5 years, and their time remaining ranged from three months to 15 years, along with three who were condemned to life sentences, of which two including the theoretical hanging. Most interviewees volunteered their crimes: one was serving time for a white-collar crime,

and six had been found guilty of murder. One was probably in for prostitution though she did not choose to make that clear, and one, with a sentence of less than a year, did not reveal her crime. All of the women had had children, from as few as one (who was removed upon birth from her unmarried mother) to as many as nine. This is not atypical of the general population. The 2018 demographic survey found that “childbearing is universal among women. Among the ever-married females, less than 5% have remained childless” (Kurdistan Regional Statistics Office 27). As for marital status, one was unmarried, one married, four widowed, one divorced, and two remarried (one after divorcing her first husband and the other after the death of her first husband). This, too is typical; the same report tells us that “53% of females and males aged over 12 years are married” (Kurdistan Regional Statistics Office 24).

Professions before incarceration ranged widely, from tending chickens to nursing, from cooking and cleaning to office work as a government employee, from salon work to working at an NGO for child protection, and from being employed at a small shop to working in labor and delivery at a hospital. Without exception, the women said that all of their personal necessities were provided by the prison, and that the physical conditions of the prison were very good; for example, there was always enough water for bathing and cleaning. There were, it bears repeating, absolutely no complaints, even small ones, about any aspect of the prison.

The inmates ranged from circumspect to open about their lives. Even the most reticent, Ms. Solin, was willing to offer some information about her background and life before prison. While there are gaps and question marks in all the women’s life stories, and while the stories were never presented in chronological order, we were able to weave together brief narratives, at least, of each, as follows.

Ms. Kazhal

Ms. Kazhal was polite and brisk, and did not volunteer many details, though she answered our questions willingly enough. Born in 1978 in Rania, she worked as a hospital nurse, for which she studied three years after high school. She married at 15 years old, at which time she moved to Erbil. While 15 is younger than average, it is not uncommon. A 2018 demographic survey finds that “the mean age at marriage for KRI females is 20.7 versus 24.5 for KRI males. There is also a difference of age at marriage between urban and rural locations, 24.7 versus 23.5 for males and 20.8 versus 20.1 for females” (Kurdistan Regional Statistics Office 26). Her husband, a member of the Peshmerga (the Kurdish military force) and three years older than she, died in February, 2014. “I loved him very much,” she adds. She has six children, all boys, all of whom live in Erbil. Four are older and two are twins, born in 2013. She has been incarcerated since 2014. She did not volunteer the crime for which she was sentenced, but hinted that it stemmed from a family altercation. “A dirty man,” she says, “ruins the environment. One bad person in the family is like having trash in the family. One trouble is everyone’s trouble.” She is scheduled to be released in 2022.

Ms. Pakiza

Ms. Pakiza’s interview was monitored, but she did not seem to be bothered by the presence of the monitor or at all stifled in her responses to us, all of which seemed thoughtful and transparent. She was born in 1974 in Erbil, where she lived up until the time of her first marriage, at which point she moved to Kalar. Of her three siblings, her brother died in a car accident, and her two sisters remain in Erbil. Her father died in 1991; her mother is also dead. She was married when she was 12 years old, in an “exchange” marriage. These are marriages of reciprocity between two parties or families. Most often this means that one family agrees to give their daughter in marriage to another family in exchange for a woman from that family to marry the brother or cousin of the daughter they have relinquished. This tradition is framed as a protective measure for women in societies where women have subordinate status, because it strengthens socioeconomic interests, and provides social (and in some cases political) alliances. Exchange marriage is called “zhn ba zhn,” which translates as “woman for woman,” or “wife for wife.” The practice has declined over the decades within areas of the Kurdish Regional Government, and social attitudes have become more intolerant of the practice, as the law reflects. The practice is now illegal and is categorized as a form of domestic violence, but, like other traditional practices, persists (*The Act of Combating Domestic Violence in Kurdistan Region-Iraq 2011*). Ms. Pakiza’s exchange marriage resulted in three children; her husband then died, and his mother took all three children.

She described her second marriage, in 2002, as a “marriage of love,” and she remains close to her husband. She is older than he is, “but he is fat, so people think he is older.” (She appears startlingly young.) When they first

married they were so poor, she says, that he only had one set of clothes, which she washed every night. They had six children together, all of whom have stayed in Kalar.

When a friend of her second husband sexually assaulted her, she killed him. It was self defense, she claims, and she adds that she knew that her husband would kill him anyway. She regrets the murder. “Nothing is as bad as a murder. But the devil gets control of you and you get mad. Nothing is solved.” The cousins of her attacker had connections with both the judicial system and Asaish, which translates directly as “security” and serves as the region’s general domestic security agency and primary intelligence force. Because of these connections, she believes, she was at first sentenced to hanging, even though she claimed self defense in court. Her sentence was later reduced to nine years, of which she had served three years and seven months at the time of the interview. Her sisters now tell her husband that he should marry again, but “he has never thought about it.”

In spite of her circumstances, Ms. Pakiza appeared to be centered and calm. She believes that all humans were created by God, but even so, “everyone has things in their life that they don’t like. They ask, ‘why did that happen? Is it something within me?’ But no one is perfect.” She suggests that people should look within themselves for the answers rather than blaming God. “She should ask: ‘what do I lack?’ ‘Do I follow too much?’ ‘Is my thinking bad?’”

Ms. Solin

Ms. Solin was by far the most reticent of our interviewees. This interview too was monitored, and when our monitor left the room for a few moments, Ms. Solin refused to speak even a word until she returned. Her affect was wooden; her expression rarely changed. She answered our questions in the briefest way possible and offered nothing more. Ms. Solin was born in 1997 in Erbil. She worked at a beauty salon at some point. She divorced after being married for two years and giving birth to one son, who was one year old at the time of the interview. Of the nine women, she was the only to have divorced. A 2018 demographic survey finds that “marital dissolution is very rare among couples: only 1% of females and 0.2% of males is divorced or separated” (The Kurdistan Regional Statistics Office p. 24). She did not volunteer her crime, but told us that she has been in prison six months with six to go, and that she is serving this time in lieu of paying a fine. The son is with her ex-husband’s parents. They don’t bring him to the prison because they think it would affect him negatively. Her mother is dead, and her father is alive but doesn’t want to see her, nor do her four brothers or four sisters. Ms. Solin only volunteered one piece of advice: “don’t make mistakes, but if you do, don’t try to get out of them.”

Ms. Lana

Ms. Lana is the only never-married woman in this group. Her family put her asunder very harshly. A young woman (born in 1996), she wept through the interview, occasionally breaking down and being unable to speak. She had completed high school, scoring a 72 on the baccalaureate exam. This average score was high enough for her to have attended university, but then she became pregnant while unmarried. She gave birth to a daughter, who was taken from her moments after birth on her father’s instruction, and placed in an orphanage; Ms. Lana was incarcerated immediately thereafter, and had served just under seven months of a 15 year sentence at the time of our interview.

As commonplace as it is in the west, it is unacceptable for a Kurdish woman to become pregnant while unmarried; sex before marriage is actually illegal. It is, however, unlikely that she would have received a sentence of so many years for it, though she did not volunteer the nature of whatever her crime was. It is possible that the crime was prostitution, which would have added institutional shame onto domestic shame. She will likely now be unmarried for the rest of her life, which is also unacceptable in traditional Kurdish society. The Kurdistan Regional Statistics Office reports that “at the end of their reproductive ages (15–49), less than 5% of females have remained single” (p. 26).

Her seven brothers and one sister want nothing to do with her and do not call or visit her. Her father will not let her see her mother, whom she misses desperately and sees only in her dreams. When people, meaning well, tell her that she should be happy that her mother is alive, she feels even worse. Ms. Lana gave no hint of being angry or embittered by the abandonment by her father or by any of her family. Asked if she had any advice for young women, Ms. Lana said: “Obey your parents. I didn’t listen to my father.”

Ms. Gashaw

Ms. Gashaw was friendly but reticent, and very matter-of-fact. Born in 1977 in Koya, she finished high school and earned a diploma in a technical field. She had been married for 17 years at the time of the interview, quite happily so: her husband gives her his full support, she says, and visits weekly. She has two sons, two and 16 years old, and a daughter, three years old. All of the children are living with their father, and they all have problems: the eldest son is not doing well at school because she is in prison, and none of her children visit her. She blames herself entirely for her prison sentence of one and a half years: “I made a mistake.” It seems that she had an altercation at work—she was a government employee—with a colleague. She had served four months of her sentence at the time of our interview.

Ms. Amina

Ms. Amina was 21 years old at the time of our interview, and had been in this prison for only one month, having served almost a year in the detention jail. She was born in Kirkuk to an Arab mother and Turkmen father. She completed fifth grade at an Arabic school, and was married at 14 years old to a relative. It was not a forced marriage, for at 14, she had an image of marriage, from observing married couples on TV, as “make-up and dresses and being a lady.” She bore two daughters, five and six years old at the time of the interview. Her husband was abusive, both verbally and physically, hitting her with a belt. Domestic violence is common; the General Directorate of Combating Violence Against Women recorded 375 cases over a nine-month period in 2019, but “like in the rest of the world, most domestic abuse and gender-based violence goes unreported to the authorities, so the extent of the issue is likely much greater than the date suggests” (375 Cases of violence, para. 3).

Her husband died when he was 27 years old. She also had a boyfriend, who murdered the husband, and who was murdered in turn. While Ms. Amina does not directly say she killed her husband, she does say that she was “present at the murder,” which led to her sentence of hanging under the charge of murder. She has many regrets, she told us, crying and looking down most of the time, including telling her boyfriend that her husband was abusive. She is not proud that she had a boyfriend, but stated—breaking down as she did so—that she loved him very much. Her family accuses her of ruining the family, and while her parents bring her daughters to visit her once every five months, she misses them desperately. “When I think about them, I think it is better to be tortured by my husband than being here, without my daughters.” Her advice to all women who are in abusive marriages, in fact, is that “nothing is worth getting a sentence of execution.”

Ms. Roonak

Ms. Roonak was born in 1953 in Sulaimani. Her husband is dead. She has a certificate from primary school, and worked at Save the Children for five years, specializing in early marriage prevention. “I was a social woman. I enjoyed life.” She had nine children and lost two daughters: one died from heart disease, and the other by self-immolation. Immolation, including self-immolation (cases of which may be only allegedly self-inflicted) is quite common in this area. In a period of only nine months during 2019, the General-Directorate of Combating Violence Against Women reported that 125 women were burned and that in addition, 81 burned themselves (“375 Cases of violence,” para. 2).

After her daughter killed herself, Mr. Roonak told us, her life changed. “I felt like I was drowning and no one to rescue me, no way to escape.” She committed the crime that led to her life sentence; though she did not go into the details of the crime, it was somehow closely connected to her daughter’s death. Despite the tragedies of her life, she was calm and pleasant, perhaps because she had been incarcerated for 12 years at the time of our interview and was resigned to spending the rest of her life there. Still, she allowed herself some sadness during our interview, and cried when remembering her daughter. “I still feel her. She is part of my blood. I can’t forget her. Here in prison, there is no mourning.” She takes a lot of pride and comfort in her sons, one of whom is a doctor, the other a lawyer.

Ms. Rezan

Ms. Rezan, born in 1975 in Erbil, where she lived most of her life before moving to Sulaimani, wanted to marry her cousin (a common arrangement in Kurdistan) but her parents refused; they and her brother forced her to

marry someone she didn't love, or even like. She had served five years of a life sentence at the time of the interview. The circumstances, as she put it, were that "my husband was killed and the case led to me." When she was first married she couldn't get pregnant, but then bore two children. The girl, about 12 years old, lived with her deceased husband's family. They mistreated the girl, but when she tried to go to a shelter, she was not accepted. The boy is living with a step-brother of the in-laws. Ms. Rezan appeared to be quite closed to her emotions except when speaking of her children, at which point she cried, but stated that as long as her daughter continues to get good grades, she accepts the situation. Her advice to young women: "don't get married."

Ms. Xuncha

Ms. Xuncha, born in 1944 in Erbil, had served 14 years and two months of her sentence at the time of our interview. Because of her advanced age, she will be released prior to fulfilling her sentence of life in prison. She had two years and ten months left to go. She was 12 years old when she married. "Women above 55 appear to have married at earlier ages compared to their younger counterparts whereas no significant difference was assessed between older and younger men" (Kurdistan Regional Statistics Office 26).

She bore five children, of whom only two remain, one daughter and one son. Of her three daughters, one died of heart disease at age 13 or 14. Her second was married at 14 to a man who was 35 years old; she died by self-immolation at 17. The remaining daughter left "with a bad man" and now prostitutes herself. She returned to her family once but this man took her again; five months after that, Ms. Xuncha's husband died. Of her two sons, one ran away, and she learned that he had died while she was in prison. The remaining son, who has a "beautiful singing voice," is mentally ill. He sleeps in parks and spends time at mosques, where people feed him. Sometimes he visits the prison, where the guards also give him food. She was in prison, she told us, "because of my daughter's case," but did not go into details.

Daily Life

In contrast to the horrors of daily life in prison as portrayed in popular media but with some base in reality, the daily routines of the women, including the social environment and food, were free of horror to say the least. As noted above, all parts of the prison were notably clean. The prison administration believes that the cleanliness of the prison is because women, by nature, pay more attention to cleanliness. The administration provides the inmates with all the necessities of sanitation, including soap, shampoo, sanitary pads, all-purpose cleaner, bleach, washing liquid, hairbrushes, toothbrushes, and toothpaste. Washing machines and vacuum cleaners are also provided. The women receive new blankets each year, and new sheets every two months. Each year in winter and summer they receive a new set of clothing and underwear. Despite the pleasant surroundings and adequate supplies, however, there was little joy expressed around the routines, and relationships, though cordial for the most part, were shallow.

Social Environment

Michael Santos, in his accounts of his 45-year prison term in the U.S. *Inside* (2006) and *Earning freedom* (2012), details not only the harshness and violence of the U.S. prison system, but also the contrariness, ignorance, and corruption of the prison guards and prison administration. In my own (Lynn Rose) visits to prison in the U.S., I was routinely demeaned, delayed for hours, treated rudely, and, with fellow visitors, handled like cattle. By contrast, we found the guards at this prison to be brusque but polite, never insulting or cruel. Although it was not a specific interview question, most of the interviewees volunteered that the staff were very good. Ms. Solin commented that they are all "very helpful"; Ms. Rezan describes a good relationship with all of the prison employees; and Ms. Gashaw adds that "the employees behave well and are nice." Ms. Lana says that "no one should complain" about the staff or the conditions, and Ms. Roonak goes so far as to say, of one of the social workers, "I would give Mr. Akeel my heart." The administration treats her like a friend and a relative, she says, asking after her. Guards supply them with gum and cigarettes; Ms. Xuncha tells us that one of the guards helped her to buy medicine that she could not afford. The women who leave prison and return to their community do not maintain communication with the prison staff, although if they have issues reintegrating back into society, prison social workers will be in contact with them until their issue is solved.

In *A world apart: Women, prison, and life behind bars*, Cristina Rathbone (2007), drawing on extensive, in-depth interviews, shows us a dangerous and tense life inside two women's prisons, replete with fragile alliances

and frequent betrayals, deep friendships and romances, and danger and intrigue among the women. By contrast, the relationships among the incarcerated women we interviewed were remarkably free of drama, though also notably free of closeness and trust. The longer the woman had been incarcerated, the more guarded she was in her relationship with the inmates. Ms. Solin, having served six months with six months to go, had the most cheerful summary of her interactions with the inmates, whom she describes as friendly. “We are all sisters.” (This is not a western-style statement of political sisterhood, but a cultural sentiment that reflects extended kinship, and is more formal than sentimental.) Ms. Gashaw, too, spoke quite positively of the relationships among inmates. She had been there for four months and was to be released in about a year at the time of our interview, in which she told us that all of the women have breakfast together and then sit in the garden and talk. Prison has been good for her, she says, because she has been exposed to a lot of different kinds of women, including condemned women. Ms. Lana, having served seven months with 16 years to go, spends time with the other inmates and reports that she feels less like a prisoner when she does so. Ms. Amina had been incarcerated for one year, with less than one month left. She reports no problems, claims good relationships with everyone, and says that the women sit, eat, and work together, and have labor divisions. Because she is young, everyone calls her “daughter” (a formal pleasantry). Everyone is respectful, she says, and there is mutual respect.

The longer the time the women had served, however, the more guarded they became. Ms. Pakiza, who had served three years and seven months of her time, told us that all of the inmates clean the prison together, and that teamwork is important. She has some friendships among the inmates, she says, but none very close. If she told them everything, she says, “they would talk.” She adds that she is accused sometimes of being aloof because she doesn’t want to get close to anyone, but she does not keep herself apart because of any sense of superiority: “I am the lowest, not the highest.” If there is a conflict, she stays away from the person “for two hours or two days” and then she approaches and hugs them. She prays for everyone, especially those who don’t know how to pray. “God is great,” she says. She advises all women to “have a big heart. Everything can be solved by negotiation.”

Ms. Rezan reported no trouble with any of the inmates during the five years she had served of her life sentence. Still, she is not engaged in any friendships, because there is an absence of trust, and she prefers to stay quiet. The only fights are verbal, and there are not many. She is comfortable in general, “but I AM living with prisoners.” “If another prisoner hates you,” she adds, “they will file complaints.” Ms. Kazhal, who had been incarcerated for six years at the time of the interview, was extremely reticent about everything, and this reticence extended to the inmates, about whom she had nothing to say.

Between the two oldest women, who had been in prison the longest, there is a striking difference in their relationship to the other inmates. Ms. Roonak, who had been there for 12 years of a life sentence, stated that “some prisoners deserve to be prisoners.” But she has no problem with anyone, because she stays busy, and because she chooses not to interact with anyone for fear of problems and fights. She has witnessed other prisoners fighting, crying, and making up; the one time she had a problem with an inmate, she requested and was granted a transfer to another room. The women gossip and make problems, she reports, and she observes this and tries to learn from the miserable ones.

In contrast, Ms. Xuncha, who has lived in the prison for over 14 years, reports that it feels like family. The women talk to each other about their problems. When a new inmate comes, they instruct her. Some want to be friendly but they don’t know how, and she tries to teach them. She also teaches Kurdish to the inmates who do not know it. Even so, Ms. Xuncha distances herself from the other prisoners, cooking her own food and not sharing it with them, storing her own plates and utensils, and washing her own clothes by hand, separately.

Visitors

Especially because the inmates form few genuine close ties with each other, visits from their families are very important. Ms. Roonak has observed during her twelve years in prison that the prisoners who have visitors are easy to get along with, but those who are abandoned by their relatives are also abandoned by the other prisoners. As noted, visiting the prison was very easy, compared to any prison in the U.S. The prison is on the edge of town, but only a few minutes from the city. The guards at the checkpoints to enter the military compound, as well as those stationed at the entrance to the prison itself, are serious but not intimidating. The gender-segregated pat-down is carried out in private, and rarely; there are only hand-held metal detectors. No bags or phones are allowed inside, but the small gifts that we brought for the women (sweets, nuts, yoghurt) were usually accepted and distributed after being inspected. While not especially friendly, the prison guards are professional and polite. Still, few of the women had many regular visitors.

Ms. Kazhal's children visit from Erbil, about three hours away, coming once every two months. Ms. Pakiza's husband visits her from time to time, and she talks on the phone occasionally to her sisters, and every day to her children. Her children do not come to visit because their home in Kalar is too far away (about three hours), and she says that she fears that they might be in an accident—a real fear, given the state of the roads between Kalar and Sulaimani.

Ms. Solin's son does not visit her, because her parents in law, with whom he lives, believes that it would affect him negatively. In fact, no one in her family wants to see her. Ms. Lana, also, has no visitors. Ms. Gashaw's supportive husband visits weekly, but her children never visit. Ms. Amina sees her parents once every five months, at which time they remind her that she "ruined the family." Ms. Roonak has visits from her sons, but her other relatives don't come anymore. Ms. Rezan's daughter visits, rarely, but her son never visits. Ms. Xuncha's mentally ill son "finds his way" sometimes. He has memorized her phone number, and calls her when he can.

Food

Much of the daily routine revolves around meals. The women eat together, for the most part, and Ms. Amina always does the dishes after breakfast. Not all the inmates enjoy this communal aspect, though. Ms. Roonak makes traditional Kurdish food for herself with the ingredients purchased by her family. Ms. Xuncha maintains even more distance between herself and the other inmates, as noted above. She buys her own rice, cooking it like a soup to make it last. She also washes her own plates and silverware herself, storing it all in a can underneath her bed.

Except for Ms. Rezan, who had no interest in any sort of food, all of the women preferred traditional Kurdish food, often naming a specialty: Ms. Pakiza is partial to dolma and kofta; Ms. Xuncha enjoys staples such as soup, bread with tomatoes, yoghurt, and tea. Ms. Solin likes everything but especially enjoys fried food. The comments about the prison fare did not vary much from one woman to the other. They were all satisfied with the quality and quantity of the food.

Perhaps the routine of prison dulls the sense of possibility. Ty Treadwell, who served time as a prison cook, wrote an account (with M. Vernon) of the requests for final meals of death-row prisoners (2011). The blurb for the book on the amazon.com page tried to make the contents sound spectacular—"One condemned man requested 24 tacos, 6 enchiladas, and 6 tostadas. Another wanted wild rabbit, biscuits, and blackberry pie," but in fact the requested meals were strikingly ordinary, perhaps because the ingredients had to be within the prison kitchen. Still, there were no requests with much imagination—nothing exotic by US standards, terribly specific, or even sarcastic.

The only suggestion of criticism of the food, from Ms. Kazhal, was that "it is based on the budget," and the only instances of women declining to eat any particular offering was not because of the quality of the food itself. Ms. Lana eats anything, she says, but because of her emotional state doesn't have much of an appetite. Meat is served every evening, which is appreciated by everyone; only Ms. Kazhal does not eat much meat, she told us, for health reasons. Ms. Gashaw comments on the the variety of food, as did Ms. Amina, though for her it is a temptation to give in to overeating when she is depressed. At the other extreme, Ms. Rezan is not interested in food, and lacks any appetite because of deep depression. Because of her heart problems and diabetes, eats only rice and fruit, and not much of that.

Pastimes

Here, too, there was very little by way of imagination or creativity. In general, in prison or not, Kurdish women are not encouraged to be creative or to think critically. In large part, women are part of the domestic sphere, and rely on repetition rather than innovation. The women's pastimes and hobbies were modest: they mentioned listening to the radio, watching television and movies, reading books including the Quran (those who were literate), praying, and baking bread. Bread making is very much a traditional Kurdish female activity. Ms. Roonak bakes bread just to stay busy, she says, even though her son doesn't want her to work in her old age (she was 67 when we spoke with her). Although in 2017 the Organization of National Centre for Human Rights sponsored a crafts fair in Sulaimani to sell jewelry made by female prisoners, none of the women we interviewed mentioned any such interest; the crafts fair may have been a one-time event (Handicrafts 2017).

Health

Everyone we interviewed had health issues of body and mind, ranging from mild and sporadic to chronic and severe. Sickness and health, just like food, is very much a family issue in Kurdistan. Health care is much more a communal activity than in the west. In the public clinics, for example, several women might have their gynecological exams at the same time, in the same room. During a hospital stay, the family is expected to be with the patient: one's quality of daily care depends upon it. So, while the women we interviewed had access to medical care, not many of them sought it out. They would have to go to the men's prison, next door, but that in itself did not seem to be the reason for avoiding the visit. Ms. Kazhal, 42 years old, tells us that her menstrual cycle has always been off, and she sees a gynecologist at the male prison with female guards inside the room and male guards outside. Still, even though she worked in nursing before incarceration, she has seen a doctor only three times in six years. For her blood pressure problems, she eats garlic, which, she believes, helps. She uses poppyseeds and oregano for her headaches. She had thyroid problems, but she did not seek further medical help after she had surgery for it. Like almost everything about herself, Ms. Kazhal did not offer much about her mental health, telling us only that she prays regularly and takes responsibility for what she says.

Ms. Pakiza, 46, had her six children by cesarean and has complications from that, but does not see a doctor. She takes painkillers at night, and she also uses sleeping pills, both of which are dispensed free of cost (and neither of which is narcotic). She also complains of problems with her blood pressure, but does not seek medical help for that, either. Ms. Pakiza says that her mental health is much better since her sentence was reduced from hanging; when she was condemned to die, she used some psychiatric medication. Now, even with her sentence reduced, she is sad. "When I miss my kids, I cry." During hard times, when she is annoyed and sad, she helps herself, as there is no one to help her, she says. She prefers to be alone and think, and she prays.

Ms. Solin has "very good health." The doctor visits the women's prison once a week, she tells us, and she only has to go to the men's prison to see a doctor if there is something critically wrong. Although not at all forthcoming with us, she did suggest that she thinks a lot at night, especially about her divorce, and cries. She can't sleep and is never happy. She has sleeping pills at night, and during the day, she deals with her thoughts by activities such as cleaning.

Ms. Lana has throat issues but not severe enough to merit a doctor. She saw a doctor once for her allergies, but she doesn't want to see any doctor again. Ms. Lana appeared profoundly depressed, crying throughout the interview. She has sleep problems, sleeping either too much or not enough, and takes medicine to sleep. Her sleep problems are from depression, she tells us, and she also overthinks. She blames herself for her fate, and has no friends to talk to although she says that she would like to talk to someone. She misses her mother, but her father won't let mother and daughter see each other, so she sees her mother only when she dreams. People say that she should be happy because her mother is alive, she tells us, and that she does get to see her in her dreams, but this only makes her feel worse. Because she gave birth only days before entering prison, and it had been only a few months at the time of the interview, it is quite possible that postpartum depression was compounding her grief, which was palpable.

Ms. Gashaw has high blood pressure and allergies. She could request an allergist but she does not want to. She could go to the male prison to see a doctor but she doesn't want to because she is shy and waiting to see the doctor (where she might be observed by men) would be too difficult. Ms. Gashaw says her mental health is stable, although she is sad because of her children and worried about the health of her husband, who has high blood pressure. She appears to be very matter-of-fact. "Prison has been good for me."

Ms. Amina has stomach pain and takes painkillers for it. She saw a doctor for her physical problems, who sent her to the psychiatric hospital for an evaluation, where she received a diagnosis of depression. She says that her depression results from the death of her boyfriend. She reports overeating, overthinking, feeling desperate, and suffering from insomnia. Even more difficult than grieving for her boyfriend, she says, is being away from her daughters.

Ms. Roonak has seizures and kidney problems, for which she takes medicine. She also experienced a heart attack. Her son is a doctor, who treats her physical problems and sends her medicine to her. Ms. Roonak feels depressed and emotionally unstable, which results in headaches and vomiting. She deals with her emotional issues, she tells us, by controlling herself. She does not let her feelings out, because whenever she does, she gets a headache and gets even more depressed. She is especially prone to mental instability if a relative gets married, or if the family has a disagreement. She tries to avoid overthinking because it hurts emotionally, but sometimes cannot avoid overthinking about her lost children, especially her daughters, whom she worked so hard to raise.

She has anxiety about her living children whenever there are violent demonstrations. She also overthinks about and regrets the death that she apparently caused.

Ms. Rezan has only one kidney, and she has rheumatism, and she describes her health as generally weak. She has seen doctors at the men's prison, where they referred her to an outside doctor. She buys her own medicine—there used to be an organization that would pay for it, but it no longer exists. She cannot afford to have a kidney transplant. “I am suffering mentally and physically.” Ms. Rezan, too, tells us that she overthinks. She is very depressed; she wept throughout the interview. She misses her children, especially her son, and when she overthinks about them, her mind gets “free field” to overthink.

Ms. Xuncha has heart disease, high blood pressure, and severe migraines. On top of these conditions, a prison doctor diagnosed uterine cancer two years ago. Because of the dangers of anesthesia to her heart, surgery is impossible. She quit her course of chemotherapy because of the side effects. If she wants to go to a private hospital she can, she says, with a few days' advance notice, and she can go to the hospital in the male prison for simple things. In addition, doctors come to the women's prison for simple check ups and blood tests. Still, her perception is that it is more difficult in prison than at home to get simple care; as an example, she tells us that she lost her vision in her right eye, and it would cost 12,000 IQD (about 10 USD) for an ophthalmologist's check-up and more than this for eye drops. A doctor told her that he could cure her eye for 1000 USD, but she only has 5,000 IQD, and she needs to buy her own heart and blood pressure medicine from this. Ms. Xuncha was more reticent about her emotional health than about her physical health, but did tell us that “grieving is hard.” It was especially hard for her to hear about family members having died, since she was unable to attend their funerals, which are very important Kurdish rituals. “We can't see our relatives and can't feel the support of the outside world.”

Education

Severed from their roles as family members, unable to form substitute kinship with their peers, these women's social and emotional lives were shallow. This not because there were no opportunities, but because they were unable to harness opportunities. The inability to imagine any alternate path or identity may stem, in part, from their slim education. Education, especially higher education, opens new concepts, new ways of relating to other people, and reveals a wider world (Rose & Hardi, forthcoming). But in our group, not one woman had a higher education beyond a vocational certificate. Three women had no formal education at all; three had completed or almost completed primary school; three had completed high school and held certificates in practical fields. This reflects the general population. The 2018 demographic survey reports that “nearly one out of five individuals aged 6 years and above has never attended school (17%) (Kurdistan Regional Statistics Office 35). “Non-attendance, which corresponds with illiteracy, is higher in rural areas, and the share of individuals who have never attended school is largest in the oldest age groups (71%)” (Kurdistan Regional Statistics Office 35). The institution provides primary and secondary education for women who have missed the opportunity to study, or who have delayed their study. Also, if a woman is incarcerated while attending college or university, the prison can provide services that allow her to continue her studies by distance learning. However, and notably, the prison administrators recall no such cases.

The Future

The women's plans after incarceration (that is, the six women who would be released) were strikingly modest, even grim. They longed to return to their families, even if their families did not want them, and, in some cases, to their employment, even with diminished status. There was no talk of starting over, moving elsewhere, reshaping one's identity, or in any way remaking oneself. There was no hint of wanting to cut any ties with family members who had turned away. There was no element of feminist recognition of power imbalances, no sentiment of the personal being political. There was no outrage against violence. There was no indication of consciousness that their individual plight was shared by other women. There was not even any fanciful “what-if” musing.

Ms. Kazhal wants to be in Erbil with her son and return to nursing work even though her salary will be half what it was, given the economic crises that have occurred since her incarceration. Ms. Pakiza only wants to reunite with her children and form a family again. “If it is in a tent it is OK; it doesn't matter.” Ms. Solin wants to be reunited with her son and find a job at a cafeteria. Ms. Lana wants only to see her mother once, and then to die. Until then, since her father will not allow her to return home, she expects to live on the streets after she is

released. Ms. Gashaw plans to resume caring for her children, including finding tutors for her son, and return to the job where she had the altercation that landed her in prison. Ms. Amina was sentenced to death; Ms. Roonak and Ms. Rezan were incarcerated for life. Ms. Xuncha, who was sentenced to life but will have an early release at just short of 80 years old, wants to create a life for her mentally ill son and then die.

Conclusions

Popular culture emphasizes the drama of prison—the dangers, the tensions, and the rigor of institutionalized life. Even more exotic, often salaciously so, are portrayals of women’s prisons. “Orange is the New Black,” the American television series loosely based on the book of the same name (Kerman, 2010), popularized the intrigue of prison life in the 21st century, but prison life had been a staple of drama for decades before. Hollywood promotes the image of prisons in the Middle East as especially brutal and corrupt, most notoriously in the movie *Midnight Express* (1978). Popular entertainment is not based purely on fantasy, though. Accounts from journalists, human rights groups, and scholars suggest that Middle Eastern prisons, particularly women’s prisons, are no models of correctional science (Ghaddar, Ghadier, & Abboud, 2016). Indeed, female prisoners anywhere in the world are at special risk of harm while in prison (Finn, 2013; Owen, Wells, & Pollock, 2017).

Not the stuff of Hollywood, the nightmare of the Sulaimani Women’s prison is a lack of imagination. The women live a half-life of liminal existence throughout their prison sentences. Traditional Kurdish women are not equipped with the perspective to imagine new identities or new beginnings. Their very birth as females stamped their identity on them: they were mothers, wives, daughters, and sisters, and these roles would determine their lives throughout and after incarceration. While the prison itself is adequate, even pleasant, internalized shame and community standards are the barriers to any sort of self-determination. Deeply codified gender roles perpetuate a “pervasive honor-shame complex” (Johansen, 2019, p. 3). Such internalized oppression produces ghosts going about the motions of life.

Scientific Ethics Declaration

The authors declare that the scientific ethical and legal responsibility of this article published in EPSS journal belongs to the authors.

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