

JORDAN

Imprisonment to Protect Women Against "Crimes of Honor"

A Dual Violation of Civil Rights

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Some Jordanian women commit a crime, serve their sentence and then walk free. Others — some of them guilty only in the eyes of their family and the society — end up in prison and never leave. This is the story of one of these women, Kifah, who is destined to probably spend the rest of her life in prison, because government authorities cannot release her out of fear she might be killed by her family.

Kifah (and that is not her real name) was 18 when she was first admitted to the Women's Correctional and Rehabilitation Center located in Jewideh, south of the capital Amman. She had been shot at 22 times by her enraged uncle. Her only fault was rejecting her family's arranged marriage to her cousin, and instead eloping with her lover to a neighboring country. Her uncle caught up with both of them just before crossing the Jordanian border. He fired 22 times towards her direction, but only four bullets struck her and she survived the shooting incident. She was treated at a government hospital and then transferred to the Women's Correctional and Rehabilitation Center. That was in 1989. She is one of around 40 women who were spending indefinite time at this Center, most of them without any charges except alleged or suspected involvement in immoral behaviors, becoming pregnant out of wedlock or having been a victim of rape or incest.

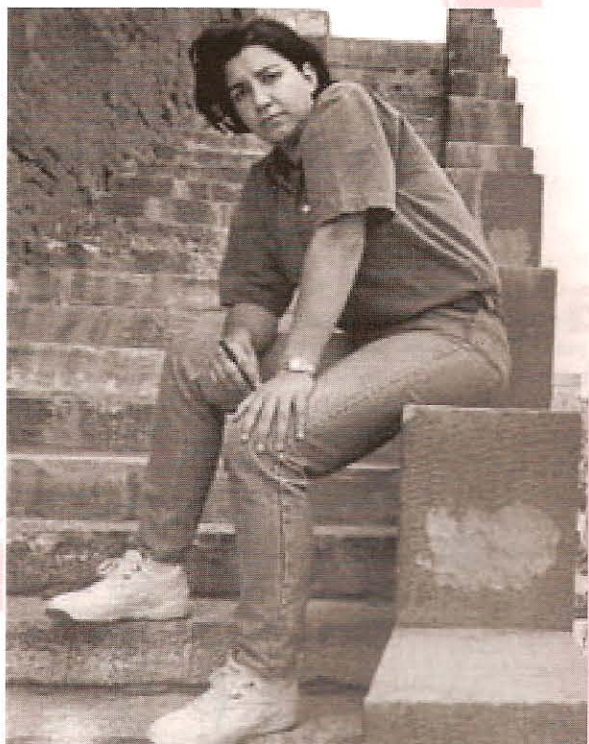
But Kifah, who has wasted 12 years of her life in the women's detention center, is optimistic and wants to leave her detention place to start a new life. "I want to leave this place and be reunited with my family. I want to ask them for forgiveness. I am sure they will forgive me," says Kifah with big confidence. However, the prison officials had a different opinion. They are almost certain that her family will never forgive her and instead would kill her as soon as they lay their eyes on her. Knowing that her fate would be bleak if she

was ever released, Kifah still has high hopes that one day she will be released from prison to fulfill many of her stalled dreams. "I am certain one of these days I will be out of here. Then I will continue my education and eventually work to earn a decent living," she says. The Jordanian local press has reported many cases of families actually bailing out their daughters with the intent of killing them to cleanse the family's honor. These women cannot leave the prison after serving their sentences even if they want to. The Government has the authority to keep these women in prison if it feels that releasing them would place them in grave danger of being killed.

Between 20 to 25 women are reportedly killed in Jordan every year in crimes of honor, a practice condemned by many officials and human rights activists in the Kingdom and abroad. Male relatives take the lives of their female relatives for either their actual or their suspected involvement in an affair with a man — largely a taboo in Jordan's conservative society which links family honor to the behavior of women. One 24-year-old woman, who has been in the Center since 1996, after being caught in a brothel says, "I am dead either way. Inside the prison I am dead, and if I leave the prison, I am dead."

Conditions at the Prison

One prison official said, in describing the mental state of some of these women: "We feel that some of them are destroyed...we do not see them smiling—instead, we sense distress and sadness in their hearts...everyday is the same to them." Realizing the mental status of these inmates and the fact that most of them do not, in reality, belong behind the bars, prison officials designated a special section of the building for them. Here, they are somewhat isolated so that they would not mix with the convicted women. They have their own



kitchen and enjoy more freedom of mobility. "Unfortunately, there is not much we can do here other than encourage them to go on, because we are only an executive authority and we apply the law," says the prison official. In addition, the official says that the Center never looks at those women as prisoners. Instead, "we look at them as victims of their own circumstances and we try to compensate them for what they have gone through in the past."

The rest of the inmates who are spending time for crimes including murder, drug possession, forgery, theft, complicity in rape and molestation, adultery, prostitution and embezzlement, are distributed in the remaining three floors of the building.

The Center stretches over an 11-dunum land and can hold over 900 inmates, if necessary. For the first time in the Kingdom's history, the Center is operated and managed by women, which is viewed as an advantage by prison officials. They say women are closer to each other and can better understand each others' needs and demands.

The prison's management adopted in the new premises the concept of classification and separation of inmates according to their offense and conditions, a practice that was lacking to a great extent in old prisons. The goals of the Center include providing vocational training and academic education to help women to become productive and to enable them to earn a living after serving their prison sentence.

Inmates can also obtain training on dressmaking, embroidery, knitting, ceramics, sewing, flower arrangement, typing, computer work, hair dressing, tailoring, house decoration, literacy and religious courses. In addition, the facility is equipped with a health center, which includes several clinics for specialists who

deliver health, physical, psychological, dental and gynecological services. There is also a unit that provides social care, a nursery for the inmates' children, a supermarket and a canteen, as well as offices for lawyers and a visitors' hall. The prison houses also a public library and classrooms to educate women. "We aim at implementing the concept of order and commitment among inmates, as well as filling their time with beneficial programs that will earn them self-confidence and respect, cooperation with others and an honorable profession to depend on once they are released," the prison official said.

When inmates are first admitted, they undertake a medical checkup before being placed for one week in a special section during which they come into contact with social workers. The latter examine each inmate's case, her background and the circumstances of her imprisonment, then they attempt to place her in a group of inmates convicted of similar offenses or displaying similar characteristics. The Jordanian Government provides social workers and psychiatrists for follow up on the inmates' cases and well being.

Prisoners are allowed three visits per week and they have access to health services, food, clothes, newspapers, television, radio and a library. However, prison officials and lawyers say women inmates are neglected by their families, who do not visit them, largely because of the feeling of shame from having a convicted female criminal in their family. "Even though women inmates have visiting privileges, their families are reluctant to visit them in jail or to even appoint for them good lawyers," Attorney Zahra Sharabati says.

On the other hand, male inmates are visited regularly by their families. They bring for them food, cigarettes and money, and appoint for them the best lawyers. As one prison official puts it: "When a woman is convicted, she pays for it her entire life and she can never be reintegrated into normal social life, while men released from jail reintegrate easily into society because of their family's support." Their families do not consider them criminals, and they seem to forget that their sons committed shameful crimes such as murder, embezzlement or theft.

Endnote

* Rana Husseini's report in the Jordan English language newspaper, the Jordan Times, raised wide public awareness of honor crimes and planted the initial seeds of the campaign to eliminate honor crimes in Jordan. When she began her job at the newspaper on the crime beat in 1994, honor crimes were not considered worth reporting in any paper. Yet, Husseini was perseverant and continued to report on these murders. By 1998, she was awarded the Reebok Award for Human Rights for her dedication to human and women's rights.