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Eid behind bars

A hundred beats

By Fatima Bhutto

Every Eidul Fitr my family and I visit the Larkana women's prison. After all they are our neighbours; our house and the prison practically share a boundary wall. People seem very excited about this proximity. I'm never quite sure how to take that. There are only two women's jails in Sindh, one in Karachi and the other in Larkana. Most of the women in the Larkana jail are from small cities and towns in Sindh and Balochistan like Jacobabad, Shikarpur, and Quetta. I have never been to the Karachi women's prison, I imagine it would be harder to arrange (we're not neighbours), but the first day of our Eid ul Fitr is always spent in jail with the incarcerated women of Larkana and their children.

This past November, after exchanging pleasantries with the lady superintendent of the prison, we were lead past two large black gates – which read ominously 'Live like Ali, die like Hussain', with 'unity, faith, and discipline' marked underneath, as if an afterthought -- into the women's cell area. The superintendent curiously and continuously referred them as barracks. The Larkana women's prison was famous in the 1980s for housing MRD activists and various other prisoners jailed for resisting Ziaul Haq's military regime. Those cells, small and dank encampments with graffiti wallpaper covering the walls from floor till ceiling, are remarkably preserved though hidden at the back of the compound. After seeing those units, it's no wonder the superintendent referred to the newer women's area, which comfortably houses up to five women per cell, as barracks. This year there were 35 women incarcerated behind bars, the year before there had only been around 23. 'Why the increase?' I asked one of the female guards as we walked towards the barracks. She looked at me as if I was slow in the head. 'That's how crime works' she replied.

The prison houses both a hospital -- used mainly for childbirth -- and a school, albeit in the same room. It is a completely disarming sight: a hospital bed equipped with birthing stirrups placed to the side of a row of small desks and a large blackboard. The superintendent informed us there had only recently been a delivery; a girl named Aisha was born. Her mother Sanam, whose six other children lived in the prison with her, had been convicted on a kidnapping charge -- kidnapping cases are almost always a euphemism for custody battles and many women in the jail had been arrested for trying to flee bad marriages with their children.

The prisoners were gathered in a makeshift courtyard and were bedecked in bright churis and silver tikas for Eid. Many of them had tasbees they counted on anxiously while talking to us. All of the women were Muslims and seemed eager at the chance to escape the drudgery of their lives by dressing up and celebrating Eid, as their families lived too far away to visit them they welcomed us as their only available guests.

They were for the most part illiterate and without access to lawyers are condemned to an interminable life constrained behind four walls with their children as their only constant companions (I counted 12 children huddled near their mothers). In fact, most of the women have received bail early into their sentences -- which range from narcotics distribution, to crimes deemed offensive by the utterly offensive Hudood Ordinance, to murder -- but simply cannot afford to post the surety that guarantees an early release. Azmat's bail was listed at Rs10,000. Mumtaz's was Rs20,000. Neither of them could afford to put down the money, they said, so they would have to serve out their sentences till they were, quite literally, free to go.

I thought I had heard wrong, Rs10,000 rupees couldn't be right. I turned to my friend Jia, who had accompanied us along with her younger sister Iqra, to double check that I wasn't, as the lady guard presumed, slow in the head. Jia nodded slowly, it was only Rs10,000 -- approximately \$160 dollars or for festive Karachiites the price of only one ticket for any of the upcoming New Years' eve parties. The highest surety mentioned that afternoon was around Rs50,000.

There were so many other heartbreaking stories that Eid.

One woman, Haleema, had just lost her daughter. Haleema was considered, as all prisoners are, a flight risk and was refused a day's leave to attend her daughter's funeral. In an act of bizarre kindness or insensitive cruelty, it wasn't clear which, her daughter's dead body was brought to her at the Larkana women's prison. After a few moments with her child, Haleema was taken back to her barracks and her daughter to her gravesite. Haleema's only other child, a son, is presently being held in the Larkana men's jail. No one attended her daughter's burial.

Rani, serving a life sentence for narcotics, was six months pregnant when she was brought to the Larkana women's prison. Her son Aijaz was born in the hospital/school room and is now ten years old. He wore a beige shalwar kameez and bright green sunglasses, his only present that Eid. Rani and Aijaz will remain behind bars for another 15 years; she has no lawyer and therefore no chance to appeal her endless sentence.

Several of the women complained that they had no means of supporting themselves or their families while in jail. They told us that besides one woman who came to teach them to read the Quran, Ms. Shirin, there were no other options for learning or trade available to them. Shirin was a trained computer operator, but there were no computers available to the prisoners to learn on. They asked if we knew anyone who could come teach them sewing or embroidery so they could pass their time learning an art and making a little money while they were at it. 'Don't any NGOs come to visit you? Can't they help?' we asked innocently. The superintendent waved her hands, her face contorting as if she too was a prisoner let down by society 'they come every year or six months, they ask questions, and they file reports and leave'. One of the prisoners, a young woman named Naheed nodded along 'they don't do anything -- they just speak'.

They asked us if we knew any lawyers willing to help petition their cases. They asked if we could bring more warm clothes next time. They asked if we could arrange a deep freezer for them. 'A deep freezer?' my mother asked. Yes, they replied, to store milk for our children.

No matter how many times I have visited that jail, I cannot get used to the amount of young children forced to serve time along with their mothers. The children were the hardest thing to take in. While their mothers were crying and talking in between sobs, they looked up at you and smiled. Some of them came and sat near me, anxious to look at what I was writing. They were so delicate, these children who had never known a life outside the prison's walls. I drew faces on my paper. They liked that.

By the time we left it was late in the afternoon. We returned to our house and carried on with our week. My mother made phone calls and wrote letters -- asking for lawyers and teachers to volunteer at the prison, requesting appliances and freezers to be donated. Zulfikar debated with the idea of writing about the prison for his school newspaper and spoke to his friends on the phone telling them what he had seen and I tucked my notes into my bag. This past week we received news from the prison -- they had received a deep freezer. Thank you for your concern, the children and their mothers appreciate it the message said. Now, how about those lawyers?