BEING A WOMAN IN WOMEN'S PRISON

Sanem Kulak Gökçe

Dr., Yeditepe University, Turkey, sanem.kulak@gmail.com

Abstract

My doctorate study about power and hierarchy relations among prisoner women in women's closed prison is conducted in between March 2011-2012 to hear from prisoner women, to examine how they understand and perceive each other and how these are built on relations among women. Framework of the study consit of how they shape themselves and their status in a physical environment where no male exists, of observing their daily experiences in the lives they created away from society, their families and environments. That women prisoners referred to as "forgotten criminals" in literature are sent to prisons in other cities where they have no liberty and where they are detached from their families in spatial and physical senses, lead to aggrevation of their punishments more and more even if this situation is not desired. Friendship and family bonds women criminals, whose punishments are sentenced, recreated or re-established in prisons where they will spend long years even their whole lives, and their narration of themselves with these relations network will be explained and form the basis of this paper.

Keywords: Women's prison, Stories, Female inmate, Social networks, Virtual kinship relations

1. INTRODUCTION

In this anthropologic fieldwork study conducted between March 2011-2012 to explore the hegemonic and hierarchical relations experienced by female inmates in a women's closed prison, an anthropologic field inspection was applied to examine the way female inmates made sense of one another; the way they interpreted each one's behaviors; and the way they built inter-woman relations. In present study which mirrors by tracking their self-statements the ways female inmates perceived themselves and inter-woman relations, a brief introduction was provided on the lives of women behind the bars. During this one-year long field study in the prison, in-depth interviews were held among the women and a total of 62 female inmates provided 158 interviews in sum. Additionally throughout the whole research it became feasible to conduct elaborate observations in the courses designed for female inmates which in turn enabled to perform a comprehensive analysis of inter-women relations. To secure the privacy of participants the name of the prison has been kept anonymous. Furthermore the real identities of participants have likewise been kept anonymous in present study.

There are 12 wards in the investigated women's closed prison. In this prison, wards are categorized as judicial (petty) crimes and terror crimes. In an ideal prison the wards are categorized as per the types of crime, but in this particular prison that practice was not applied. Besides there is a specific ward for laborers which is exclusively allotted for worker inmates and secluded from existing wards in this prison. In this prison the wards vary in sizes of 40 and 50 including a yard also named as *ventilation.* Each ward is structured with a small kitchen to heat food and tea; a bathroom equipped with a showerhead; and bunk beds that can host

20 or 30 women. Since ventilation yard is fully surrounded with high walls inmates/convicts are able to view only the sky but nothing else. Each ventilation yard faces another direction which makes it infeasible for the inmates to see or hear the opposite facade of the wall.

Based on the inter-women web of relations that lays the foundation for present research, the study focuses on the ways female inmates construe themselves and neighbor inmates and the ways they construct their interpersonal relations. The new relations that are set by female inmates who embark on a life totally dissimilar to their previous experiences affect not only themselves but the relations they build with the women around. Those female inmates who define themselves via their newly founded relations strive to maintain their existence in this newly settled habitat.

2. BACKGROUND OF THE WOMEN PRISONS

In order to grasp the conditions of female inmates constituting the study group of this research it is reasonable to initially take a brief tour towards the multiple approaches having shed light on the prison life of female inmates. Foucault reports that at the end of 18th century prisons were reorganized as an institution with a brand new function (Foucault, 1996, pp.342). The convicts who previously received public punishment at the sight of viewers were now put behind the bars to be corrected. That would ensure a closer surveillance of the person kept under strict control; the system in the prison would "be fully charged with physical correction of all the aspects of the inmate and be commissioned with strict control of the work motivation, daily routine and preferences and chores of the convicts" (Foucault, 1996, pp.342) who would be kept under close scrutiny and control at all times. This practice freed the streets from trouble and stuck the criminals into prisons. Those people isolated from the larger public circle, more specifically those who committed petty or serious crimes, were located in a prison for the aim of rebuilding them as good citizens for the community at large or in Foucault's terms; "Discipline is utilized as a tool to manufacture individuals" (Foucault, 2006, pp.256). The individual hereby is genderless in Foucault's particular study; furthermore this gender-neutral state "instinctively" categorizes the individual as *male* (McCorkel, 2005, pp.44). On the other hand Bhavnani & Davis argue that the condition of intervention of female inmates to their own lives (Bhavnani and Davis, 2001, pp.195) fails to be noticed in studies related to female inmates; what is even more disturbing is that female inmates are referred to as *passive beings.* Bhavnani & Davis oppose this passive imprisonment discourse and claim that in any prison women explore and implement "creative methods that challenge the depersonalization attempts of the prison system" (Bhavnani and Davis, 2001, pp.195).

Clemmer employs the term "prisonization" in order to explain the acceptance and internalization of prison life (Clemmer, 1970, pp.25). Clemmer attests that the very moment that newcomers step into prison, they instantly start to accept the prison conditions and struggle to adapt to the new circumstances. On the other hand this stage of acceptance leads the individual to grow a reaction towards outside life and feel isolated and alienated from the outer world. At this point it is underpinned that psycho-social service employees in prisons should develop programs targeting at eliminating such negative perspectives (Clemmer, 1940, pp.87). However İçli and Öğün state that prison subcultures are merely reflections of the cultures in real life. According to this theory aka "movement culture", the convicts/inmates in prisons reflect the outer culture into the prison thus create a "sample of outer world" in their prison life (İçli and Öğün, 1999, pp.13-25). According to Giallombardo who attempts to define female inmates on the basis of family and blood bond, the life of any imprisoned woman can be described via gender roles and dynamics of family/blood bond. Having argued that social order in women's prison is recreated by adapting traditional roles of women (mother, daughter, wife) to prison conditions, Giallombardo claims that family or blood bond dynamics of women have also been structured on the basis of this gender distribution (Giallombardo, 1966, pp.27-9). In Barbara Owen's work *In the Mix: Struggle and Survival in a Women's Prison* which attempts to analyze daily life in a women's prison from the perspective of gender-based social construction, social roles and authoritarian bodies another aspect illustrated by the author is that for a female inmate, prison culture is forged by the dynamic social structure that shapes the life conditions of all women inside or outside the prison as is equally shaped by the social roles ascribed to women (Owen, 1998, pp.6–8). Owen holds the belief that a woman's life standards and qualities before imprisonment affect that particular woman's integration process to prison culture. It has been observed that female inmates are basically women with a history of financial mishaps, personal/sexual abuse, drug addiction, and drive for self- violation. It has also been detected that the tenure of employment, the nature of employment and household responsibilities leave effect on women's prison-life schedules; set a model for daily life in prison and shape the new relations that help the inmate to accommodate to prison life. This condition termed as *Mix* by Owen is an integral component of prison culture that initially drives the women to violate laws and being sentenced (Owen, 1998, pp.6–8).

As manifested by the diversified approaches the lives and level of acceptance of female inmates also exhibit dissimilarities. Needless to say that such diversities impinge upon the inter-woman relations and positions women hold in their circle.

2. 1. Friendship and Hostility

Friendship is the most intimate form of connection established in and out of the ward. In this form of relationship which maintains close cooperation and share there are differences in the expectations from one another and from the relationship in essence. In-ward friendship calls for emotional cooperation in tandem with financial cooperation. For friendship relations it matters substantially to be a part of the very same social structure or education level whereas having committed an identical or resembling offence bears not such significance while forging a relationship. Generally speaking participants in this research defined themselves and their mates as "doomed inmates" and by drawing a similarity between all of their former lives they claim to be stuck in prison due to exactly the same reasons. Some of these women who defined their friendship relations as "merely sharing their feelings" and "feeling of in need of one another" argue that it is not feasible to make real friends in a prison. In the conducted interviews female inmates recurrently emphasized that most of the relations were founded upon "self-interests" but they claimed to be strictly against such a friendship format. Regarding this view below is an inmate's statement to provide hard evidence:

What could possibly be shared here? Your time, your agony, your doomed fate … You have nothing else but your life alone (Dila[1], age 37).

In this research some of the interviewees who claimed to get used to prison conditions thankfully with the assistance of their friends reported that most of the times "loneliness climbed to a maddening level". On the other hand some inmates stated that although friendship was a necessity there was not one friend whom they could name as close friend. Some of the inmates who stated that they viewed some women as friends to chat only, "a real friendship" could never be set in a prison. Nonetheless some of the inmates described their associates as more than a friend but rather as an "elder sister" or even a "mother". By mirroring the family and friendship ties they had in outside world, these inmates redefine themselves and their friends. Some exemplary statements collected in this field study are as below;

Sister Nazife is my mom, my soul. She is the one who made me familiar with this place. I simply cannot imagine what to do without her. Do not think that I always call her sister, I always call her mom, but nothing else (Zeynep, age 26).

Hülya became my very dear daughter. I have three sons who seldom visit me here. Hülya is my hands and feet here, she runs all my errands. I am her protector, no one can do her any harm when I am around (Sevda, age 53).

None of the inmates has any visitors, not their moms, dads or kids. So what else to do? We have to take care of each other, the worst thing possible is to be alone. Some friends are just like mom (Dila, age 37).

There were also a vast number of inmates who reported that in a prison friendship relations are far from being "so pure". A majority of inmates claim that friendships are essentially based upon power or money. This form of friendship termed as "self-interest relationship" is widely common in wards that witness exchanges among prisoners. While some of the inmates receive money from outside some simply are deprived of such means. Inmates use the money to finance their weekly shopping needs. Those with no money compensate for their poverty by washing the clothes, cleaning the wards of richer inmates in exchange for adding their own needs on the shopping list of others. Women who do such chores in the ward are labeled as "errand woman" or "runner". This is regarded as quite a normal incidence within the specific social dynamics of the ward but when it comes to friendship relations it may turn into a different form of tie. While such form of "exchange relationship" is deemed to be faulty by some inmates the women involved in such an order define themselves as "benevolent" ladies simply backing up their friends in need. Women labeled as "errand woman" or "runner" also claim that those are good-willed women who demand nothing but only their friendship. Nevertheless some participants claimed that:

I am so broke that I cannot even buy me cigarettes, I have no choice but to earn some money. They did not take me in laborer ward either, so what else to do but to clean the garbage here. As if they had their own servants when they lived outside these walls... (Ayşe, age 34).

You are worse than a dog if you have no money, you are the boss if you have the money (Hadiye, age 52).

There is no friendship whatsoever here, it is all mutual interests... they either share a bed or a meal. They talk behind their backs but sit on the same table as if nothing bad ever said or done (Seher, age 36).

---

[1] In field study the real names of participants were kept anonymous and replaced with pseudo names.

In the event that such a relationship terminates, female inmates claim that "she exploited me for my money, then stabbed me in the back shamelessly" (Yonca, age 28). One significant point is that women use entirely different expressions when defining their own relations and defining the same kind of relations among other women. One hard evidence is that one of the inmates, Seher, described her relation as "my very dear friend with whom I share everything" she defined the friendship among other women as "self-interest relations". Such relations may at times not be ubiquitous between the needy and relatively wealthy inmates. The needy inmate may cooperate with some other women and become a "meal buddy" as termed in prison life. Generally speaking women categorize such relations not as "self interest" but rather, as stated hereinabove, "fate" friendship or "camaraderie".

Aside from the fight, the most devastating experience among friends is reported to be the transfer of one inmate to a different ward or release from the prison. In this research it was observed that a lot of women applied to the administration for a transfer to a friend's ward and in the event that their application was rejected, some women experienced a nervous breakdown; cut themselves; threatened to commit suicide and started a fight. That is due to the fact that for these women the only possession they have in prison is their friend. A second traumatic event is experienced when one of the fellow inmates is released from the prison at the end of serving her years. The released inmate promises to pay frequent visits and send letters but all the inmates agree that friendship here is limited to the boundaries of prison life. To illustrate this;

When released they all promise to send you money, clothes but once free they simply vanish into the air. Nobody would like to be reminded of this place (Gülsem, age 22).

It was observed in this study that close friends did not gossip about each other, shared all their secrets and had "similar ways of thinking" about life. In the conducted field study it was also seen that in addition to the relations kicked off and maintained in the prison, there were women who belonged to the same group outside or who had a kinship. Multiple kinship relation is particularly widespread among the members of clans. Although such form of "clan" or group relations is described by other women as "gang" the members define themselves as "kins". The participants explain this relationship such;

Lady, I am in the same ward with one of my sister, other sister and sister in-law are in a different ward. My two sisters used to be in the same ward with me but they caused a fight so the managers separated us. I wrote a pledge to be in the same ward with them again, still waiting for the reply (Buse, age 34).

There are two kumas (co-wives) in my ward. They always fight but when an outsider does any harm to younger wife, the older one always guards the younger one. Their co-husband is also in the prison and the young one asks him to send the older wife a letter too so that she would not feel bad (Hasibe, age 32).

As there is no distinction between convicts and inmates in prison it is quite likely that some close friends of convicts are among inmates but the general conception advocates that a convict befriends with another convict. Inmates, holding the belief that they would soon be released, try to live without growing attachment to prison life. The stage of acceptance takes a longer period among these prisoners compared to the rest.

Convicts are much closer to one another, inmates are always waiting to be released soon (Sibel, age 26)

It was also detected in this study that there are multiple intertwined groups in the wards. While group members define themselves as good friends they describe other groups as self-interest seeking bonds. Another group member reported that her friends were just like a family and she could fulfill her longing for family in her group. It is safe to claim that kin and "gang" groups are not popular among others.

The investigations revealed that in-ward conflicts and foes also differed in size and nature. This is doubtlessly related to spending long time in the same place. However considering the fact that these women, all from dissimilar lives and cultures, shared a common history of violence inclination it is decisively an expected outcome to witness enmities in prison life. During the period of trainings and courses prison administration pays particular attention to the "list of enemies". Women who committed great disputes are kept away from one another to prevent any potential fight but it was seen that if they encountered in a social event such as a conference a hassle was almost inevitable. When female inmates were interrogated about the "roots of their enmity" common responses were; jealousy, immorality, gossiping and education gap. Sample cases illustrating jealousy are as below;

One woman receives a letter from her lover but the other has no letter. That is reason of fight, she gets jealous (Elif, age 29).

One woman receives money or clothes, then another one gets jealous and starts a fight (Yonca, age 28).

One woman is illiterate so asks another woman to write for her husband but the woman who writes the letters simply steals her husband. Women here are obsessed with sex drives (Emine, age 34).

You listen to her agonies, then all of a sudden she starts to talk behind your back (Elif, age 29).

It was found out that the hostility among women grows even bigger once the issue is lovers or husbands. Eight participants declared that they had lovers outside and even in a different prison. As reported by one inmate some illiterate women asked other women to write letters for their lovers or husbands but the striking point is that the writer could eventually steal the husband or lover of the illiterate woman and even start a love affair. In the event that such a scandal was exposed it was seen that huge fights and ward transfers occurred. Some women reported that other inmates felt jealous of them just because they were more popular, more educated or wealthy.

Gossip, as a critical component of information access mechanism, is utilized in the transmission of all private information in or out of the ward. Gossip is also a major cause of fights. The woman who shares her secret with another inmate could gossip about her listener. This has also been another driving force behind the enmity between two women.

Different worldviews are also the potential reasons of conflicts. A pious inmate, Nur, feels outraged when others wear revealing clothes, use bad language, have relations and share their private life with others. Nur reported that;

The TV is open and I try to pray namaz. You want to cry alone, but you cannot because there are 36 women around. They are obsessed with their bodies, they curse, they flash the v's, Just spend some time here and you would hate all women. They are so low (Nur, age 41).

The dispute among women occasionally takes place in verbal and behavioral form or in the emergence of physical violence at times. After engaging in conflicts with some women Demet was transferred to another ward but she alleges that she was not the one to blame. Other women were the ones who abused her on a frequent basis:

They threw my blanket to the dirty floor. They threw my clean linen into the toilet and then denied what they did. One time they stole my stuff. I asked her to take off my clothes but she said my name was not written on it, the other woman simply backed her up. They simply could not bear with me (Demet, age 20).

In a prison ward there are two other forms of frenenemis (friend and enemy) outside the category. The first one is "two women become friends against a common enemy but soon after their friendship breaks down" and the other form is "two women are friends at the beginning but later they become enemies".

In any conflict or fight it is common to witness group fights rather than individual confrontations. Since almost all women have more than one friend (comrade) the fights grow bigger and wider. These fights could even spread outside the same ward and during the joint trainings women from hostile groups may get involved in disputes. In such instances prison administration may resort to cell prison to stop the further spread of conflict.

It was also identified in this research that struggle for power and authority, which is also a different form of relationship, could also lead to fights and conflicts. The desire of one group or woman to establish authority in the ward does not necessarily stem from the desire to gain respect but could also be utilized to secure physical or financial power and sovereignty. The person or groups aspiring to be the sole power in the ward attempted to subordinate the rest of women via pressure and fear.

2. 2. Fake-Buddy

"Fake-Buddy" is a term originally used by one of the participants. Instead of the *frenenemy* term that would be used to imply women who were friends at first but became enemies later, fake-buddy is a more appropriate term to summarize the situation. One of the participants Hasibe used this word to indicate women who are outside her close circle but still she had to rely on for a variety of causes. However, she reported that fake-buddies are the women who could easily "backdoor her". Female inmates stated that relations quickly reversed by the threats of disclosing secrets once shared; by the change in friendships based on financial interests. When a woman is bombarded with negative teachings from the other inmates about a particular woman, their friendship may easily turn into hassle which could grow exponentially depending on the intensity of former friendship between the two.

We used to be very close friends but she fooled me. She said she was broke so I helped her but I soon discovered that she used to steal from me. It simply ruined my life (Aya, age 27).

I told her about my boyfriend. I thought we were friends and we could share everything. But then I learned that she told my secrets to everyone. Of course I taught her a bad lesson. I kicked her ass. I am so, so happy! She deserved it! (Yonca, age 28).

The common view among women is that they felt unsecure about women who were not very close to them, everyone else did their best to stab them behind and friendships were based on self interest. A majority of women reported that their friends for whom they did everything once, "stabbed them in the back" and "screwed them" after a while. They reported that no real friendship could simply be built in prison life. As seen what makes women the most upset is the kind of fights between friends once but enemies next. Participants declared that their lack of faith towards real friendship in prison emerged after the occurrence of such conflicts between used-to-be friends.

3. EPILOUE

Inter-women relations constituting the focal point of this research is one of the means employed to detect the way female inmates construe and define themselves and their surrounding circle. Each relationship that these women build in prison is decisively a way for them to express themselves. These women, by attempting to create a projection of their families inside the prison, aim to re-live to some degree their outside world inside the wards. Being more than an inmate but a "mother", "elder sister", "sister", "daughter" and obtaining a new identity mean the world for most of the women in prison.

Pınar Selek narrates her previous first-hand experiences in prison and notes that women in prison try to forget the pressure of surrounding walls by constantly talking, fighting, making fun of themselves and keeping themselves busy at all times (Selek, 2004, pp.601). In Selek's ward it was a rule to act in unity and plan the chores collectively. Selek argues that in a prison domain in which violence is the patrol the only "antidote " is cooperation (Selek, 2004, pp.597). The reason why Selek defines her ward in Ümraniye Prison as "an exclusive place for woman" is exactly that: "In my ward words implied something about life" (Selek, 2004, pp.599). Selek refers to a publicity that was empowered by the words of women. Sibel Öz also draws a resemblance between the ward and a city of words (Öz, 2006, pp.174). The places termed as ward in which inmates are driven to lead a collective life necessitate a re-conceptualization of the word publicity. The reason for this new conceptualization is that although wards are under State surveillance and control, for inmates wards stand as places in which it is possible to stand united and lead a collective lifestyle. The striking issue hereby is that those who were once expelled from public space as punishment could turn their prison into a public space. It should also be noted that despite the harsh reality of violence the nice memories still exist behind the walls (Selek, 2004, pp.596). In these wards constantly vulnerable to the invasion of violence, women are seeking the possibility of a promising and inspiring life.

4. REFERENCE LIST

Angela, Davis. (2001)."Rape, Racism and the Myth of the Black." Feminism and Race. ed., Kum-Kum Bhavnani, New York : Oxford University Press.

Bhavnani, Kum-Kum. Feminism and Race, New York: Oxford University Press,

Bora, Aksu, (1997). "Public Space/Private Space: Beyond the Dilemma of Deprivation-Liberalization.", Society and Science. vol. 75.

Brass, D. J. (1985). "Men's and Women's Networks: A study of Interaction Patterns and Influence in an Organization" Academy of Management Journal, vol. 28.

Clemmer, Donald. (1940). The Prison Community, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston

Clemmer, Donald. (1970). "Prisonization" The Sociology of Punishment and Correction. ed., Norman Johnston, New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc.

Edgar, Andrew. and Sedgwick, Peter. (2002). Culture Theory: The Key Thinkers, London: Rouledge.

Foucault, Michel. (1996). Foucault Live: Interviews, 1961–1984,. ed., Sylvère Lotringer., New York: Semiotext(e).

Foucault, Michel. (2006). The Birth of Prison, Translated by Mehmet Ali Kılıçbay, Ankara: İmge Publishing House.

Giallombardo, Rose. (1966). Society of Women: A Study of a Women's Prison. New York: John Wiley and Sons.

İçli, Tülin and Öğün, Aslıhan. (1999). A Sociological Analysis on the Rehabilitation Activities conducted in the Prisons in Turkey. Republic of Turkey. Ministry of Justice Publications, Ankara: Ankara Open Prison

İçli, Tülin and Öğün, Aslıhan. (1988). "Female Imprisonment in the Process of Social Change", Hacettepe University Faculty of Arts Journal. vol. 2.

McCorkel, J., F.E Schmitt, V.P. Hans. (2002). "Gender, Law, and Justice." Handbook of Justice Research in Law. ed., Joseph Sanders and V. Lee Hamilton, New York: Klumer Academic/ Plenum Publishers.

Owen, Barbara. (1998). In the Mix – Struggle and Survival in a Women's Prison, New York: State University of New York Press.

Özbek, Meral. (2010). Public Space, İstanbul: Hill Publications.

Selek, Pınar. (2010). "A Women's Ward in Prison and Publicity." Public Space, İstanbul: Hill Publications.

Yang, H. and Tang J. "Effects Of Social Network On Students' Performance: A Web-Based Forum Study In Taiwan. JALN".http://nccur.lib.nccu.edu.tw/bitstream/140.119/27390/1/v7n3_yang.pdf (10 March 2010).

Yulin Prison. "Yulin Prison History".
http://www.ulp.moj.gov.tw/ct.asp?xItem=70400&CtNode=17349&mp=145 (7 March 2011).