The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Book Reveals Plight Of Female Prisoners

By Galina Stolyarova

December 04, 2012



It's not quite Mom's Taxi Service in Yekaterininsky Park on Wednesday, but with one hand nudging a stroller along and the other powering a sled, this mom is making quite the improvisation on the tote-your-kids-around theme. **Vladimir Filonov**

ST. PETERSBURG — A group of St. Petersburg sociologists have published their insights into the lives of Russia's imprisoned women.

Titled "Before and After Prison: Women's Stories," the book blends uncensored stories written by prisoners with a professional assessment of the plight of the country's female prison population.

"There were thirty of us sharing the same room in the colony," recalled Galina, a prisoner whose story is included in the book. "It was awful, and really felt like barracks. And there was only one toilet room — with two toilets in it — per one detachment of three hundred people, who had a total of half an hour in the morning to use this toilet. It was surreal. [...] We hardly ever had hot water, and the toilets, if they broke, would not be repaired. It was a concentration camp."

"I remember we did not have any water at all for a few days, and it was raining. We collected some rainwater that was falling from the roof in a basin, and then boiled it and drank it," Galina said.

According to official statistics, Russia's total prison population in 2012 amounted to 714,000, with women representing 59,000 of them, or 8.3 percent. Conditions in Russian prisons have been examined before but the research has mainly been carried out by lawyers and human rights advocates. The studies have also been general and have not touched on gender aspects at all. However, as the St. Petersburg-published book clearly proves, Russian prisons feature a series of ordeals that appear to have been designed to suppress femininity, the authors say.

A Kafkaesque lack of privacy and inexplicable humiliation was what the book's authors said shocked them the most in their interviewees' sobering accounts.

"One complaint that was repeated over and over again in the interviews was a devastating lack of personal space," said sociologist Yelena Omelchenko, a co-author of the book. "Whether you are eating or working or sleeping or showering, and even when you are using the toilet, you are exposed to others."

Toilets and showers in prisons do not have partitions. Remarkably enough, this shameful element is preserved in them even when the premises undergo full renovation. The principle of full deprivation of personal space is being kept intact.

"When I discovered, during the course of my research, how they renovated a toilet in one colony, I was stunned," Omelchenko recalled. "In front of a row of holes in the ground — not separated by partitions — they placed a large mirror. I am still not fully convinced that the person who was responsible for that interior design solution was not in fact a moral sadist."

Another distinct feature of Russian female prisons and colonies is that they create a system of severe suppression of femininity.

"Colored bed sheets are forbidden; and there are rules in jails stipulating that if you soil your bed sheets — for example, with menstrual blood — you will be punished for it," said sociologist Natalya Goncharova, a co-author of the book.

"When your period starts unexpectedly, you are not allowed to wash until the next allocated shift for showering, which could be the next day," the prisoner Galina remembered.

There is one myth that the study dispels — that relations between prisoners themselves are gentler in female jails and colonies.

"Women are cruel, and they are extremely nasty to each other, vicious as hell," said Yulia, a prisoner whose story is included in the book. "If you are ill, or weak or old, they will be sure to exploit you, humiliate you, harass you, sometimes just for fun. When someone was snoring, they would come and hit them with a shoe over the head — and if you complained, they would simply give the duty officer a chocolate bar or another sweetener to hush up the incident. We were working in a sewing workshop in the colony, and some vicious inmates would cut the items that the girls in my team made so that we would fail to fulfill the plan."

The strict system of surveillance that exists in Russian jails is made worse by the informal system of snitching.

"The system of squealing and earning high marks with the management for snooping on others, which was originally created in the Gulag [Soviet-era labor camps] and has effectively survived until the present day, is as strong in women's prisons as in men's ones," Omelchenko said.

According to the experts who wrote the book, one drastic difference between a male and a female prison or colony is that there are always lines of visitors standing in line to enter or waiting outside the men's jails. By contrast, visitor areas in women's prisons are striking for their emptiness and strong sense of abandonment.

"You immediately feel that loneliness abounds here; when a woman is given a prison term, in Russia this inevitably means almost complete exclusion from society at all levels," Goncharova said. "A sentenced woman is typically rejected by her husband or partner, her friends, her colleagues and social circle. By contrast, women rarely abandon men over imprisonment. On the contrary, women often give support to their partners who are put behind bars."

"Who visited me? If anyone came there, it was almost always our mothers; nobody else gives a damn," said Lyudmila, who served a five-year term in jail.

"Lawlessness, despair, devastation, hopelessness are the key words that describe the incarceration of our interviewees," said sociologist Gyuzel Sabirova, another of the book's co-authors.

The sociologists conducted 35 in-depth interviews with women who had served one or several terms in Russian jails. "The women were very different: They had committed different crimes, been given different sentences, their age and personal circumstances were also different, yet there were patterns that emerged that made them equal in the ordeal they had been through."

Anna Tyomkina, a doctor of philosophy and a senior lecturer at the European University in St. Petersburg, stressed that, although the subject of the research may seem marginal for the general public, the book is fascinating to read to anyone who considers themselves a human being.

"For me personally, this book was a revelation," Tyomkina said. "When reading the book, I remembered a time when, very recently, I was very ill and felt extremely vulnerable. I had very similar feelings back then to those that our heroines had: I was up against a system that was designed to cure, but was not helping me. Just like the prisons that, in theory, should prevent people from committing crimes in the future, but only make them ill, bitter and emotionally traumatized. We live in a society of hedonists and prefer to turn a blind eye to all things depressing, sad or unfair. This book is an essential read."

"Before and After Prison: Women's Stories" is published in Russian by Aleteya Publishing House. Price 250 rubles.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2012/12/04/book-reveals-plight-of-female-prisoners-a19942