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Prison Periods: Bodily Resistance to Gendered Control

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Abstract: Prisons are places of power and resistance. This article is based on original research material derived from Arabic, English, and Hebrew sources, including interviews with menstruating prisoners from Palestine, Northern Ireland, England, and the United States. I document and translate stories, including those of minors who had their first periods behind bars. I then show how several global prison structures fail to provide minimum support, from offering adequate sanitary products to accessing toilets and showers. I also ask what the menstruating body—and its treatment by prison guards and by prisoners—enables us to understand about the gendered realities of detention, and about the possibilities of resistance to those realities. The article argues that masculinization by the prison authorities through mechanisms of shaming and embarrassing of prisoners on periods is a crucial component of gendered control over bodies and spirits in detention. I examine the prison journey from interrogation rooms, court spaces, and prison cells, to the use of prison vehicles to transport prisoners between prisons and to/from courts, and “health care” spaces. I have structured the article around this spatialization to emphasize how gendered control goes beyond one space, and how all spaces illuminate different aspects of gendered control and masculinization. A key contribution in this article can be put as follows: while prisons use menstruation to consolidate gendered control over prisoners’ bodies, prisoners use those same bodies to resist such control not only of the prison authorities in question but also of detention more broadly. I conclude by making a case for prison abolition, paying particular attention to the nuances of prisons in settings of ongoing coloniality and authoritarianism.

Keywords: Prison, menstruation, period, resistance, culture

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This article contributes to research and conversation about menstruation in society broadly and in carceral spaces specifically. It shows how the spatialization of gendered control in prison takes place in prison cells, interrogation rooms, court spaces, transport vehicles, and “health care”¹ facilities. It is structured around this spatialization to emphasize how gendered control goes beyond one space, and how all prison spaces illuminate different aspects of control. In these spaces, I bring attention to connected issues related to menstruating through centring the voices of prisoners in a sampling of countries and situations, starting from Palestinian prisoners in Israeli prisons to Irish, English, and American contexts. Menstruating prisoners constitute the general theme of this research and are of particular interest given their experience in resisting the imposed oppressive power dynamics and authority. I weave their narratives together to demonstrate that the way periods are handled in prisons is not only gendered and controlled but also the focus of resistance.

I am centring the voices of menstruating prisoners in particular, rather than the voices of prison guards, security officers, and others who enforce power within prisons. Power shall not be studied from the centre only (centre here refers to the oppressors’ viewpoint), as this ignores the multiplicity of power relations in society and how these contentious relations work. In other words, instead of examining power from the perspective of those holding it, this article is about the subject (menstruating prisoners)² and about their prison experience. I do not mean that prisoners are completely powerless, and I will, in fact, shed light on the power of resistance through bodies, but in the prison setting, prisoners do not often hold the formal/official power that guards, security officers, and other prison authorities have. Prison authorities tend to decide when prisoners may live or must die, through controlling when and

what they eat, drink, or sleep (what Achille Mbembé (2003) has termed “necropolitics”). Examining power from the perspective of menstruating prisoners is useful for understanding how their resistance comes to be constructed by the oppressive power enforced on them.

The article treats menstruating prisoners as active agents who embark on bodily resistance against various forms of oppression. It also shows how bodily resistance to prison gendered control is connected to menstruation. I use the term “bodily resistance” here to refer to the use of the body to resist injustice—often as a last resort after all other mechanisms of resistance fail menstruating prisoners (Shwaikh 2020). This resistance takes place in different forms, including using all that is available in prison cells as alternatives to sanitary pads, including undershirts and blankets. Prisoners smuggle in pads, refusing to allow their captors to see them bleed. They also transform materials they receive from prison authorities into something more useful for their needs. For example, American prisoner Kimberly Haven (2020) learnt how to make her own tampons out of the poor menstrual products she was “given” while incarcerated. As was the case during the 1980s in Armagh jail (Northern Ireland), women also smeared their cells with menstrual blood as a form of protest. Part of this resistance is to also challenge prison “etiquettes” that prefer to hide all references to menstrual blood and instead make menstrual blood visible in prison.

I draw on narratives of incarcerated Palestinians in Israeli prisons. I conducted interviews with Palestinian women prisoners and complemented them with written testimonies and narratives from Palestinian journalist Reem Abu al-Laban; all this work was conducted and written between 2015 and 2021. The participants are mostly cited by first letters of their names or their nationalities to protect them from retaliation from prison authorities. The sample includes young and elderly, some of whom were acquainted with me before through activism work, and some were interviewed through the snowball method, introduced to me through other interlocutors. Interviews were semi-structured, allowing for flexibility and enabling generation of further questions that came up during the conversation. I also draw my case studies from prisons in the United States of America, Northern Ireland, and England. They offer a wide and synoptic panorama of the ways in which menstruating prisoners have resisted prison control over their bodies by using those same bodies to make political statements and either normalize speaking up about periods or find alternatives to menstruating products. The case studies also show some shared themes of prison gendered control during menstruation across the world.

Before delving into the case studies further, it is important to note that the vast literature on menstruation barely engages with menstruation in prisons/detention and, to the extent that it does, it happens within the field of criminology predominantly. I choose to connect menstruation in prisons to gender, space, and culture because such literature on menstruation rarely explicitly engages with prisons, so there is a value in bringing these bodies of knowledge together in a cross-disciplinary form and to build on knowledge that already exists in other fields. To do this, I rely on a growing body of primary and secondary literature that collects, categorizes, and analyses menstruation, including the works of Reem Abu al-Laban (2016) on the experience of Palestinian women in Israeli prisons and Theresa O’Keefe’s work (2006) on menstruation in Armagh jail. What all these works show is how there are prison “etiquettes” that may push menstruating prisoners to keep all conversations about periods secretive, demonstrating how prisons echo broader shaming patterns in society.

Gendered Control In and Outside Prisons

Menstruation remains a taboo in and outside prisons. Outside prisons, societal cultures ensure that commercials avoid using words such as blood or period and replace them with words to describe the effectiveness of menstruation products. In the same commercials, the blood’s red colour is replaced with blue liquid (Houppert 1999). Menstruation is also discussed behind closed doors, and the societal

sensitivity of such topics only “increases the difficulty and mental pressure already thrust upon these women” (Badarni 2013, 17). Importantly, the “taboo” attached to menstruation is not exclusive to any particular society, but in reality, and throughout history, menstruation has always been a “taboo” subject (Laws 1990). Menstruating women have been socially and physically isolated and prohibited from preparing food (Hays 1972; Weideger 1975; Martin 1989; Kowalski and Chapple 2000). Even in an era when “sex and sexuality are not the taboo topic they once were, menstruation remains closeted” (O’Keefe 2006, 537).

Prisoners have reflected on how these broader sociocultural taboos around menstruation transcend and pre-date their imprisonment. As former Irish Republican prisoner Brenda Murphy (1989) explains, “In Ireland you do not speak about your period. You do not even mention the word. My mother hardly ever mentioned it to us and we were a family of eight girls and one boy. You get your period, but you just do not talk about it. It is taboo” (226). In another context, Murphy narrates the case of a young woman who got her period between interrogation shifts that followed her arrest. She was forced to talk about it to a male officer, “I have my period,” she said. “I need some sanitary napkins and a wash.” The officer looked at her with disgust and said, “Have you no shame? I have been married twenty years and my wife would not mention things like that” (226-27). What is intriguing in the Irish case is that even Republican men did not speak about mistreatment of menstruating prisoners. In her work, Begoña Aretaxaga (1995) shared this recollection of Mary, a middle-aged Republican woman,

I remember one rally in which a girl released from Armagh spoke about what it was for them during their periods. It was very hard for her to talk about menstruation, to say that even during that time they could not get a change of clothes, could not get washed. And some people, including Republican men, were saying “How can she talk about that?” They did not want to hear that women were being mistreated in Armagh jail during their menstruation. And so, the Republican movement did not talk about it. They only talked about the men, but did not want to hear about girls. Some people just could not cope with that. (140)

A further account by former Republican prisoner Maureen Gibson shows that communities outside prisons did not necessarily comprehend how difficult it is to have periods in prisons and the further feelings of isolation Republican women felt (in Aretaxaga 1995, 185). In both accounts, women share a sense of betrayal by their own communities. This betrayal is partly a result of how menstruation is covered with shame and embarrassment in society. Today, it continues to be surrounded with taboos and myths, often used to exclude women from many spaces and aspects of socio-cultural and political life.

In prisons, menstruation is that time when women have to look for the nearly impossible to find sanitary products and to have access to showers and toilets. There are no legal universal frameworks that oblige prisons to provide menstrual products. In the United States, for example, thirty-eight states have no law requiring the provision of such products to prisoners (American Civil Liberties Union report 2019). Even when provided, prisons are spaces where menstrual products are often “rationed, restricted, traded, or used by guards in power games” (Bobel and Breanne 2020, 1008). Not only is there a shortage of sanitary products but also the ones provided are inadequate, tiny, of poor quality and lack adhesive. Prison authorities do not take into consideration that no two women’s experiences are identical, hence they assume all women need to same number of menstrual products. The result is some incarcerated menstruators are forced “to wear these for multiple days, which can cause bacterial or fungal infections, or lead to bleeding through clothing” (Bobel and Breanne 2020, 1008). Some prisoners are also forced to make menstrual products themselves from “shreds of clothes” or stuffing “from inside their state-issued mattresses” they have access to, which comes with health consequences from “toxic shock, to infection, to infertility” (Haven 2019). In immigration enforcement system in the United States, menstruating detainees face similar dilemmas. They have to rely on the

immigration enforcement system to provide adequate access to menstrual facilities and products. And those immigration systems fail to deliver. Some immigration facilities may have commissaries where sanitary products may not be stocked, or a menstruator may not have access or sufficient funds to purchase those given overpriced costs (Karin and Valeria 2021, 4-5). In such contexts, and in all others when prisons try to control the entry of sanitary products or increase their costs, they try to consolidate gendered control over menstruating bodies and their needs. It is important to add here that product access alone is not enough. Rather, the problem goes deeper to include other menstrual-related needs, including toilets, waste, and medicine. Additional issues include the connection of control related to menstruation and other reproductive and health control measures such as access to birth control or pain medication, information about menstruation-related impairments like endo and PCOS, and the history of forced hysterectomies or even shackling in prisons.

In addition to gendered control, prison authorities impose masculinist disciplinary practices to enforce some forms of prison “menstrual etiquettes” that relegate all things menstrual to the private space (O’Keefe 2006, 537). From Israeli prisons to prisons in Northern Ireland, England, and the United States, jailers would not shy away from practising shaming to make women less comfortable during menstruation. They ensure a sense of embarrassment and fear for prisoners on their periods. All tampons and sanitary pads are designed to be invisible to those within prisons, and if detected, they will be used by prison authorities to shame menstruating bodies. In some contexts, like in Israeli prisons, Palestinian women prisoners on menstruation try to avoid prison authorities, fearing shaming of their mental and psychological wellbeing and the consequent exploitation of them and their bodies. This is especially the case during interrogation when prison authorities use menstruation to exert further pressure and force women to confess. It is important here to note that these prisons’ gendered norms are a replica of societal gendered norms, if not worse and more violent: it continues to be shameful to be vocal about these needs in and outside prisons. A testimony of a released Palestinian woman prisoner shows just that,

I was in the middle of my period and reached an unbearable mental state—I ran out of pads and *was ashamed* to ask the prison guard for more. I did not know what language to speak to her or how. I *was* also *ashamed* because I *was uncomfortable* speaking with her about my intimate needs. (Badarni 2013, 16; emphasis added)

And this culture of shaming makes experiencing periods even harder since many prison guards are men who do not shy away from verbally and psychologically abusing menstruating prisoners. For some, the result is internalized suffering and trauma. A woman prisoner in a closed women’s prison in England, expressed these feelings well when she said, “I hate it [. . .] We have to suffer in silence. You certainly do not talk about it or let people know that you are on [. . .] And you definitely do not talk about it in front of men. They would run a mile (laughs)” (Smith 2009, 6). An English woman prisoner said that if she has a particularly heavy period, the prison authorities do not want to hear about it, and “just put their heads in the sand” (ibid., 13). What stands out in the two testimonies above is that period is a word that is surrounded by taboos, and so menstruating prisoners avoid mentioning it in their interviews and when speaking with prison authorities. The testimonies also show how not only do prison officers not want to hear about periods, but they also keep sanitary supplies limited to reinforce prisoners’ feelings of powerlessness. Prisons are spaces of power, and the prison authorities will do everything in their capacities to ensure prisoners remains powerless, even if this means controlling menstruating prisoners’ cleanliness. In the words of ex-American prisoner Chandra Bozelko (2015), who spent more than six years at York Correctional Institution in Niantic, Connecticut, “to ask a macho guard for a tampon is humiliating. But it is more than that: it is an acknowledgment of the fact that, ultimately, the prison controls your cleanliness, your health and your feelings of self-esteem” (50). And this is how

menstruating prisoners, and their bodies may be humiliated to the extent that the basic intimate needs are not often met.

In the next sections, I show how prison attempts to control women's bodies through gendered violence starts as soon as women are taken from their homes to prisons. Most examples will be from Palestine unless they are noted as otherwise (from England, Northern Ireland, and the United States). This global dimension is used to note that the prison industrial complex across the world is inherently violent. In Palestine, as soon as the Israeli military forces imprison Palestinian women, whether from their homes or while in the street, at midnight or in the day, they will mostly be transferred to interrogation rooms. From interrogation rooms to court spaces, prison cells, military vehicles and "health care" areas, everything can be violated including women's bodies. This violation is not only by sexual assault but also by exploiting them during their menstruation to exert additional pressure to provide the information needed to complete the interrogation process, which often extends from several hours to weeks.

1. In Interrogation Rooms³

Women prisoners may be trapped in interrogation rooms where, in some cases, they may not even be provided with paper napkins (or other means) to prevent the leakage of blood during their periods, which may exceed the week. The violence continues as many women prisoners are not allowed to take showers or use the toilet from time to time during the interrogation period. They may be forced to complete the interrogation without changing their blood-stained clothes. E. E., whose first incarceration was in 1987 and spent fourteen years in total in Israeli prisons, was one of those prisoners, and throughout her interrogation period, she "was wearing the same clothes" as the Israeli authorities did not give her any of her other clothes. Even when she had access to water in the prison cell after she left the interrogation room, she "had to use cold water, then wear soiled clothes" (Abu al-Laban 2016, translated by Shwaikh). This only multiplied her pain. In other cases, all what is available is tissue papers. A twenty-year-old Palestinian woman (who chose to stay anonymous) recalled her experience, "I was interrogated for eight hours, and every half an hour I went to the bathroom, and I used to join my feet while sitting, and in this way, I was reducing the amount of blood coming, especially as I had put amounts of tissue paper on my underwear" (Abu al-Laban 2016, translated by Shwaikh). Similar tactics are used in interrogation rooms against women prisoners in other contexts. In her essay, Kate Smith (2009), discusses the experience of a prisoner in a women's prison in England, "I came on and I asked if I could go and change my underwear and have a wash. I was told that I could not and so I had to stay in the same dirty knickers" (12). All these stories show one thing: how shame has a color, not a name. The masculinist logic here is clear: it is not just male guards and prison officers who do this, but female prison guards and wardens are integral to reinforcing it in the prison institution. All work hand in hand to control women's bodies and their intimate needs and enforce a sense of powerlessness.

2. In court spaces

Courts are where prisoners receive a decision on how long their sentences will be, if any. For women prisoners who are minors, and especially those who are also newly imprisoned, the trauma can be more complicated than for adults, and the violence is often multiplied. While conducting this research, I came across stories in which the first menstrual cycle shocked minors in prison courts, leaving red marks on their clothes, and they were unable to deal with it. Most young Palestinian women in Israeli prisons report having "irregularity in their dates of their monthly period, apparently as a result of their precarious mental state or some hormonal imbalance in their bodies" (Badarni 2013, 7). Ehteram

Ghazzawna of Addameer Prisoner Support and Human Rights Association recorded a story of a fifteen-year-old Palestinian young woman who, sitting in a court chair, started to tremble because she got her period. When she stood up, the lawyer in charge of her defence found her clothes soiled with blood. This is not the only instance of a complete disregard for women's needs during their periods. In a similar account, a Palestinian prisoner said,

While in the court, I was surprised by a sea of blood [. . .] My underwear became filled with blood, and I could only lift my pink dress up to my waistline to hide blood stains and sit on the seat so that I would not be smeared in court.

I did not feel the pain of the period at the time, because the pain that was killing me was that coming from the interrogator's scream. I was tired of the interrogation, and for many hours I sat motionless on the chair. (Abu al-Laban 2016, translated by Shwaikh)

She added that other Palestinian prisoners were screaming in pain when their periods came. In a women's prison in England, the court experience impacted the mental health of a woman prisoner so much that her period stopped for a long time,

My periods stopped for a long while. I think it was the whole trauma of the court case, the sentence, everything. It is like you have lost everything. Everything that is familiar is gone. It was a horrible, horrible time . . . Losing my period in many ways was quite symbolic, the last straw. I was this close to breaking point. (Smith 2009, 16)

The testimony here shows the impact of losing getting periods in prisons. It also shows that the effects of imprisonment live on in women's bodies even after the imprisonment itself has ended, thus inviting us to reimagine carceral life cycles.⁴ Prison authorities invade this most intimate space, not only through physical means but also through psychological torture, from screaming at the prisoners and isolating them to ignoring their intimate needs. These stories tell us about how prisons respond to menstruation with control and power, most immediately, but also about strategies of gendered control within prisons through more suppression that negatively impacts prisoners' bodies and health in the longer run.

3. In Prison Cells

Following interrogation and court cases, prisoners are often transferred to join other prisoners in prison cells. The issue of lack of sanitary products is prevalent in most prisons. In Israeli prisons, for example, a certain number of tiny sanitary pads may be allocated to women prisoners. Prisoner E. E. told me in an interview that these products are "thin." A former woman prisoner agreed, "I was using three pieces of sanitary napkins that were provided to us by the prison administration, but that was not enough, they were thin" (Abu al-Laban 2016). E. E. also mentioned that the prison administration distributed only a limited number of sanitary pads to the prisoners and that they were less than needed (Abu al-Laban 2016). A third prisoner at Hasharon Prison recollected, "the pads are of inferior quality and often fail to meet the needs of some of the prisoners during their monthly periods" (Badarni 2013, 17). According to reports from the Public Committee Against Torture (PCATT), every Palestinian woman receives two or three rolls of toilet paper and ten pads per month (2011-2012) (Badarni 2013, 17). This does not accommodate for each woman's individual needs. It is not unusual though when compared to other prison contexts; in American prisons, for example, prisoners are usually provided with insufficient pads per cycle, varying greatly depending on the facility, the governing laws, and practical implementation (among other factors). These products are still not enough to some prisoners, as one prisoner said,

My period lasts seven days . . . Sometimes I have to wear four [pads] at a time because they are so thin [. . .] Women who needed more had to apply for a special permit, which in some prisons included having to show their used napkins before they could ask for new ones. (Period website 2006)

Chandra Bozelko (2015), wrote to *The Guardian* in detail about the quality of sanity pads in American prisons,

The lack of sanitary supplies is so bad in women prisons that I have seen pads fly right out of an inmate's pants: prison maxi pads do not have wings and they have only average adhesive so, when a woman wears the same pad for several days because she cannot find a fresh one, that pad often fails to stick to her underwear and the pad falls out. It is disgusting but it is true.

In England, the situation is grave too. The research of Dr. Kate Smith (Griffith University) examines women prisons in the country and shows a high level of menstrual distress among prisoners whose bodily needs are often secondary to the prison regime's needs. There are documented stories of prisoners who had to ask for tampons but are not given one, and they had to then be examined while blood is trickling down their legs. One woman had her clothes removed and was dressed in a paper suit, and despite being on her period at the time, her underwear was removed, and she was refused sanitary protection (Period website 2016). In another interview by Smith, a woman in a prison in England says,

I work in the kitchens and we have to wear whites, which can be quite *embarrassing* when you have your period, if you come on unexpectedly or if you are very heavy. The pads they give you here do not give much protection and several times I have leaked through. (12; emphasis added)

In American prisons, the conditions forced on menstruating prisoners are humiliating. A particularly shocking account discusses a strip and body cavity search in a women's jail, in which women had to remove their soiled tampons and pads in front of a group of deputies (Roberts 2020). In other cases, women bleed down their legs and onto the floor while deputies were accused of verbally abusing them (ibid.).

Other necessities and personal hygiene—soap, shampoo, toothpaste—are not easily accessible in prison cells. In the Palestinian context, prisoners are forced to buy them at the “price-gouging prison canteen” (Badarni 2013, 18). In Sahar Francis's (2017) words, “the prison administration does not provide adequate personal hygiene items, forcing female prisoners to buy these items from the prison's canteens with their own money” (53). This is economic exploitation of prisoners, and the Israeli (prison) authorities are the only beneficiary, exerting financial and psychological pressure on prisoners to achieve their own (financial here) goals.

The testimonies from Israeli, American, and English prisons show many similarities in how women prisoners in prison spaces struggle to receive adequate sanitary products, and how prison authorities try to control women bodies' needs during their periods. Here, the mere request of sanitary products from prison officers can lead to verbal assault and psychological torture. Such requests are used to embarrass and stigmatize women on their periods, a stigma⁵ that also exists outside prisons where the mere public show of menstrual blood or asking for menstruation product may be seen as unclean and unruly. Importantly, as the next section explores, to ask for those pads disrupts this culture of silence surrounding periods and is a form of bodily resistance.

4. Prison Vehicles

In Israeli prisons, *al-posta* (פוסטה) is used to transfer prisoners from one place to another. It is a military vehicle belonging to the Israeli Prison Services (IPS). The IPS often use it as a means to transport prisoners. But it is more than that. For women prisoners, it is more of a small prison inside a vehicle, used for long hours without sufficient access to toilets or washrooms. It takes up to three days to transfer prisoners from prison cell to court. It is a painful journey, and more so if women prisoners are on their periods or are injured. Former prisoner R. A., nineteen years old, was incarcerated for four months in Hasharon Israeli Prison, while injured. She recounted her experience in *al-posta* as follows,

I was in a lot of pain when I was in [*al-posta*], especially as my left arm was injured. I could not move much, there was no room for breathing. The air comes from a small window. The air conditioner comes out very cold in the winter and its temperature increases in the summer. This is totally inhumane especially when sitting for more than three hours inside, and the wound was bleeding so how would it be when it is the menstrual period time? (Abu al-Laban 2016, translated by Shwaikh)

The answer to R. A.'s question is clear in the account of another woman prisoner, narrated by former prisoner Khalida Jarrar,

Al-posta is a torture vehicle. I remember that one of the female prisoners was severely injured. She was taken to the court on her own, and then her period surprised her. She was in a critical health condition that would not allow her to enter the toilet alone. She was transported through *al-posta*, and one cannot imagine the magnitude of the pain suffered by her at the time. (Abu al-Laban 2016, translated by Shwaikh)

The testimonies show how prisons continue to be gendered and masculinist, and how moving from interrogation rooms to court spaces, prison cells, and *al-posta* does not change the reality of the challenges of menstruation for women on their periods.

5. Prison “Health Care”

Women are uncomfortable with the “health care” provided within prisons, and in particular, having male prison staff deal with their intimate needs. Women prefer women medical staff to discuss menstrual symptoms or even sexual abuse, which happens at the hands of both female and male prison officers. These intimate issues are still not easily discussed with female prison staff, let alone males. The experience of recounting such accounts may also be traumatic for menstruating prisoners. And even when such issues are discussed with physicians and doctors, women face a lack of empathy; their complaints are not often taken seriously, and their lived experiences are disregarded.

Interviews conducted for this research with Palestinian ex-prisoner M. Q. shows that in Israeli prisons, the most that prisoners are provided is paracetamol. It is supplied for any kind of pain, and even the knowledge by women of their own body is routinely denied, an issue that they face in prisons worldwide. In other global contexts, we see similar tactics used against women prisoners. In a women’s prison in England, for example, two prisoners summarized the health conditions in prisons as follows, “for God’s sake, I know my own body better than he [prison staff] does and I know when things are not right. I told him what was happening and about all the bleeding, the changes I was feeling and he just looked me up and down and totally dismissed me” (Smith 2009, 19). The prisoner adds, “I was worried because my periods had stopped and I was only in my 30s and I remember this old guy just basically said to me ‘what do you expect?’ I think he just looked at me and why I was in [prison]. I got no advice, no treatment, nothing. All they give you is paracetamol” (ibid.). This testimony shows a sense of devaluation of women’s prisoners and their experiences, a distressing and patronizing moment, with an

impact that goes further than the time it happened and continues to affect women's life for much longer than the *moment*.

Bodily Resistance in Prisons

Bodily resistance is an important feature of prison resistance to gendered control. It is often used as a last resort after all other mechanisms to address a situation fail prisoners. In this section, I examine bodily resistance in more detail, unpacking the Palestinian case first followed by Irish, American, and English contexts. While some resistance mechanisms in these contexts are similar, some are clearly different—all depending on the types and conditions of prisons.

In Israeli prisons, women may refuse to allow their captors to see them bleed. They try to find alternatives to sanitary products to avoid prison control in the forms of shaming and exploitation of their psychological conditions to pressure them to confess. These alternatives may be risky and detrimental to their health. In my conversation with former woman prisoner S. H., she relayed to me that, in one instance in 2020, a Palestinian woman prisoner had to have a few sanitary pads “smuggled to her prison cell in another prisoner's clothes.” These attempts are risky because if detected by Israeli prison authorities, women prisoners will be punished. The testimony also shows that sanitary pads may exist in different prison cells unevenly, and here prisons imagine some bodies as ones who deserve more or less rights, including supplies of pads. The uneven access to pads is a policy of divide and rule in which Israeli prison authorities try to pit prisoners against one another. For women prisoners, this is a resistance battle, similar to ones outside the prison walls, that challenges the colonial system through exploring alternatives and possibilities. Women's attempts to find alternatives may also cause long-term negative health consequences, as in the case of cutting women's clothes to use as pads. During this research, I came across stories from the 1980s until 2021 when Palestinian women utilized undershirts and even blankets during their periods. In one story by former political prisoner E. E., she gave an example from the 1980s of women's alternatives during menstruation,

I cut off the coarse blanket in the interrogation room and used it instead of sanitary napkins to prevent blood from running on my underwear. I stayed in the interrogation room for 40 days. I did not receive sanitary napkins, and the menstrual cycle surprised me twice during the interrogation period. (Abu al-Laban 2016, translated by Shwaikh)

Former prisoner I. N. was also arrested in 1987 and had a similar experience. She said that women prisoners at the time had to use *fanel* (women's undershirt) and “coarse blankets” when they knew it was time to get their period,

The *fanel* was our only refuge in 1987. We used the white *fanel* in interrogation rooms instead of “sanitary pads” that were not available at the time, and sometimes we cut off parts of the “coarse” blanket to use for the entire duration of the interrogation, which was for 13 days. [Women prisoners also] used pieces of sponge, when available, in a specific way, to keep their clothes clean from menstrual blood. (Abu al-Laban 2016, translated by Shwaikh)

In another story, a Palestinian ex-prisoner recollected a shocking account of another prisoner who had to use an old blanket as a sanitary pad,

I remember once I was with another prisoner. She was on her period. She demanded [the Israeli authorities] in Arabic, in English, and in Hebrew that they give her anything she could use. Nobody listened to her. They put us both in isolated cells next to each other, separately. An isolated cell, for those who do not know, is basically a bathroom. It is a small space, much like a bathroom. At the end of the room, there is a toilet; and you sleep on a slightly elevated surface. On this surface, there is a very thin mattress. Underneath this mattress, there are dead insects. It is dirty. It smells horrible. And it is covered in a blanket. And this blanket . . . the number of prisoners who have used it, without it being washed, is likely in the thousands. It had not been washed in decades because its smell was rotten. The room was filled with spiderwebs, insects, cockroaches. Small ones, big ones. Because you are in a bathroom, basically. She started crying during the interrogation, when she asked them for hygiene products. She pleaded: "Please, help me. Give me anything." They refused. She *was forced to rip apart the blanket with her own teeth*. This blanket was extremely dirty. I am sure of it. And I started crying. I asked "how could you use this blanket?" She said "I have no other choice." This is the most basic right a woman deserves in prison, during an interrogation. She is a woman, and this is a basic necessity. (Ayah 2020; emphasis added)

These testimonies are a reminder of how prisons are violent spaces that are there to control, suppress, and humiliate women and their most intimate needs. They also show how prison resistance extends from finding alternatives to claiming ownership of their bodies and lives, even when these forms of resistance are fraught with difficulties and do not apply to spaces like *al-posta* or interrogation rooms when neither smuggling of sanitary products nor using other means to stop blood leakage may be possible. Those who do not have access to *fanel* or a blanket may be forced to complete the interrogation or *al-posta* journey without changing their blood-stained clothes (E. E. in Abu al-Laban 2016). This highlights further prison control mechanisms to keep the power of the bodies limited. Still, what stands in all these stories is the search for possibilities and alternatives, something that defines the imprisonment experience and wider everyday reality in Palestine (Shwaikh 2018). This search for options is clearly explained by Palestinian ex-political prisoner, Khalida Jarrar,

In prison, we challenge the abusive prison guard together, with the same will and determination to break him so that he does not break us . . . Prison is the art of exploring possibilities; it is a school that trains you to solve daily challenges using the simplest and most creative means, whether it be food preparation, mending old clothes, or finding common ground so that we may all endure and survive together. For Palestinians, the prison is a microcosm of the much larger struggle of a people who refuse to be enslaved on their own land, and who are determined to regain their freedom, with the same will and [vigour] carried by all triumphant, once-colonized nations. (Baroud 2020)

Another aspect that stands out in the accounts above is how menstruating prisoners prefer to avoid being vocal and loud about their periods to prison authorities. Even when they search for other options, they do it secretly. There are stories of women prisoners in both American and English contexts who make the same choice to remain silent about their menstrual needs. For instance, they make their own menstruation products rather than asking for more from prison officers or risking bleeding through their clothes. I came across a few cases of American prisoners making "jail tampons" from poor-quality pads (BRAWS 2018, 20). Of course, there are various health risks here. To mention one example, prisoner Kimberly Haven turned prison pads into tampons and ended up requiring a hysterectomy (Haven 2019).

Some menstruating prisoners (in Irish, English, and American contexts) seem to be more vocal about these needs even though they risk being shamed when they request sanitary products. The clear difference in the Palestinian context is the exploitation aspect of menstruating prisoners by the colonial prison forces. For example, Israeli authorities tend to force prisoners to confess or uncover details that may put their other Palestinians in danger, which is probably why Palestinian women prisoners prefer to keep their periods secret. In Israeli interrogation rooms, the prisoner is not only asked to confess her

role in the resistance, if any, but also those she has worked with and, at times, even about her relatives, who may not be directly involved. And it is relevant to add here that the interrogation phase in Israeli prisons does not end when women prisoners leave interrogation rooms for prison cells. Women may still be interrogated throughout their time in prisons, and the prison authorities are not above using forms of psychological torture to pressure women prisoners to confess. So, their attempts to keep their periods secret from prison authorities may be a protective mechanism not only to protect themselves but also the Palestinian people.

In Northern Ireland in the 1980s, women took resistance to another level. They joined the “no wash protest,” where in the context of limited options, they fell back on using “their own waste products as symbolic weapons against the assumed civilization of the prison authorities and that of the British State” (Wahidin 2019, 114). They also used menstrual blood on the walls on Armagh jail (O’Keefe 2006, 549). This type of protest had no precedent in the existing political culture in Ireland (Aretxaga, 124). It sparked a debate within the women’s movement in Northern Ireland. The result was a split within the feminist community. The Republican women prisoners saw the women’s political struggle in Armagh as a feminist issue. They demanded that the mainstream feminists of the North support them but the latter did not adopt Armagh as a feminist issue. The Republican women then strongly organized among their community. This then led to the birth of Republican feminism (O’Keefe, 2006, 549; see also O’Keefe 2003).

The Republican women did not weaponize their periods out of choice. It was a last resort resistance tactic to the mistreatment they faced in Armagh Prison, which extended to their most intimate needs when prison authorities restricted the number and quality of sanitary products. In Northern Ireland, prisoners had to ask for sanitary products, and when they did, they would be shamed, as explained by a former Irish prisoner,

It depended on who was on and even as to how many they give you. They just *would have thrown them into the cell, without any cellophane*. Sometimes, that all depended on who was there at the time and that’s when we thought we would have picked up infections and stuff. Funnily enough there were very few infections. There were some, but not as much as we thought was going to happen. (Wahidin 2019, 116; emphasis added)

Asking for sanitary products in itself is resistance of the masculinist “etiquette” that prefers silence around menstrual cycles. This resistance redefined the silencing of Irish prisoners’ situation by “transgressing the confines of the prison walls by marking the prison officer’s clothes, hair, and body with the stench of the protest which was inadvertently brought home to the prison officer’s family” (Wahidin 2019, 118). This is about making menstruation visible not only for prisoners on menstruation but also prison officers and their families. It is a clear challenge to menstrual prison practices, directly challenging a culture of silencing and shaming around periods.

Likewise, in American and English contexts, the menstrual cycle is *sometimes* made visible in prisons, in a clear resistance not only to menstrual prison “etiquette” that prefers all reference to blood to stay secret but also to the wider society where such a topic remains taboo even today. Even when made visible, the feeling of shame may still exist. In the words of American ex-prisoner Amy Fettig (2021), “I have passed my tampons in clear plastic bags through prison security and waited for smirking male officers to say something so I could respond forcefully without shame, but I *was secretly embarrassed*” (76; emphasis added). As soon as the menstrual cycle is made visible, the body becomes a powerful weapon and a site of resistance, not an object that the prison authorities can control and discipline. Menstruation becomes much more than blood or sanitary products. It becomes a political statement, a collective call that pushes us to listen to women’s voices and may even challenge the root causes of stigmas that surround periods.

Towards Prison Abolition

We have a role to play as writers and readers in resisting prison power, and by extension prison shaming, embarrassing, and violence. We start this process by centring and amplifying menstruating prisoners' experiences. We shall amplify those experiences not only when women resist and break the silence around menstruation but also when they are bearers of violence, pain, and suffering (Wahidin 2019, 128). This pain shall not be normalized or romanticized. It shall not be weaponized to shame or abuse menstruating prisoners. It shall rather be used to shame prison authorities and hold them accountable. It is also important that menstruators are treated with dignity and humanity. The denial (or restriction) of hygiene products or access to menstruating facilities violates human decency (Shaw 2019, 475). Access to such products and facilities is a "basic right that [. . .] inmates have historically been deprived of" (Moye 2020). In the words of Chandra Bozelko (2020) who experienced detention first hand, without adequate sanitary supplies, "having access to sanitary pads is not a luxury—it is a basic human right. Just like no-one should have to beg to use the toilet, or be given toilet paper, women too must be able to retain their dignity during their menstrual cycle." Legislations need to be put in place to provide such supplies everywhere. This is not too much to ask for.

But the provision of these products is one step in the prisoners' struggle for justice. There is an even more important conversation to have about systems of oppression which allow incarceration to be the only solution to societal problems. Our society has for long been trapped in the prison mindset, and this research is a reminder that there is no such thing as a good cage for a human being. Mass incarceration will not make us safer either (Stemen 2007). Abolition is a necessary conversation here. It includes discussion about why incremental reforms (from better sanitary pads to access to toilets and medicine) that specifically address the scope of the problem articulated in the rest of the article are not necessarily enough in the pre-abolition stages. The tailored response starts with getting to the root of the problem: prisons are criminogenic or produce crimes (Cid 2009; also see Mariame Kaba 2006). They are not fair solutions to societal problems. It is time that we ask what replaces prisons? Would an alternative space address our societal issues? The alternatives need to be collectively-led, involving all communities. Justice that relies on punishment (as in prisons) is counterproductive. Moving beyond punishment, there are several alternatives. One is transformative justice which responds to violence without creating more violence. It defines crimes as harm (or disease) and aims to repair this harm as much as possible, placing the power to respond back into the hands of those most affected by such harm. This could lead to greater agency over how to respond to acts of harm (Mingus 2018, also see Cradle Community 2021, 193, 210, Wozniak 2008). There is also restorative justice which brings into communication those harmed and those responsible for the harm. It allows them all to take part in repairing the harm and finding a way forward. It is part of larger restorative practices which allow people to recognize that their actions impact others, and that we all are responsible and accountable for our choices (Restorative Justice Council, also see Braithwaite 1999, Zehr 1990, 80).

I find both restorative and transformative justice conversations particularly important because they push us to question the structures that (re)produce societal problems and re-imagine the world without prison spaces. They are relevant for understanding gendered control and resistance, in particular, because they let us work for a world where collective justice is central to our conversations and everyday actions and choices. A just world is a better world, with boundless possibilities, where the structures that produce violence in the forms of colonialism, authoritarianism, capitalism (racialized and gendered), and other such ideologies are abolished—it is where everyone lives in dignity, free from violence over their lives and bodies. These conversations, as Ruth Wilson Gilmore remind us, also invite us to think about interconnections among larger structures that lead to the creation of prisons (Kushner 2019). Here, it is important to re-evaluate all

systems of oppression and get to the root causes of the real problems: Why are prisons still the first and only resort to societal problems? Why do prisoners receive very little medical care? Why are menstruating prisoners around the world still fight to get adequate sanitary products and access to menstruating services? Answering such questions shall bring us closer to re-imagining a world that is built on transformative and restorative justice, including *abolishing* of structures that make prisons the first resorts to all problems from poverty to drugs, and political dissent. Abolition is an invitation to re-imagine policing, security, and incarceration as we know them, as the main and dominant forms of “justice.” Moving beyond prisons requires community-led transformative alternatives that re-think prisons and challenge its existence as the sole way to achieve collective justice. And the bottom line in all this is: justice cannot and will not be achieved through shaming, exploitation, or other forms of punishment.

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Notes

1. I put “health care” between two quotation marks because it is care in name only. In other words, it does not address all aspects of health in the necessary ways.

2. It is important to note here that not all those who menstruate are women, and not all women menstruate. There are menstruators who self-define as trans, Queer, non-binary, and intersex. The article uses “menstruating prisoners” or “menstruating bodies” when the gender of those on periods is not known for the researcher.

3. Prison spatialization (starting with “interrogation rooms”) is not necessarily linear in the way this article structures it. Israeli Prison Services, for example, may move Palestinian prisoners to interrogation rooms after they serve a period of time in prison cells.

4. I thank Roxani Krystalli for helping me draw out this point and several other points in this piece. A particularly powerful work by Krystalli to note here is “Narrating Victimhood: Dilemmas and (In)dignities” (2021) which shapes my understanding around how victimhood can be a source of power, activism, and agency.

5. I want to draw readers’ attention to a particularly important and relevant piece by Jasmine Gani (2021) on stigmatisation/othering of Muslims and how the colonizers try to demonstrate their own superiority by humiliating their targets.

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