

# Beyond Prison Walls

## Grantee

Zakira by Ramzi Haidar

## Project

Photography Training Workshops at Barbar Khazen Women's Prison

Story collected by Zena Takieddine.

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Zakira is an all-volunteer organization devoted to the promotion of photography in Lebanon as an art form, a means of honest reporting and a professional skill. We applied for an AFAC RTR grant in 2012 to run a photography training workshop at the Barbar Khazen Women's Prison and I cannot tell you what a deep impact this has had on the inmates. It has been a year-long project and, since its completion in 2013, we haven't had the heart to tell them that the project is over. So, buying time to fundraise again, we told the women we are simply away on other projects and that a second round of the workshop will resume soon.

Each prisoner is a world. Those aged between 20 and 30 are house maids who have run away from their employers and are accused of theft. A lot of them have come to Lebanon from Africa to work as janitors and house cleaners. For them, a problem that can be solved in one day simply drags for months and months simply because they have no one to defend them. More severely, there are women who have been involved in violence or in drugs... a murder in the family, for example, self-defense against rape. Many of them are also 'married' to local men who are their pimps. Most of these women are from neighboring Arab countries, like Syria, and more distant Arab countries, like Tunisia. Lebanese women make up the smallest portion of the inmates. Mostly, they are held for prostitution or for drug-dealing.

Our photography workshop at the prison was very powerful. Because of our presence, all the rooms of the prison opened to each other and all the inmates got to meet each other and learn more about each other in spontaneous ways. They were no longer secluded in different groups and different cells. Our workshop was an opportunity for them to meet and to make human contact among themselves. We are talking about 60 women, sometimes even 75 women. They waited for us eagerly, each week.

At the end of the training, we got permission to do an art exhibition of their work and to publish a catalogue of their photo essays. You have no idea how healing it was for these women to have a space to communicate their inner realities and their hopes. It humanizes them.



## Commentary

**Perspective: Camera, Image and Memory in the Khazen Barbar Prison**

By Cathy Khattar

The camera captures moments of life... a smile, a dream, or maybe just a silent scene that may never again pass by.

The camera, it captures moments and isolates them from their reality for eternity.

Photographs are a prison of sorts, though perhaps less painful. The picture always has a much stronger presence in memory.

With the work of 'Zakira', the photograph has been able to break through prison cells and to liberate, even if just for a few brief hours every week, the inmates of Barbar Khazen's women's prison.

Zakira's AFAC-funded project is a photography training workshop for the Barbar Khazen inmates. Unlike the inmates, the Zakira team has entered the prison of their own free will, bringing together teachers, cameras, a variety of skills and a willingness to engage. They offer what they have to those women long forgotten in their prison cells.

This photography workshop project was held over one



year and was able to help more than 50 prisoners to transform their worlds, switching their roles from those who are observed and under surveillance to those who are observers - from objects to subjects. Through their camera lenses, the women rediscovered their prison space in a new way. A small area where the time passed drearily became invigorated with the energy and communication of the workshop. The area became the world of the 'other', a space for discovering the play of light and shadow, a space wider and more welcoming than the entire city.

The women found a sense of ownership of themselves. I could feel it, it was palpable and moving. The workshops helped them reconnect to who they are as human beings.

During their two-hour photography sessions, they were not the accused or the disdained. Rather, they were individuals capable of learning new skills. They were creative and sensitive, they inspired our appreciation.

At the end, were the workshops merely a way to pass the time? To overcome the routine of prison life? To have an excuse to step outside the locked prison cell? Or were they dreams for a different future? Means for returning to a society that was less than sympathetic?

Who knows... Each woman has her own unique story. Nevertheless, the positive impact of this experience is undeniable. It was written all over their faces, their smiles, their warm welcome of their teachers, their passion to learn. They explored the latest on digital photography, examining the cameras in their laps behind their walls.

The impact went beyond the prisoners and could also be witnessed on the wardens and guards. By the end of the training, during the closing celebration, everyone was clapping their hands in celebration, dancing, and sharing dessert together, prisoners and wardens alike. The harsh

circumstances that defined their relationship seemed to evaporate, even for just that hour.

The impact on the teachers too cannot be ignored either. The teachers, all women, entered the prison for the first time, probably somewhat afraid, certainly carrying many questions. Would they choose to return, knowing the inmates eagerness for their company? Would they rather forget the sound of the locks and keys behind them every time they departed?

In prison, during the sessions and the end-of-training celebration, the world was different. Even inmates that were non-Lebanese - foreign laborers and house maids that have been imprisoned for various reasons - were also part of this small world. Despite their poor language and their isolation, they gathered around and danced to music whose words they did not understand. They took pictures of fragments of blue skies that promised them freedom and a return home one day.

Certainly, art is not only elitist. It can also be participatory, inclusive for all people. Zakira's project shows us that we may discover the artistic spirit even in the most miserable places; places that are far from freedom, creativity and open horizons...