

### **THREE**

#### **“WHEN WORDS MEAN A LOT”: THE EXPERIENCES OF FEMALE PRISONERS IN SENEGAL AND THE EFFECTS OF THE INCARCERATION ON THEIR FAMILIES**

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Sabrina, a 25-year-old Senegalese woman of Lebanese descent, offers an interesting perspective on the experiences of female inmates in Senegal’s prisons and the impact of incarceration on a family. An art professional, she along with her husband, was indicted for complicity to murder and sentenced to ten years at the Rufisque Women’s Prison. A mother of a one-year-old child from whom she was separated, she described life in Rufisque as a world of cruelty, injustice, and power abuse. She considered death as the only way to end her suffering. Her story is one of many, and this study is an in-depth examination of the impact of women’s incarceration on families in Senegal.

Interviews with female inmates shed light on how incarceration affects their lives, as well as their relationships with family members. The tone and the language they used to describe their prison experiences speak volumes about how life behind bars results in significant disruption and loss of family ties. Moreover, the stigma associated with imprisonment in Senegal only adds to the harm suffered by female inmates, thus making a return to everyday life after prison even more difficult. Long-held beliefs in Senegal deemed prisons as shameful while the disgraced image that inmates acquire also impacts their loved ones, causing more disruptions among family systems.

According to my informants, the incarceration of a female negatively affects the quality of marriage as well as the functioning of the family solidarity and system. In addition, the psychological effects of imprisonment, the necessity of adjusting to prison life, and detention conditions have also negative and long-term consequences on inmates and their families. Yet to survive, female inmates often have to redefine family relationships and negotiate their lives, in particular the power relationships within prisons. The aim of this study is threefold: First, to provide a historical background on women and prisons in post-colonial Senegal, second, to delineate the problem areas in the impact of the

incarceration of female offenders on their families, and third, to discuss the redefinition of family relationships in a context of survival or accommodation of prison life.

### **1. Women and Prisons in Senegal**

Patricia O'Brien argues persuasively that "historians must begin to write the history of prisons from the inside out...Prisoners were not an inert collectivity on whom the new disciplinary regime effected its changes" (1982, pp. 54). In order to understand the prison community, "it is essential to know who lived in it" (*ibid.*), but also to measure how prison experiences affect families. This paper explores another aspect of imprisonment in Senegal: the experiences of female offenders and the impact of their incarceration on their families. The topic, which has not as yet been studied, is a contribution to the history of the family as well as that of the prison in Senegal.

The lives experienced by some Senegalese women in prisons and the impact of their incarceration on their families are fundamentally a dynamic social process. However, only recently has attention been directed to the conceptualization of the prison experiences of Senegalese women and the gendered nature of their crimes and punishments (Konaté, 1997, 1999, 2003, 2005, and 2007). Due to that, the presence of female inmates is rarely mentioned in the history of prisons in Senegal. Indeed, Senegalese historians have produced a large scholarship that explores the emergence and evolution of penal institutions (Thioub, 2003, Séne, 2004, Bâ, 2004, and Konaté, 2012). Much recent research into the transformation of prisons in post-colonial Senegal has revealed a more complex reality of the world of prisons. Yet, such research is limited by its failure to take into consideration the incarceration of women and the impact of their in-prison experiences on families. By overlooking the variable of female offenders' family ties, prison historians have ignored an important aspect of the nature of imprisonment in Senegal. My conversations with female inmates suggest that the existence or absence of contact with families and family support during the period of incarceration sheds light on how they did cope with life behind bars or did fail to do so.

In January 1930, the prison population in Senegal including European and native inmates numbered 851 inmates (Archives Nationales du Sénégal (hereafter ANS), 1930), rising to 1,766 in 1943 (ANS 1942-44)

and 2,331 in 1952 (ANS, 1952). After independence in 1960, Senegal’s prison population continued to rise. It doubled reaching 5,267 arrested offenders in 1967(DAP, 1968), and 6,326 in 1968 9 (DAP, 1969) for a total prison capacity of 5,060 places during that time. In the 1970s, the numbers of inmates kept on climbing, while the capacity of prisons remained the same. The number of people in custody rocketed from 5, 267 in 1967 to 10,008 in 1979. In the 1980s, crime rates increased from 1,725 arrests in 1983 9 (DAP, 1984, p.2) and 16,967 in 1988 (DAP, 1990, p. 4). In 2000, the total prison population of 5,000 inmates exceeded the regular capacity by around 1,717 (*Le Soleil*, 2000). In spite of these huge numbers, women continue to comprise only a small fraction of the prisoner population (Table 1).

Table 1. Sex-ratio of the prison population in Senegal from 1967 to 1973.

Year	Total Prison Population	Male Inmates	Female Inmates	Percentage %
1967	3655	3626	29	0.79
1968	4431	4411	20	0.45
1969	4130	4069	61	1.47
1970	3027	3008	19	0.62
1971	3722	3701	21	0.56
1972	3094	3065	29	0.93
1973	3674	3657	17	0.46

Source: Senegal’s Penitentiary Administration.

In a previous study on women and prisons in colonial Senegal, I argued that the female inmate’s triple status as woman, convict, and African accounted for the colonial state’s indifference and neglect towards that category of prisoners (Konaté, 2003). After independence, there were few efforts to deal with female inmates. This was most evidenced with the absence of prisons for women twelve years after Senegal became independent. Beginning the 1970s, however, the prison officials showed some concerns over what they viewed as a pressing problem: what should be done with women being incarcerated in male prisons?

After 1960, Senegal’s newly-created government engaged in a process of consolidation of the nation-state, a process based on a territorial reform unveiled in 1972. The reform was concerned with institutions like prisons. The government made a first change on June 1971 when it

turned the Penitentiary Administration into a Department of the Penitentiary Administration. The performances expected from that administration were set by the Decree of 19 April 1972 relative to the status of the personnel. That year, concerns over the lack of appropriate accommodation pushed the government to recommend the creation of an entirely separate prison for women; the Rufisque Women Prison, the first and still only institution for female inmates.

Located at 24 miles from Dakar, Senegal's capital, the Rufisque Women Prison is a facility built in 1930 and was formerly a police station. It functioned as a section of the Dakar Prison from 1972 to 1974, housing suspects awaiting trial. A year later, it received its first sentenced female offenders and in 1984 it welcomed its first nominated female director. This nomination anticipated its autonomy, which became effective in 1986 with deep changes, among others a professional training of inmates, a feminization of the staff and separate rooms for pregnant inmates for two months before and after they gave birth. The creation of a women's prison was the most thorough break with the colonial period. It reflected the desire of the government not to correct the bias done to women during the colonial period, but to adhere to the international standards for prison administration and regulations. Thus, this attention to women's incarceration is not to be defined as a gender policy, but responded to the 1970s territorial reform.

## **2. Voices from Inmates: Women, Prisons and Families**

In their study on transitions from prison to community, Christy Visher and Jeremy Travis conclude that "strong ties between prisoners and their families and close friends appear to have a positive impact on post-release success" (2003, p. 99). Do family ties remain strong when prisoners serve their sentences? Family contacts are a vital part of the life of any human being. But the ways in which family members react to the imprisonment of love ones is different from one case to the next and depends on a number of circumstances. This study examines the quality of family relationships of incarcerated women in Senegal. It is drawn largely from surveys I conducted at the Rufisque prison in 1996 and from 2003 interviews collected at the same institution and the Liberté VI Prison for female adult offenders awaiting trial and for minor female delinquents.

## **2.1. The 1996 Sample**

The 1996 research project at the Rufisque prison was based on a random sample of fifteen incarcerated women chosen from a total prison population of thirty-five inmates. A four-month permission to conduct research was granted by the Penitentiary Administration. Interviews were conducted once a week, usually on Mondays between 8am-1pm for about a month, with an average of four inmates interviewed during each visit. These sessions were held in the visiting room that serves also as the prison front-desk where the guards answered the phone all the time, making our conversations less private. Conducted in Wolof, Senegal’s most spoken local language, the interviews were based on a questionnaire with two sets of variables. The first set contained biographic information on the inmates such as age, ethnic group, religion, profession, length of prison sentence, number of sentences, marital status, number of children, level of education, and situation of parents. The second set of variables were incarceration related: motives of detention, relationships between inmates, measures of the family system and functioning during incarceration, relationships with family, guards, the outside world, and post-release projects.

### **2.1.1. Results**

All fifteen participants were young women, between twenty-two and thirty-eight-year-old. Thirteen of them were Muslim, reflecting the predominance of Islam in Senegal, a country with ninety percent Muslims. The demographic information of the informants reveals that they came from different ethnic groups. Of the fifteen inmates in our study four were Wolof, three were Bambara, two were Sérère, two were Diola, two were Socé, one Lébou, and one Soninké. Originally from Senegal’s major cities of Dakar, Thiès, Kaolack, Ziguinchor, MBour, and, Touba, the participants lived prior to their incarceration in populated neighborhoods like *Médina*, *Gueule Tapée*, *Usine Niary Tally*, *HLM* or in suburbs like Thiaroye, Yeumbeul, Diamaguène and Pikine. In those places insecurity, poverty and overcrowding are the norm.

Moreover, the social background of the study participants shows that most of them came from families with divorced or deceased parents. Only few of them claimed living with married parents. However, all participants admitted growing up in unstable, impoverished or in foster families where they were left to fend for themselves making them fit candidates for crimes.

Of particular interest was the fact at the time of interviews, six of the participants were married, four were divorced, and five were single. All those interviewed, each had an average of two children. Regarding their socio-economic status, they were jobless, stay-at-home mothers, or held low-income jobs such as housekeeper, street vendor, and hairstylist prior to their incarceration. None of them had been incarcerated for white collar crimes. Only one inmate among the fifteen claimed to attend school for three years, an equivalent of the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade level in the United States, while another inmate reported to have attended Koranic school. The informants were incarcerated for offenses ranging from robbery to prostitution, aggravated battery, drug trafficking, homicide and infanticide. Except one participant who had recidivated twice, all others were first-time offenders with no criminal history.

## **2.2. The 2003 Interviews**

Additional data is drawn from interviews conducted in 2003 during my fieldwork for my dissertation thesis on the history of prison architecture in Senegal (Konaté, 2006). Semi-structured interviews were administered to a group of women at both the Rufisque prison and the Liberty VI women's prison. The interviews related to many aspects of imprisonment in Senegal and how they were shaped by the state of the prison buildings. The 2003 interviewees were not different from those of the 1996 sample regarding their social background. They were first-time offenders, grew up in disrupted families, held similar jobs while committing different crimes ranging from theft, drug trafficking, fraud, murder, and gang attacks. Meanwhile, a major difference between the two groups of informants was the presence of white collar offenders in 2003, a consequence of higher education levels and better job opportunities for some of them. Four of the 2003 participants came from middle and upper level class families, held college degrees and were sentenced for misuse of public money and misconduct while in office.

## **2.3. Discussion**

Jean Marc Varaut, author of *La prison pourquoi faire?*, questions the effectiveness of prisons. He recalls this following incident. "One day, an attorney arrived for the first time in a small city and asked a lady who was passing by his way to the prison. With a suspicious look, the lady answered that she never entered a prison," (1972, p. 5). This lady's reaction is typical of popular perceptions of prisons in general. In fact, Senegalese are not an exception to the norm although released inmates are usually welcomed back into their communities. However, social

stigma falls on them when they go back in their families explaining why “the family often suffers as a buffering agent for the newly released” (Wisher & Travis, 2003, p. 102). The social stigma attached to imprisonment in Senegal starts the moment a loved one is behind bars. Many respondents explained how family relationships deteriorated during the time of their incarceration due to the social stigma. More than 70% of informants from the 1996 sample worried that they would be rejected by their families after release because their loved ones were upset. As a result, they received a few or no visits at all from them. Half of them told me that their families were really worried that they would never be the same.

Prison regulations in Senegal allowed family visits. But it seems that female inmates have less access to families and friends than their male counterparts. At the Rufisque prison, family visits are permitted once a week on Sunday from 8:00 am to 11:00 am and from 2:00 pm to 4:00 pm. Of the fifteen participants from the 1996 survey, eight said they were visited by their families but not a regular basis. Five of them reported they had been abandoned by their families, while two others stated that their families were not aware of their incarceration. Except those two inmates, all other participants told me that their families were deeply affected by their incarceration while they themselves suffered tougher consequences which had heavy toll on their marriages and their children’s lives. For instance, three of the six married women interviewed in 1996 had been repudiated after their incarceration, increasing the number of divorced participants to ten. The effects of women’s imprisonment on their marriages is such a problem in Senegal that a nun who visited regularly the Rufisque prison argued that a sizeable number of women waited for their husbands while behind bars but wondered how many men would do the same.

In addition to impinging on marriage quality, the incarceration of women in Senegal negatively affects children. Two of the 1996 study participants were allowed to keep their babies with them in prison until they turn three before being separated from their mothers as stipulated by prison regulations in Senegal. This regulation expresses the benefits of breastfeeding for the growth of babies up to two years of age. Both babies were still nursing at the time of the interviews, but the mothers were consumed with emotional stress and heartbreaking to the idea of separation with their children, causing more psychological damages manifested through a lack of sleep and nightmares as they claimed it.

However, a better understanding of imprisonment outcomes on the families of female offenders in Senegal is drawn from the 2003 interviews. The participants used scores of words to describe the “pains of imprisonment” (Kruttschnitt & Gartner, 2003, p. 25). They called the prison, *nduguusine*, a prison argot that expresses sufferance, darkness, privation, and loss of liberty. The word does not exist in any local languages in Senegal. But no other words express more the “pains of imprisonment” than these: shame, cruelty, injustice, and terrible. These words which translate the harsh reality of being away from families are the most obvious indicators of the ways in which female inmates in Senegal depict, define, live, and measure their prison experiences. They also embody their vulnerability with regard to their prison experiences and living conditions. Finally, the words “provide us with the means of understanding the manner in which institutional personalities were formed in the prison and are crucial to our understanding of how” (O’Brien, 1982, p. 77) in Senegal the incarceration of women impacts family relationships.

Prisons destroy family life, ties and contacts, as many of my informants, and in particular married women, pointed out. Katy a state-officer accused of fraud and official misconduct uttered that her husband was “out of the picture,” and that without the outstanding support of her parents who dropped in every week, she would never have survived her sentence (interview with Katy, Dakar, 20 March, 2003). Kiné, another government-officer, sentenced to two years for similar charges, married and mother of four young children explained how prison had affected their education, relationships with her husband, family, and relatives (interview with Kiné, Rufisque, 23 June, 2003). She described herself as a lucky person because she is visited regularly by her family which was not the case for many others. Yet, she complained of missing her children but still refused to let them visit her in prison to minimize the damages already done to them due to her incarceration.

The majority of the 2003 study participants contended that their families paid visits. A few of them, however, complained about parental neglect. Yet, as mentioned earlier, the best explanation that summarizes the impact of women’s incarceration on families and marriage comes from Sabrina. She described life at the Rufisque prison as a world of cruelty where inmates are often deprived of family visits when they failed to comply with the guards’ orders (interview with Sabrina, Rufisque, 23 June, 2003). Separated with her one-year old child who was in her



parents' custody, while her husband also was serving time for the same crime, she was in such denial that death was an easy way out to end her suffering. She was so agitated during the interview that the guards told me that she was mentally unstable. Sabrina was not the only informant who envisioned death as an answer to her fate. Kiné had mentioned death repeatedly to escape her humiliating life of prisoner. She contended that her family was terribly affected by her sentencing to the point that she thought to kill herself, but said her religion (Islam) prevented her from doing so (interview with Kiné, Rufisque, 23 June, 2003). The loss and disruption to families of Senegalese female inmates became obvious as the emotional stress and psychological damage of their imprisonment seemed to be considerable.

According to Katy the simple fact of thinking about the crude reality of prison life and the separation with families can destroy you. She pointed out, for instance, that the lack of mental and physical activities like reading and exercise has more damaging effects. She characterized the absence of such activities in prisons as a moral violence (interview with Katy, Dakar, 20 March, 2003). Indeed, the psychological outcomes of imprisonment among female inmates in Senegal result also from prison conditions and regulations. Overcrowding, lack of sports facilities, insufficient sanitary facilities and poor medical care, limited access to social workers and services, and short visit schedules plague the prison system in Senegal. At the Rufisque prison, Kiné contended that hygiene was disgusting: there is one bucket for every ten prisoners who could not shower daily for they are supplied with a bar of soap only once a month. The lack of hygiene, she insisted, prevented her from practicing her religion, her only way of coping with prison life (interview with Kiné, Rufisque, 23 June, 2003). Penda incarcerated in the same prison, pointed out that two to three detainees share a mattress. She explained that they could not complain about these mistreatments for their rights as prisoners are routinely denied. The majority of inmates, she added, remain silent for fear of reprisal (interview with Penda, Rufisque, 23 June, 2003). Meanwhile, the majority of informants openly shared their opinions about what they believed was wrong with Senegalese prisons. To the question of what needs to be done to reform the prison system, they all called for psychological support from the staff and more vocational training.

However, due to the negative impact on their lives and families, almost half of my informants said they would never talk about their prison

experiences. At stake here is the fact that “the woman who violated the law transgressed not only legal norms, but the boundaries of femininity itself” (Dodge, 1999, p. 908). Many participants told me that they felt diminished as a woman and a mother because of their incarceration, thus recalling two Senegalese adages. The first one says, *Jigeen moomul yeenn yii*, which translates as “a woman should not do certain things.” In other words, there are some things that are inappropriate for a woman to do or engage in and there “things” implied the crimes they committed and went to prison for. The second adage that reflects on the outcomes of a mother’s behavior on her children says, *Ligeey you ndey anioup doom* translated as “a mother’s work is going to be ‘food’ for her children,” meaning that everything a mother does, whether good or bad, will have repercussions in her children’s future. In addition to the damaging effects of imprisonment are the popular perceptions of what it means to be a prisoner in Senegal. The social stigma associated with imprisonment and the negative representations of the prison, a consequence of the absence of imprisonment in pre-colonial Senegalese societies, accounted for more profound effects of women’s penal experiences on their families. It has come to be widely accepted that prior to European arrival, imprisonment did not prevail in African societies where prison has no usage while the term was not found in any of their languages (Bernault, 2003 and 2007; Vansina, 2003). Thus, for the Senegalese, imprisonment was slavery by another name. For instance, in the province of Fuuta Toro, “whatever the crime, a free man shall never be enslaved” (*Le Coutumier*, 1939, p. 107). When the French introduced prisons in Senegal from the 1820 onwards, images of shackled prisoners tied together with ropes around their necks continuously reverberated images of slavery. Yet, suicide, escape, esoteric incantations and charms, and Islam, what the Senegalese Historian Ibrahima Thioub calls *évitements* (1999, p. 285) became fundamental tools relied upon to avoid prisons.

The long-drawn-out evolution of mentalities in Senegal happened today to foster the prison as fundamentally shameful. The conception of the prison as a polluted place leads released prisoners to plunge in the sea to purify their body and soul and burn their clothes. Moreover, the use of a particular prison vocabulary in daily discussions sheds light on the public’s perception of prisons and prisoners. The French word *galère* (galley) came to be generic in Senegal for it is used to mock a person that looks like a prisoner, particularly when that person wore a *faary mbaam* (a mule’s ribs), the typical prison uniform. Today, the word *galère*

implies somebody who works hard like a prisoner, representing what it meant to be a prisoner. Yet, when participants of the 2003 study were given opportunities to discuss any benefits they associated with incarceration, the answers were mixed. A majority of them contended that prisons had changed their life in a positive way while other questioned any alleged positive aspects of prison life. Another group spoke about both the positive and negative effects, but women, they argued, are more likely to be affected for they grow up faster than men (interview with Sadia, Dakar, 14 March, 2003). Yet, female offenders in Senegal try to cope with life behind bars by redefining family relationships within the prison walls.

### **3. The Social World of Female Offenders in Senegal: Redefining Family Relationships Behind Bars**

This section is concerned with how female inmates in Senegal interacted with each other and developed survival strategies through a redefinition of family relationships behind bars. Scholars looking at prison life tend to overlook or underplay inmates' roles in the definition of power relationships within prisons. Often, prisoners have been relegated to a peripheral status. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the historiography of colonial prisons in Senegal. Prisoners are almost nonexistent in Chérif D. Bâ's study of the history of deviance and criminality in the Senegal River Valley. He argues that inmates suffered in silence in the terrifying space of the prison (2002, p. 257). My conversations with female inmates suggest that the penal world was not a silent one and that prisoners were not passive actors as Bâ assumed. The inmates I interviewed engaged in numerous activities to redefine what they missed the most: family relationships. But to what extent is the redefinition of family relationships inside prisons utilized as a means to a better adjustment?

The harsh reality of prison life led female inmates in Senegal to form networks of all sorts usually expressed through a prison subculture which took on various forms. For some inmates, it was an accommodation and acclimatization to prisons conditions, in others words a state of personal and social equilibrium in relation to the demands of prison life. For others, it meant compliance with the dictates of prison staff to escape severe disciplinary practices. Prison subculture in Senegal was also about recreating family relationships.

Imprisonment was obviously a terrifying experience for all the female inmates I talked to. But usually “women attempt to resist the destructive effects of imprisonment by creating a substitute universe within which the inmates may preserve an identity relevant to life outside the prison (Giallombardo, 1996, p. 129). Despite prohibitions and denials, my informants turned out to be very creative in looking for forms of entertainment and relaxation against the torments of prison life. For instance, they engaged in efforts to subvert the mundane and alienating aspects of prison life on an individual level, but also on a prison-family level through bonds between them.

My informants described positively the relationships between inmates using expressions like “mother,” “sister,” “aunt,” and “friend” to depict the strong family bonds between them. Prison-family relationships were further heightened by the inmates’ religious affiliations, ethnic background, or age group. The majority talked about co-inmate relationships as familial ones. The interviews were replete with expressions such as: “we are like a family,” “we do not have problems,” “we support each other,” “we are like brothers and sisters,” “there is solidarity between us,” etc. Even in tense moments, my informants said they maintained good relations. Here the creation of prison-family relationships among female inmates works as a safety valve to cope with the hardness of prison life. Nevertheless, there is a direct correlation between the redefinition of family relationships among inmates and prison conditions and types of treatments they were subjected to. To accommodate prison life, inmates also engaged in the formation of networks of support. For instance, to improve the food served at the Rufisque prison, on one informant stated that sometimes they club together and gave the money to their comrades preparing the meals (interview with Aïda, Dakar, 20 March, 2003). She maintained that they were able to do so because they had to support each other as family members do. Prison officials seemed to validate inmates’ ways of recreating family relationships and even deemed those relationships as a tool to approach them.

Meanwhile, the social background of inmates, such as the education level, type of job and class status prior to incarceration influenced also the ways in which family relationships among women offenders in Senegal were recreated in prisons. To Kiné, prisons educate responsible citizens but not petty offenders to whom prisons are just hotels” (interview with Kiné, Rufisque, 23 June, 2003). Her comment builds on

the fact that she sees herself as being in the wrong place. A government employee accused of fraud and official misconduct, she identifies herself as someone who has a better sense of life and more responsibility than most of his fellow inmates. Thus, she kept her distance from those petty offenders, claiming that she would never maintain any kind of familial relationships whatsoever with them during her incarceration.

Usually, the relationships between prisoners and prison staff are characterized by varying degrees of fear and suspicion, caution and mistrust on the part of the staff. If this argument may be true within Senegal’s prisons, it is nevertheless certain that the relationships between inmates and prison personnel took on another level. Prison guards’ contributions to the creation of a prison subculture could not be ignored. There were bonds between some inmates and personnel at the Rufisque prison, where some guards fraternized with them and maintained a narrow social distance.

### **Conclusion**

Taking to women inmates brought to light the reality of prison life in Senegal, in particular, how the many levels of monitoring, supervision, and regulation, affect individual lives in ambiguous and contradictory ways. More important, however, was how life behind bars deeply impacted family relationships at different levels. Marriage and children suffered the most, leading to family disruption and loss. The negative popular views of prisons among the Senegalese, emotional stress and psychological damages constantly consumed my informants causing more damage as well. Yet, in the mix of the suffering and distress, incarcerated women in Senegal find ways to deal with their fate through network of support with prison-family relationships. It is hoped that this essay will lead other scholars in Senegal with an interest in female prisoners to research an important field of study.

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