



EL QANATER WOMEN'S PRISON

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El Qanater Women's Prison

Introduction

The Egypt Prison Atlas (EPA), through prison profiles, documents the construction and living conditions of prisons in Egypt, in addition to the illegal detention facilities, to convey a clear image that uncovers the secrets of prisons. That 'parallel universe', whose high walls contain another world, or perhaps a miniature model of society. It conveys the positive aspects that are in conformity with the texts of national law and the rules of international covenants, and documents their shortcomings and violations, in contrast to the approach followed in the biased and inflammatory rhetoric that pervade the scene and contradict reality. This act of documentation aims to provide an accurate picture of reality, and by that preserve rights while simultaneously urging concerned authorities to respect humanitarian laws and principles.

The prisons page in the EPA contains a comprehensive visualization of Egyptian prisons, in addition to displaying their data on an interactive map. It also contains general data about prisons, such as the date of the establishment of the prison, the text of the internal regulations, and an explanation of their architecture. It also sheds light on the living and health conditions in each prison, supported by testimonies from prisoners and ex-prisoners, their families, and their lawyers.

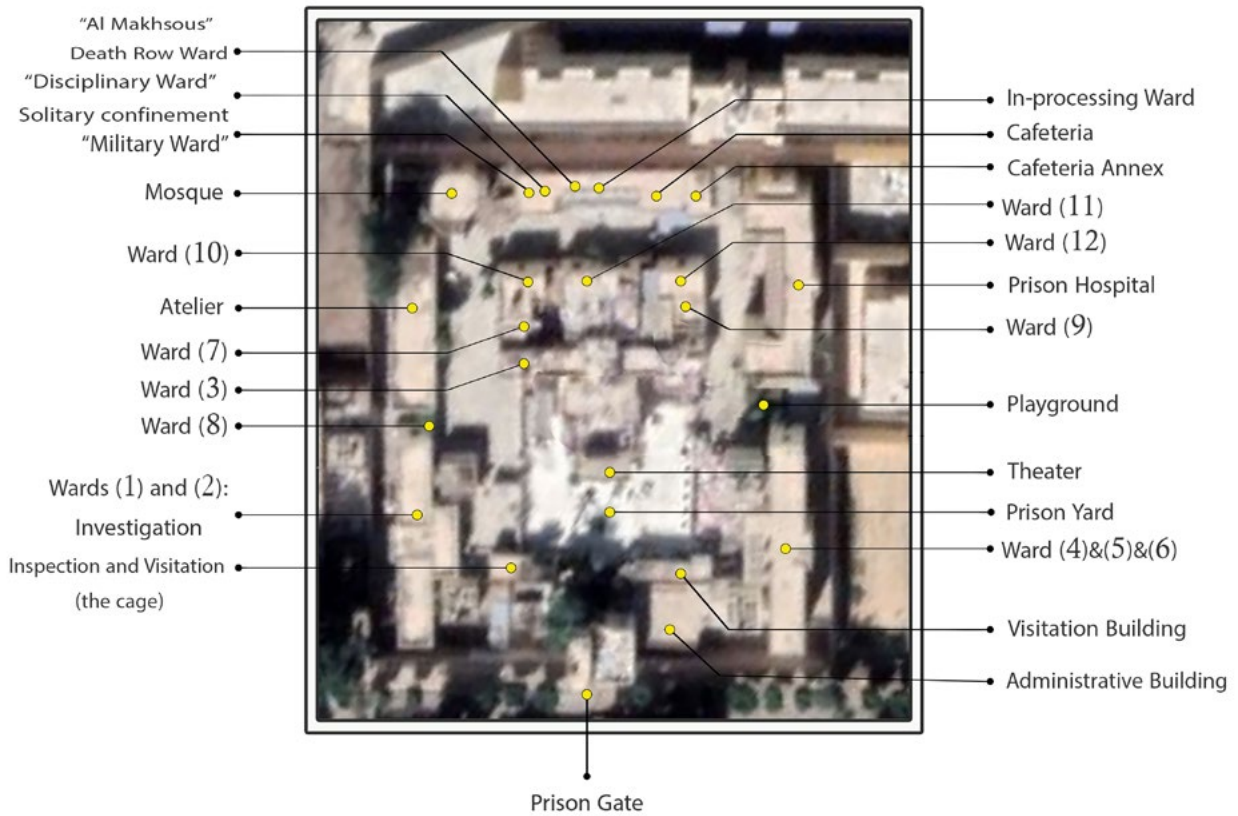
Accordingly, the EPA provides a detailed view in this profile of one of the most important and famous Egyptian prisons, El Qanater Women's Prison -"Segn El Nisa"- with a special focus on prisoners imprisoned on the political backdrop, while shedding some light on some of the conditions of 'non-political' prisoners.

This profile is divided into three sections: The first section addresses basic data related to the prison and its external design. Then, the second section ventures inside the walls and addresses the interior design, starting from the moment of receiving and searching new prisoners, leading to the in-processing ward -the first stop for prisoners-, concluding with the wards and cells where they live throughout their detention. Finally, in the third section, we describe the nature of life inside prison, including healthcare, employment, punishment, and sexual abuse that may occur inside.

First: Towards the Prison Gates

I. General Characteristics

Al Qanater Women's Prison



1. Basic Information

Establishment Date: 1957

Governorate: El Qalyubiyah

Type: Public prison. It is considered one of the most important Women’s Prisons in Egypt, as it is the main prison for Greater Cairo and it houses the largest number of women prisoners.

Data Collection: Data on this prison was collected through semi-structured interviews with ex-prisoners in Cairo, Egypt, between April 2019 and April 2022, then comparing it with secondary data from media and pro-regime sources.

Methodology: For more details on the methodology for prison profiles in the EPA, and the different used sources, please click [here](#).

2. Prison Geography

El Qanater Women’s Prison is located in El Qanater El Khayriyah city, El Qalyubiyah province. It is one of the four prisons that make up El Qanater El Khayriyah Prison Complex (El Qanater for women, El Qanater for men, El Qanater for men 1, El Qanater for men 2). It is built on an island faced by agricultural land.

“El Qanater prison is on an island. It is accessed by a drawbridge. Occasionally, the bridge is raised and the prison is completely isolated.”

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women’s Prison

3. Security Design

A. **Prison Walls:** In addition to the walls surrounding El Qanater El Khayriyah Prison Complex, El Qanater Women’s Prison is surrounded by four walls.

B. **Security Forces:** Security forces are distributed among two gates: The first is the external gate and the second is the internal gate.

The security forces guarding the external gate consist of two female guards who conduct the physical search of female visitors, an undetermined number of non-commissioned police officers and staff involved in the operation and management of scanning devices, one or more male inspectors in charge of securing the facility, and a large number of soldiers to guard the gate.

The internal gate leading to the women’s prison consists of its own security forces, two female guards, and two male staff members: One is responsible for registering the visitors’ names and the other is responsible for opening and closing the gate. In addition to the Prison Warden and inspectors who may be present at the gate.

C. Prison Gates: A prisoner passes through six gates from the moment she enters the prison until she reaches her cell, which are as follows: the main prison gate for El Qanater El Khayriyah prison area, El Qanater Women’s Prison gate, the gate to access the wards inside the prison, the gate for the exercise area, the gate that leads to the ward in which the prisoner is placed, and finally (if present) the gate to the room inside the ward, which is usually left open.

Second: Inside the Prison Walls

II. Search upon Entry and the Prison Uniform

1. Search upon Entry

Rule 19 of the *Bangkok Rules* (The United Nations Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-Custodial Measures for Women Offenders) states that:

“Effective measures shall be taken to ensure that women prisoners’ dignity and respect are protected during personal searches, which shall only be carried out by women staff who have been properly trained in appropriate searching methods and in accordance with established procedures.”

Moreover, Rule 20 stipulates:

“Alternative screening methods, such as scans, shall be developed to replace strip searches and invasive body searches, in order to avoid the harmful psychological and possible physical impact of invasive body searches.”

While Article 9 of the Prison Regulation Law stipulates searching every prisoner upon entering the prison and confiscating prohibited items they may have in their possession, it does not provide details concerning the search method or set measures that call for respecting the sanctity of prisoners’ bodies.

In reality, upon arrival at El Qanater Prison, prisoners are subject to two types of searches: Search of possessions and the ‘body search’.

A. Search of Possessions: The incoming prisoner's possessions are searched upon entry. In theory, contraband items are to be confiscated, while permitted items -such as conforming clothes or personal care tools and books- are to be handed back to the prisoner.

In reality, and in most cases, and in the best-case scenario, prisoners are completely stripped of their possessions, but they are deposited in prison safes to be returned to them upon release. In many cases, however, prisoners are forced to surrender their belongings to the inspectors who search them, especially valuables, such as perfume or jewelry, and even food items they may possess.

"They took everything from me, except soap, shower gel, cigarettes, and my toothbrush. They took all my medications. They left me with one medication and put the other ones in safes until my mom came and took them."

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women's Prison

"They took everything, even the books, and the permitted white clothes. They gave me a white 'Galabiya' - 'shull'- and they wanted me to enter barefoot."

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women's Prison

"They took everything from us including our valuable things -my friend had an engagement ring and another ring- personal things and white clothes. They took it all and our families didn't find them in the safes. They only found trivial items."

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women's Prison

"I had brought with me a jam jar, and I asked the officer for permission to take it with me, and the officer agreed, but the guard stopped me and said, 'either I take it, or you won't go in with it so that she takes it from me."

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women's Prison

B. Body Search: There are no scanning devices in the prison to replace the body search that undermines the sanctity of the body, as stipulated in the aforementioned legal rule. Therefore, and after the inspection of possessions, the prisoner is led to a bathroom with the woman in charge of the search, who orders the prisoner to fully undress, and then asks her, inappropriately, whether she is ‘married’ or a ‘virgin’. If the prisoner replies that she is a ‘virgin’, she would not be subjected to a vaginal search, but a superficial one. If, however, she replies that she is ‘not a virgin’, every part of her body is searched.

The woman in charge of the search also asks the prisoner to turn her back and bend over. She orders the prisoner to squat-and-stand, while naked, and then inserts her hand into the prisoner’s intimate parts (anally and vaginally) without using any preventative sanitary measures such as medical gloves, but at best holding an unsanitized plastic bag. The inspector may ask the ‘virgin’ prisoner to relieve herself in front of her in order to ensure that she is free of contraband.

“When the guard searched me, she took a food bag and used it for search instead of gloves.”

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women’s Prison

“The first time we entered El Qanater, they asked us to take our clothes off, and the guard searched every part of our bodies. I told her that I’m on my period and this is not acceptable but she didn’t listen to me and she didn’t even wear gloves.”

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women’s Prison

Sometimes the measures amount to removing prisoners’ colored undergarments and depositing them in the safes leaving the prisoners without undergarments. Prisoners are also searched in the same way upon their return from court hearings, where the Prison Administration may order prisoners to relieve themselves in a bucket or on the floor to ensure that the contraband is not inserted in their bodies.

2. Prison Uniform

After completing the search procedures, the prisoner hands over her ‘royal’ (civilian) clothes, and wears the prison uniform that she receives, a head cover -the scarf- and the galabiya -”shull”- a white robe, with the word ‘inmate’ written on its back, which is made of “bafta”- a type of rough fabric. Prisoners complain that the material is see-through and reveals what is underneath.

A prisoner is permitted to wear her own ‘scarf’ and a white “galabiya” if she has one as, white is the official color of the uniform for prisoners except for those on death row, as the official color for them is red. In all cases, the prisoner must adhere to the head cover regardless of her religious beliefs. The administration may make an exception for ‘political prisoners’ and permit them not to wear the scarf.

III. Wards and Cells: Living Conditions Inside

1. In-Processing

Article 46 of the *internal regulations for prisons*¹ aims at preventing the spread of diseases inside prisons. It, therefore, stipulates that prisoners are to be held in the in-processing ward for ten days, and Articles 27, 28, 29, and 30 from the same regulation oblige prison administrations to record information regarding the health status of prisoners while they are in the in-processing considering it a quarantine stage before being placed in their respective wards and cells.

In reality, the authorities do not perform any preventative medical measures other than pregnancy tests, which turns [in-processing] into a punitive measure as it is often very crowded and prisoners are prohibited from exercising or receiving visits.

“Each bed has 3 tiers and each tier can have up to 3 prisoners on one bed, and the minimum number in the in-processing room is 45 prisoners. There is no sufficient ventilation, the window is closed most of the time, the door is closed after 5 o’clock and the floor is full of people.”

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women’s Prison

¹ Interior Minister Resolution No. 79 of 1961 regarding the internal regulations for prisons.

A. The Area and Number of Prisoners: The ward's area is about four by four meters. It usually houses no less than forty-five prisoners on a given day, and perhaps more than that on occasion. For example, during the outbreak of the COVID-19, the number of prisoners in the in-processing ward reached more than 100 prisoners. This leads to near-constant overcrowding in the in-processing cell, to the extent that prisoners sleep 'head to toe'.

"In the coronavirus period, the number of prisoners was about 100 in the in-processing ward. Two to three slept on the bed and the whole floor was crowded with people."

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women's Prison

B. Ventilation: Ventilation is usually poor in the ward because of overcrowding and the near constant closure of windows.

"There was one fan and vent in the whole ward. "El nubatshia"² (the watchwoman) would punish the prisoners and turn off the fan and vent."

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women's Prison

C. Duration of the Stay: Prisoners are supposed to stay ten days in the in-processing ward as stipulated in the Prison Regulation Law. However, the administration often fails to apply the law, extending the stay beyond ninety days. Recently, some 'political prisoners' have been permanently placed there, as was the case with Ms. Sana Seif, in her latest detention.

Depending on the administration, some prisoners returning from court hearings, may be required to stay in the in-processing ward again upon their return from each hearing.

"During the coronavirus, we stayed for three months inside the in-processing cell and we were forbidden from showering as el nubatshia (the watchwoman) is the one who can decide on that. She truly made us suffer."

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women's Prison

² "El nubatshia" (the watchwoman) is the prisoner responsible for the ward. See "El Tasni'i" (Optional Employment) section below for more details.

“The stay in the in-processing normally lasts for 11 days, but this usually applies to the political prisoners and anyone with power; otherwise it may range from a month to 40 days.”

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women's Prison

2. Ward Assignment and Conditions

Division of Wards

Ward 1 and 2: For pre-trial detainees, (‘investigation’ wards). Wards I and II are in one building. Ward I included an annex that used to house ‘Islamist political’ prisoners, but it is now exclusively for ‘non-political’ prisoners.

Ward 3: For prisoners convicted of ‘crimes against the person’ (homicide and physical assault).

Wards 4, 5, and 6: For prisoners convicted of drug offenses.

Ward 7: For prisoners convicted of robbery.

Ward 8: For prisoners convicted of (sexual) immorality.

Ward 9: For mothers with infants. It has a playground for children.

Ward 10: For the ‘elderly and sick’.

Ward 11: For prisoners convicted of robbery.

Ward 12: For prisoners convicted of financial crimes, such as writing bad checks and fraud.

Other wards, not given numbers, include the aforementioned in-processing ward, solitary confinement, the ‘military’³ ward -mostly used for political prisoners- and “el makhsous”- the death row ward.

Conditions in the Wards

After staying in the in-processing ward, the prisoner relocates to her allotted ward-either in the investigation ward if she is in pretrial detention or the ward that corresponds to her crime if she is serving a sentence, or when applicable, the ward for the elderly and sick, or mothers with infants.

It should be noted that despite the presence of set rules determining the placement of prisoners in wards, the Prison Administration frequently violates placement rules.

³ This title is commonly used in prison, but unlike the other wards, it is not officially named as such.

“We had a very sick political prisoner in the cell, and despite the severity of her illness and her old age, they placed her in the military ward, and then they put her in the investigation ward.

This was absolutely inappropriate for her condition.”

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women's Prison

The layout of El Qanater Women’s Prison differs from most prisons in Egypt, especially the newly established ones, due to its antiquity, as it was constructed in the fifties. Therefore, we find that the prison consists of large wards, not divided into cells, but wards with rooms, either with open doors or without doors.

A. The Wards’ Furnishing: Most of the wards in El Qanater Prison contain beds and water circuits, a fridge where prisoners put their stock of meat- a small TV, and ceiling fans. Some of them have kitchens that contain a small number of ‘cooking heaters’⁴ that may be placed in between beds. It must be noted that the presence of those ‘cooking heaters’ inside wards is dangerous. In fact, in 2016, a fire in the political prisoners’ room in the investigation ward left two prisoners with second-degree burns on both legs.

Beds: Most of the wards contain hundreds of bunk beds. Each bed, “mullah” consists of three tiers except for the wards of mothers with infants and the elderly- those consist of two. Solitary confinement and “el makhsous” wards are not furnished with beds and prisoners sleep on the floor. In the investigation wards, along with others, two prisoners are made to fit on each bed as a general rule. The bed is about 70 centimeters in width.

Most prisoners typically spend most of their days, except for ‘exercise hours’ on their beds (if they have ones). They eat, sleep, and put their belongings on them, such as food stock, clothes, sheets, and hygiene products. They may hang the remainder of their belongings over the bed on the wall. Alternatively, they may be able to place their belongings under the ground-level bed if there is enough space. As for prisoners without beds, they spend that time on the floor.

“El nubatshia” (watch women) order prisoners in most wards to rent ‘mosquito net curtains’ (embroidered white cloths used in prison for privacy and decoration) to wrap around the ground and first tier beds in order to beautify the ward.

⁴ An alternative to the stove, which is a cement block with a thermal wire attached to it that connects to electricity, and it is used inside prisons for the purpose of preparing food.

“El nubatshias” and administrations vary in the extent to which they allow prisoners to close ‘mosquito net curtains’ for privacy. They mostly entirely prohibit their closure, especially with ‘political prisoners’ as a form of torment.

“**El Bakia**”: It is the space between beds. It is considered valuable for prisoners in overcrowded wards, as they can furnish them and place important belongings such as a kettle, tea, sugar and a radio. A prisoner may even furnish it with a chair and a small table and host her colleagues (fellow prisoners) there if authorized.

Some prisoners with access to ‘money and power’ may be allowed private refrigerators and television sets, while the rest of the prisoners are denied access to a refrigerator even to cool water during high temperatures.

Mirrors: The Prison Administration does not provide mirrors, nor are they allowed in prison. However, hobbyists⁶ are allowed to obtain them to decorate and sell to visitors. In reality many prisoners buy the decorated mirrors and the administration frequently chooses to turn a blind eye to them, at least until they carry out a search where they may leave them or choose to confiscate them.

B. Overcrowding: Most wards, especially those housing ‘non-political’ prisoners, suffer from severe overcrowding. Accordingly, beds are insufficient and a waiting list is formed. Priority is theoretically given to prisoners sentenced to life, while in reality, and most of the time, prisoners with access to money and power are given priority as the “nubatshia” pressures prisoners of lesser financial means to give up their beds in exchange for financial compensation.

Additionally, some wealthy prisoners also rent two or more additional beds to place their belongings on and/or to surround themselves with the biggest possible amount of private space.

“El Qanater is a five-star prison.”

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women’s Prison

As a result the prisoner of ‘lesser means’⁶ becomes ‘homeless’ in prison. She sleeps in “el bakia”, the kitchen or in the area leading to the water circuit, exposed, and in uncomfortable proximity to her colleagues. Further, she has to get up early in the morning to collect her belongings and make way for other prisoners to pass by.

⁵ A title given to one of the jobs available in prison. See “El Tasn’i” ([optional employment section](#)).

⁶ Prisoner of lesser means is an Egyptian slang term which means a prisoner with no money or power.

“Even in prison there are masters and slaves.”

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women’s Prison

C. Ventilation: Rule No. 14 of the *Nelson Mandela, Rules Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners*, states:

“In any place where prisoners have to live or work:

(a) The windows must be wide enough to enable the prisoners to use natural light to read or work and are to be installed in a way that fresh air can enter whether there is artificial ventilation or not.”

The *Prison Regulation Law and its bylaws* did not address the importance of good ventilation inside wards and cells. Given the different setup of wards inside El Qanater prison both in terms of their area, the number and size of windows -and the number of prisoners within them- the degree of ventilation varies from one ward to another. Most wards are sufficiently ventilated, but some rooms inside the wards, such as the isolated room in investigation ward 1, lack windows or overlook walls, so the prisoners living in them suffer from poor ventilation.

Contrarily, ward 12, has about ten windows, approximately 1.5m in size. The windows are left open and are without glass or wood to cover them, making the ward extremely cold and moist in the winter.

“In our ward, we had the main door facing the room’s door, in addition to a window of about 1.5x2 m. No matter how much we tried to cover the windows, it remained too cold, our clothing was insufficient, and the idea of using water, in general, was terrifying because of the intensity of the cold and the refusal of the Prison Administration to close the window.”

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women’s Prison

“Ventilation is good, but in winter it turns to torment, unlike the small room in the investigation [ward], which has bad ventilation, and the girls in it are always sick because of the poor ventilation.”

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women’s Prison

“There is no ventilation and the smell of the toilet was always present in our room.”

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women’s Prison

As for ceiling fans as an artificial source of ventilation, their numbers vary from one ward to another. In all cases, they are never enough for cooling or ventilation, especially in the summer when it gets hotter, and the heat is exacerbated by overcrowding.

Therefore, prisoners may use personal fans that they can obtain with a permit from prison doctors. This permit is supposed to reduce the suffering of prisoners with illnesses that make them, especially in need of additional ventilation. In reality, however, personal fans have become accessible to prisoners who can access doctors and persuade them. As a result, prisoners who are not ill but have access to ‘money or power’ are able to obtain fans, while sick prisoners who do not have such access are not.

“People with power or money were able to bring one or more personal fans. A friend of mine suffers from heart problems, yet the doctor refused to give her a permit to bring a fan.”

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women’s Prison

Cigarettes: Smoking cigarettes is allowed throughout the day throughout the wards. There are no designated non-smoking areas. Thus, wards suffer from excessive cigarette smoke even where ventilation meets the minimum requirements. The problem is exacerbated by overcrowding. The Prison Administration offers no solution for prisoners who suffer from lung diseases and allergies.

“When I smell cigarettes, I literally am unable to breathe and despite this, “el nubatshia” intentionally smoked next to me, to hurt me. Cigarettes were the thing that damaged me the worst in prison and because of that I have been doing a lot of breathing sessions.”

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women’s Prison

D. Lighting: Article 14 of the *Nelson Mandela Rules* states the following:

“(b) Artificial light shall be provided sufficient for the prisoners to read or work without injury to eyesight.”

Despite the importance of lighting in prisons, the *Prison Regulation Law* and its bylaws neglected to discuss lighting-whether natural or artificial-or address its quality.

Natural Lighting: Due to the different layouts of wards inside El Qanater prison, natural lighting differs from one ward to another, and even within the same ward, from one corner to another, especially with the varying outlooks of different windows. However, the main rooms, unlike the small isolated rooms in the wards, generally allow for sufficient sunlight.

Artificial Lighting: Ex-prisoners in El Qanater Prison constantly complain about excessively bright artificial lighting, twenty-four hours a day. They are prohibited from turning off the lights, causing them chronic headaches and difficulty sleeping, especially for prisoners living in the upper tiers of beds. Although prisoners who are in the lower tiers get some level of darkness at night, they do not get sufficient lighting in the daytime in their beds -where they reside round-the-clock- making it difficult for them to read, or sew, thus necessitating additional personal lighting, which may be hard to obtain.

“The light does not turn off and it is so bright that it is exhausting.”

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women’s Prison

“The light never turns off and there are no light switches. We couldn’t sleep from the brightness and we always had headaches.”

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women’s Prison

On the other hand, power outages occur continuously throughout the day making it particularly intolerable in the summer.

“Electricity was cut off in prison everyday 3 to 4 times, fans stopped working, and wards were full of people. and overcrowded. In the summer, we almost died of heat and suffocation.”

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women’s Prison

E. Water: Water in El Qanater prison is poor and unfit for consumption. Sometimes a foul smell emanates from it prompting some prisoners to purchase mineral water from sales outlets in prison, incurring additional costs. Yet even this option is not always available and prisoners are unable to obtain mineral water even for a fee. On top of this, there are constant water outages that exacerbate overcrowding over water basins, and prisoners struggle to wash clothes and sheets, and access water circuits, causing major suffering and numerous altercations.

“The water was red and sometimes brown. We used to buy water.”

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women’s Prison

“The water was yellow or brown. It stinks.”

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women’s Prison

F. Water Circuits: Rule 15 of the *Nelson Mandela Rules* states:

“The sanitary installations shall be adequate to enable every prisoner to comply with the needs of nature when necessary and in a clean and decent manner.”

However, the Prisons Regulation Law fails to provide any details about water circuits inside prisons, whether in terms of their proportion to the number of prisoners or in terms of their cleanliness and their fitness for human use.

The number of water circuits available to prisoners varies from one ward to another. For example, there are nine water circuits for a ward containing about two hundred prisoners, while other wards may contain only six.

Mostly, water circuits consist of stalls with squat toilets and a tap, and usually, there are two stalls that have showers in addition to a toilet. There may be ‘foreign’ toilets (modern toilets with a seat) in some of the wards, but they are usually designated for “el nubatshia” and the prisoners who gained their favor. Some wards however have no shower at all, and prisoners have to shower with plastic basins “techt” and pitchers “kooz”. Additionally, there are large basins with multiple faucets, where prisoners may wash their faces, wash for prayer, and brush their teeth.

The presence of heaters for showers, which become highly crucial in wintertime, varies from ward to ward. Generally, the Prison Administration does not provide them, but some prisoners manage to obtain ones through personal efforts. Prisoners reported to Belady having noted the administration obtaining them just prior to a visit from the National Human Rights Council's monitoring detention conditions in the prison.

One of the most important obstacles to water circuit access is the constant overcrowding, to the extent that prisoners have to reserve in advance to shower, something difficult to achieve on a daily basis, as a result of the disproportion between the number of prisoners and the number of available toilets.

"It was difficult to reach [the toilet] because people were sleeping on the ground along the way, and there were only six bathroom stalls. We were allowed to access only one stall, which had a squat toilet and a shower. Before you go, you must inform the rest. In the morning, and after eating, there is a queue to reach the bathroom. Dishes were also washed in the bathroom."

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women's Prison

Menstrual Cycle: Rule 5 of the *Bangkok Rules* states that prisoners must be provided with free sanitary pads in their accommodation.

In reality, the Prison Administration does not provide sanitary pads to women during their menstrual cycle, so they rely on visits, other prisoners, or resort to buying them from sales outlets at a more expensive price than the market price.

"In El Qanater prison we were reassured that we will have adequate sanitary pads, because of the fact that our friends were with us, and [we had access to them through] visits. So we knew how to deal with it [menstrual cycle]."

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women's Prison

“There was a girl who was mentally ill. She never received visits. Whenever she was on her period, she wouldn’t use sanitary pads because they weren’t available for her and there was no way for her to get them.”

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women’s Prison

G. **Cleaning:** The Prison Administration does not provide any hygiene or cleaning products to clean the ward, so the prisoners depend on themselves for that. El nubatshia supervises the cleaning process assigning the tasks to working prisoners.

Daily Cleaning: Water circuits and the floor are cleaned on a daily basis.

Periodic Cleaning: May be weekly or monthly, where the ward is cleaned more extensively in one of the following ways:

(a) the ward is stripped ‘to the bone’, then the beds’ iron get ‘burned’ by spraying insecticide in front of a lighter until fire comes out and eliminates the cockroaches. Alternatively, (b) items under the beds are removed and the floor is cleaned with soap, water, and disinfectants.

Despite these procedures, however, due to overcrowding and the absence of dining halls and proper places to store food, most of the wards suffer from cockroach infestations. Additionally, some prisoners suffer from lice, which is difficult to contain from spreading, especially since the Prison Administration does not provide medication that eliminates them, but rather, prisoners have to bring them from the outside.

As for the cost of cleaning, prisoners pay a monthly sum, part of which goes to the cleaning products and part of which goes to the prisoners responsible for cleaning “el nubashia’s girls”. The cost of the ward’s cleaning is about 400 L.E. weekly -in 2016- and it is paid mostly with cigarettes.

“I got lice twice in prison, and I had to wait for a visit in order to get the appropriate medicine.”

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women’s Prison

H. Inspecting the Wards: Ward searches happen in two cases:

First: Periodically, where the search is carried out by either the Prison Authority or the Prison Administration, perhaps once or twice a year, to confiscate contraband.

However, and instead of only confiscating contraband, the administration and the inspectors often abuse their authority and leave the contraband for the favored prisoners -with access to ‘power and money’- but confiscate permitted items from prisoners who follow the rules, especially if they do not offer bribes. The confiscated items may be plastic plates, covers, or nail clippers, etc.

The group that suffers the most from the search are ‘political prisoners’ who may be completely stripped⁷ off their possessions.

“When the Prison Authority searched us, they stripped us of everything, burned the mattresses of the beds, the blankets. It wasn’t just a search, it was torment.”

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women’s Prison

Second: Search upon the occurrence of certain incidents, such as when prisoners declare hunger strikes, altercations break out, or when prisoners smuggle contraband, such as mobile phones. Wards are also inspected prior to “el tashrida⁸” or “el taghriba⁹” punishments, and in such cases, the search is carried out as a punitive measure, and prisoners are stripped of the majority of their belongings including food items. Authorities may even tear apart and destroy whatever falls into their hands.

In both types of search, the search is carried out without prior notice, usually early in the morning before prisoners are awoken by several male and female inspectors. Thus, prisoners are not given any time to dress appropriately for the search.

“Before “el taghrib” (estranging us) the Prison Administration entered the ward, they took everything, even our food that we stored and they body searched us. They made us take off our undergarments and took them.”

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women’s Prison

⁷ “El Tagrida” ‘Stripping’: It is an inspection by the prison administration or the Prison Authority. It can be expected or unexpected (for example, after a problem occurred), that ends with stripping ‘tagrid’ the prisoners of most -if not all-of their belongings in the cell.

⁸ “El Tashrida” ‘Displacement’ (Forced Vagrancy): It is the most common punishment in women’s prisons where a prisoner is expelled from her primary ward to live as a ‘vagrant’ without belongings on the floor or in other wards for varying periods of time.

⁹ “El Taghriba”: It is the transfer of the prisoner and her ‘estrangement’ from the original prison designated for her detention- which is supposed to be close to her place of residence- to another prison far away.

“When we went on a hunger strike, they took us out of the cell and started cursing at us, and they took all the food that we had, tore our bags, and left the cell and all remaining belongings on the ground piled on top of each other.”

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women’s Prison

Third: Prison Life

There is no system, daily schedule, or planned activities applicable to all prisoners, and administrations, in general, do not set waking, sleeping, or bathing times but leave them up to “el nubatshia”. The vast majority of prisoners occupy their time by working for a fee or preparing food for themselves and doing their laundry, and some exercise or practice hobbies outside wards and in designated exercise areas.

It is worth mentioning that the only time that is fixed and is applied throughout the prison is when the wards open at about eight-thirty in the morning, and close at “tamam el adad” (carrying out the count) at about two thirty in the afternoon when wards close and prisoners return from their work and activities to be counted. But even this timing is subject to exception as exercise hours of some political prisoners will be after that, or alternatively, before the opening of the wards.

Mothers: Article 20 of the *Prison Regulation Law* stipulates that:

“The child of a female prisoner shall remain with her in a nursery in prison until the age of four, and shall be accompanied by her for the first two years.”

Article 31 bis of the *Child Law* No. 12 of 1996 stipulates that:

“Every Women’s Prison shall have a nursery that meets prescribed conditions for nurseries, to allow placing the children of prisoners until the child reaches the age of four, with the mother accompanying her child within the first year”.

In fact, the Prison Administration complies with the law as it allows mothers to stay with their infants in prison until they reach two years, yet contravenes it by not applying the amendment that extends the age of stay to four years. In addition, children are not placed in a nursery, as provided by the law. For example, the child, El Bara Omar Abdel Hamid Abu El Naga, the son of Mrs. Manar Adil Abu El Naga, was removed from El Qanater Prison just when he turned two, in contravention of the provisions of the aforementioned amendment.

Finally, the Prison Administration facilitates the exit-and-entry of children -under the age of two- to visit their relatives outside prison and return to their mothers inside. Some of the prisoners' older children stay in 'care homes', and the Prison Administration cooperates in arranging their visits to their mothers in El Qanater Prison twice a month.

IV. Food and Clothing

Food: According to the Interior *Minister's Decree No. 691* of 1998 in regards to the Treatment and Feeding of Prisoners, the administration shall provide for three daily meals (breakfast, lunch, and dinner) balanced between proteins, vegetables, and fruits.

In fact, there is no standardized system for feeding prisoners as there are no specific meals to be distributed at specific times in a specific hall. Rather, there are various food items that are provided for free, food items available for purchase from prison sales outlets, others that the prisoners themselves sell, and finally, food that prisoners prepare on their own.

1. Food Provided for Free "El Ta'yin":

Free food "El Ta'yin" is provided by the Prison Administration. Before examining the quality of food provided by the Prison Administration, we clarify the difference in accordance to its place of delivery.

- A. Accessibility of "El Ta'yin": El ta'yin can be accessed in two ways:
- **Within the Cell:** The prisoner receives it easily.
 - **Outside the Cell:** The prisoner has to pass through the gate of the ward or cell, so it is difficult to reach it.
- B. Food Types, Quality, and Diversity: The first type, which the prisoner receives inside the ward or cell, includes three bread loaves and boxed food consisting of cheese and "halawa" -an Egyptian type of confectionery-, which are delivered regularly and adequately. Two eggs are delivered to each prisoner twice a week, and a piece of raw meat once a week. A fruit or vegetable is delivered randomly. Sometimes it may be fit for consumption without cooking, such as oranges or tomatoes, and sometimes it is inedible without cooking, such as eggplant or raw beans.

As for raw food, such as eggs and meat, there is difficulty in making use of these items because the prison lacks cookware, as will be shown below, so it becomes of no value to the prisoners, as they often dispose of them or sell them to other prisoners. Therefore, the only food provided by the prison that most prisoners actually use is bread, cheese, and fruits distributed randomly.

As for the second type, it is cooked food, that the Prison Administration places in “azanat” -large containers- outside the wards, and it mostly consists of fava beans, rice, vegetables or lentils, and (white) beans -fixed dishes that do not change- and they are left outside the wards from nine in the morning until five in the evening. Recently, the Prison Administration has reduced the availability of cooked items to two days per week.

The problem with the “azan” food is as follows: the food remains uncovered, which facilitates the access of flies and accumulation of dirt. Further, there are no utensils with which to scoop the food, so prisoners use their hands, contaminating the food. In addition, the food may spoil before five o'clock on extremely hot days. Moreover, the food is often not adequately cooked, not to mention the lack of variety throughout the year.

Even with overcoming these problems, the biggest problem lies in the lack of an easy and proper mechanism for prisoners to access “el azan”, especially for prisoners who are not authorized to come out of their wards. Moreover, “nubatshias” urge prisoners not to consume “azan” food so they could sell cooked meals for a fee.

“El Ta'yin is not three meals a day. All that comes to the ward is bread, eggs, cheese, “halawa”, and a couple of vegetables distributed depending on the day. If you can't leave the ward, it is impossible to access “el Ta'yin”. For example, in ward 1, we didn't know that there were fava beans in the prison. Other prisoners were selling them to us in exchange for a pack of cigarettes because we could not go out and get them ourselves.”

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women's Prison

“The first two months I did not know that the prison provided cooked food.”

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women's Prison

2. Food Available for Purchase

A. **“El Ma’isha”:** El Ma’isha” is when a prisoner who has sufficient food stocks and adequate cookware -compared to the ones provided by the prison- prepares daily meals and sells them for a monthly fee to the other prisoners. It is not uncommon for “el nubashia” to control and monitor “el ma’isha”. The concept of “el ma’isha” has arisen as a consequence of the aforementioned “el ta’yin” problems, in addition to the pressure of “el nubatshias” who urge prisoners to participate in it. The vast majority of prisoners do not rely on prison-provided food, but rather participate in “el ma’isha”, whether it is prepared inside or outside the ward.

“My dependence on el ta’yin was zero. I did a ma’isha with a woman who cooks and I paid a monthly sum for a daily meal.”

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women’s Prison

B. **Cafeteria Meals:** The prison cafeteria sells various ready-made meals that may be exquisite as shown in ‘documentaries’ presented by the state and its affiliated channels¹⁰ about the prison. However, cafeteria meals are expensive and out of reach for most prisoners.

3. Cooking (Prisoners Preparing Food for Themselves)

A. **‘Cooking Heaters’:** In most wards and cells, there are ‘cooking heaters’, which are cement blocks that are used inside prisons for the purpose of preparing food as an alternative to the stove.

The problem with the heaters is that they are completely insufficient and easily damaged -especially the thermal wire- which usually gets damaged within a few days of use, and the Prison Administration does not provide spare parts or replacements for them. Heaters are also not completely safe for use, as they conduct electricity directly to cooking utensils, thus endangering the lives of those using it.

For example, inside a ward housing more than one hundred prisoners, there are usually about three to five cooking heaters, the priority of use is given to prisoners with access to money and power.

¹⁰ This morning I a meeting with prisoners from the cafeteria and bakery of El Qanater Women’s Prison

Prisoners can also request additional heaters from the administration, but the procedures are complicated and they are often met with refusals. Therefore, the cooking process is difficult, requiring many battles, and it always causes quarrels between prisoners, but cooking remains as the best solution for some.

B. Cookware and Eating Utensils: Neither El Qanater Prison nor its sales outlets provide any cookware or utensils for eating, drinking, or even preparing food. It is the responsibility of the prisoner to either rely on what her visitors bring or to buy what she needs from other prisoners.

C. Visitation Food: Belady observed that some prisoners who are banned from visitations and not allowed to go out during exercise times -especially 'political prisoners' whom the Prison Administration considers as 'Islamists'- are unable to obtain "el tay'in" food placed in "azan" outside, or even subscribe to "el ma'isha". In such cases, the prisoners resort to a 'division of visits' system to obtain clean and good-quality food, by dividing their numbers by the number of days allowed for visitation, so that each family can bring food that is sufficient for the entire cell for one day. The following day, another family brings the food of the second day, and so on.

"In our cell, we were all prohibited from exercising because we are political [prisoners]. We spent a while thinking about a way to get food until we divided our number by the number of days. I mean we were 14 girls dividing our visits into 14 days. Every day each one of us is visited and her family brings to the entire cell sufficient food for one day in a manner that we have food every day."

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women's Prison

4. Clothing and Laundry

A. Clothing: The only clothes that a prisoner receives are those that she receives when she enters the prison: "El shall" and "el tarha" (scarf). Upon entry, the prisoner remains without clothes but for her undergarments and "el shul" until the necessary clothes are provided by her visitors -which can only be achieved eleven days after her arrival. The prison does not provide clothes even for a fee in the sales outlets. Prisoners with few resources -or few visits- suffer from extreme cold in the winter and from sweating -while being unable to change their clothes- in the summer. At other times, 'political prisoners', especially 'Islamists', are absolutely denied access to clothing, unless authorized by National Security. This is in tandem with the Prison Administration's approach of prohibiting visits for many 'political prisoners'.

B. **Laundry:** Prisoners with few resources crowd the wash basin located in the ward’s exercise area, or in one of the bathrooms, and wash their clothes and sheets, by hand, and air dry them during the time of exercise.

As for prisoners with resources, they can pay a monthly subscription for a ‘washerwoman’ who is a prisoner who collects clothes, washes them by hand, dries and folds them, and then distributes them back to their owners.

“We were arrested in winter, and when we were transferred to El Qanater prison, they took all our clothes and gave us ‘el shull’. It was see-through, and all the officers saw what’s under it. Besides, we were very cold and had no clothes to wear to warm us up.”

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women’s Prison

V. Healthcare and the Hospital

Rule 24 of the *Nelson Mandela Rules*, states:

“1. The provision of health care for prisoners is a State responsibility. Prisoners should enjoy the same standards of health care that are available in the community and should have access to necessary health-care services free of charge without discrimination on the grounds of their legal status.

2. Health-care services should be organized in close relationship to the general public health administration and in a way that ensures continuity of treatment and care, including for HIV, tuberculosis, and other infectious diseases, as well as for drug dependence.”

1. Basic Infrastructure of the Prison Hospital

The *Prisons Regulation Law* does not contain any details regarding equipping prison hospitals with basic furnishing and equipment, such as stipulating that beds are proportionate to the number of prisoners, or stipulating that the minimum of necessary medical devices, x-ray machines, and medical testing are provided in the hospitals.

El Qanater Women’s Prison Hospital consists of two floors. The lower floor consists of clinics and a pharmacy and the upper level is for the rest of the clinics and patient rooms. There are also devices, equipment and primitive beds inside the hospital, but doctors treat the medical equipment as if it were for ‘safekeeping’ -not use- and thus rarely use them.

Further, doctors do not have the same powers/authority as the hospital or “el nubatshia” of the ward, since they are expected to follow the directives of “el nubatshias”.

“One prisoner was in a coma and the doctor asked for a diabetes test strip, but el nubatshia kept on stalling despite the doctor’s attentiveness to the patient.”

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women’s Prison

“I was imprisoned at the time of the coronavirus, and there was not even a pressure monitoring device to be found, but it somehow appeared upon the Prison Authority’s search.”

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women’s Prison

“It [the hospital] has x-ray and medical testing equipment, and a dental clinic that has everything. It has an eye device for ophthalmia, it has intensive care, and it has an EKG, resting, and exercise. It has a lot of equipment, however, they are used only during human rights [observers] visits.”

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women’s Prison

2. Procedures for Transfer to the Hospital

A. **Prison Hospital:** There are no clear guidelines provided by the *Prison Regulation Law* and its internal regulations for transferring prisoners to the prison hospital. Prisoners complain about the reticence and delay in transferring patients to the prison hospital as the referral decision is subject entirely to security considerations that are often affected by the whim of the Warden, the Chief of Inspection, and the Supreme State Security -in case the patient was a political prisoner- or even “el nubatshia” who often ignore the requests of prisoners and do not take them seriously.

Moreover, there is no mechanism to inform the authorities at night, and so the prisoners resort to shouting out repeatedly to the guards sleeping near the prison gates so that they could hear them and respond to them, if they decide to heed the call.

"In order to be transferred to the hospital, I should tell "el nubatshia" that I don't feel well and I want to go to the hospital. She informs the guard who then informs the Chief of Inspection.

And the Chief's response is never immediate."

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women's Prison

"The patients' ward was in front of our ward. One day they were calling out "oh! Guard" for the guard to open [the door] for a sick lady, even when the guard did come, she told them that she didn't have a permit to open the ward. In the morning we found out that the sick lady was dead."

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women's Prison

B. External Hospitals: The Prison Administration theoretically allows the transfer of prisoners to an external hospital when necessary. But, in reality, only prisoners with 'money and power' are able to transfer. External transfer is difficult in general, and with 'Islamist political' prisoners in particular, because National Security Officers typically refuse to transfer the prisoners for treatment outside prison.

"There was one millionaire. She was allowed to give birth in a hospital outside. She stayed there for 9 months. Meanwhile, there was a poor prisoner who gave birth in the hospital, and her son was not taken care of, so he died."

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women's Prison

3. Doctors

According to former prisoners, one of the main causes of the deteriorating health services in the prison is the doctors' dual loyalty since the majority of doctors are officers who joined the police force after graduating from medical school and were appointed to prisons through the Prisons Authority sector of the Ministry of Interior. Thus, the doctors' loyalty to the medical profession is compromised by their position as officers. Most of the time, their lack of devotion to their patients is reflected through their disrespectful and humiliating treatment of sick prisoners or not taking their complaints seriously.

In addition, the doctor/officer, in most cases, lacks knowledge of the patient's medical history and whether their symptoms are a result of imprisonment or the result of a chronic disease they suffered from beforehand.

Moreover, the doctors do not have the final say; therefore, the Prison Administration may entirely disregard their recommendations.

“There is no healthcare in the prison. Due to the lack of care, we mainly depended on painkillers. There was this one time when everyone in the room, including myself, was coughing. Instead of treatment, I was told that my voice sounded ok and no one gets to get examined here. Another time, a woman broke a bone and she waited for three hours before someone answered our call.”

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women’s Prison

In addition to their dual loyalty, doctors generally lack experience since most of them get appointed to the prison during their residency.

“No, I have not met with any doctor. I used to only meet a clueless one. I saw a prisoner fixing the intravenous fluids for herself.”

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women’s Prison

There are typically only one or two doctors at most in the prison hospital. In addition, individual doctors in the hospital hold no clear specializations in any particular field of medicine.

“The one who prescribed me chest medicine was a dentist.”

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women’s Prison

“When I first entered the prison I had a problem with my liver enzymes and suffered from severe jaundice. A dentist would check-in on the clinic and I told him: ‘you’re an internist?’ to which he said ‘no, the internal medicine doctor comes twice a month’. Should I keep waiting for him as he comes only twice? I took a painkiller and that was it.”

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women’s Prison

4. Medicine

There is a pharmacy inside the prison hospital, but it is devoid of most types of medicine, leaving only very few types of medication, the most important of which are antibiotics, which doctors consider to be the one and only treatment.

When needed medications are not available in the prison pharmacy, prisoners may be able to order needed medicine -at their own expense- through the hospital, which takes the orders on a weekly basis, where the orders are delivered the following week. However, in the event that the medicine was not found in the first pharmacy to which the person assigned to bring it went, or if it was not prescribed by the specialist doctor, then the prisoner will remain without medicine.

In addition, a prisoner may have to wait for a long time until the medicine is available in the pharmacy, especially if she is of 'lesser means' and access and cannot afford to buy medicine on her own.

Prisoners still have the option to obtain medication through visits, but this requires multiple steps that start with informing visitors of the medication, waiting for the next visit, and obtaining permission from the prison doctor, in addition to the Chief of Inspection. In some cases, the 'political prisoner' is prohibited from taking out any prescriptions, or anything that might indicate that she's sick.

"During the campaign against hepatitis, they visited and tested us. When some prisoners tested positive, they [the administration] didn't provide any treatment. One [prisoner] begged the administration to let her bring it from outside the prison."

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women's Prison

"I was dying, not able to breathe, and there was not a pulmonologist for a week. I would spend the night on the floor at the ward's door gasping for air. A prisoner, god bless her soul, gave me "telefast", an antihistamine and I felt better. We then shared her meds until I was able after a long battle to send for my own."

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women's Prison

VI. “El Tasni’i” (Optional Employment)

1. Employment for a Fixed Rate

The official pay rate for female prisoners is 240 L.E. per month according to the wage set in 2020. Before that, it did not exceed 150 L.E. per month. However, working prisoners who provide a ‘service’ to other prisoners receive, in addition to this official payment, payments from the prisoners themselves, typically in the form of food or cigarettes. “El Tasni’i” includes, but is not limited to, work in sales outlets, the hospital, the laundry (where ‘washerwomen’ wash clothes by hand), the library, etc. Other official employment posts include cleaning the prison, calling prisoners for visits, as well as sewing the prison uniforms, curtains, and ‘mosquito nets’ used in the wards.

In most cases, the Prison Administration limits the opportunity of “el tasni’i” to sentenced ‘non-political’ prisoners, in exclusion of ‘political’ and pre-trial detention prisoners, although these later typically spend years in prison and are no less in need of money. It is worth noting as well that special privileges and priority consideration are given to the prisoner who ‘snitches’ on her colleagues -informs “el nubatshia” and the administration about the goings-on among her peers—. These generally enjoy privileges, particularly when being assigned to lucrative positions that allow the prisoner to earn exorbitant amounts of money such as working as “el nubatshia” who extort money by intimidation, and working in sales outlets where they extort money by swindling other prisoners.

“El Nubatshia” (The Watchwoman): “El nubatshia” of the ward is a prisoner responsible for managing the ward and earns exorbitant amounts of money by virtue of that position. She is mostly a prisoner convicted of drug offenses and sentenced to life. Most of the time there are three of them in one ward, with one of them as the leader. “El nubatshia” typically receive a minimum of five packs of ‘Cleopatra’ cigarettes upon each visit from the hundreds of prisoners in their ward, and even more than that from wealthier prisoners who offer them up to two ‘Marlboro’ cartons per visit. They may also supervise “el ma’isha¹¹” for higher fees, earn rent from beds and beddings, and may even bring items to sell at visits for exorbitant fees.

¹¹ “El ma’isha”: Meals prepared by some prisoners to other prisoners for a monthly fee. This is one of the peculiarities of women’s prisons.

“El nubatshia” has near absolute authority over the other prisoners’ lives, beginning with ‘housing’ (bed placement), -determining who will reside on the ground tier (which is desirable) and who will reside on the second and third tiers, in which area within the ward the prisoner will reside— ventilation, and lighting vary. She is also responsible for determining who is on the waiting list for a bed in the first place and whether a prisoner ‘deserves’ a bed for herself or she is to ‘be housed’ next to another prisoner. “El nubatshia” may decide to prohibit prisoners from accessing the administration (specially for complaints), the hospital, exercise, employment, going out to exercise and may impose punishments ranging from cursing to beatings and “el tashrida” (displacement), as will be detailed below. Despite all that, the prisoners are used to calling “el nubatshia”, “yamma” (mom).

2. Freelance Work

Freelance work is when a prisoner receives money in exchange for products or services she provides to other prisoners independently of the Prison Administration. The following are some examples.

- A. Domestic Service ‘Adoption’: This is when a prisoner works for another prisoner, cleaning her belongings and her bed, and helping her throughout the day. Similar to the title given to “el nubatshia”, prisoners in El Qanater prison call the service recipient ‘the mother’ and the worker the ‘daughter’, as the ‘mother’ provides cigarettes or food in addition to various types of support to the ‘daughter’ who is typically a prisoner of ‘lesser means’.
- B. Monthly Meal Preparation- “El Ma’isha”: Where the prisoner prepares or helps prepare lunch on a daily basis in return for a monthly fee from other prisoners who participate in “el ma’isha”. Often, “el nubatshia” takes this task, supervising the “el ma’isha” herself, in exchange for a rate of pay that is higher than the average prison price. She also treats the prisoners who participate in this exchange kindly and provides them with special privileges, which encourages the other prisoners to participate as well.
- C. Arts and Crafts ‘Hobbyists’: In this case, the prisoner takes advantage of a ‘hobby’, such as crocheting or decorating dolls or mirrors. At the beginning of each month, the prison social worker receives ‘a shopping list’ of needed products and tools from prisoners and delivers them to the prisoners at a later time. The prisoner works the items then sells the decorated finished products to other prisoners.

- D. Street Vending: These are prisoners who cook and sell traditional food such as “falafel”, “feteer”, and “couscous” (flaky Egyptian layered pastries) to other prisoners throughout the prison.
- E. Hairdressing: These are prisoners who cut and dye hair, straighten it, file nails, etc.
- F. Cleaning the Ward: “El nubatshia” assigns some prisoners -”el nubatshias’ daughters”- to clean the ward and its bathrooms in exchange for a monthly fee paid by the other prisoners.

VII. Other Facilities and Activities

1. Facilities

In addition to the wards and the hospital, there are a number of other buildings: a mosque, a library, the social worker’s office, a literacy room also used as a church on Sundays and on special occasions, a table tennis, a sewing room, a laundry room (for ‘washerwomen’), a cafeteria (for selling grocery items and preparing ready meals for sale), a canteen (for selling grocery items), and a stage.

However, prisoners are typically not allowed to use most facilities, in fact, many of them are not used at all, such as table tennis and the stage, which is only used once a year on Mother’s Day for prisoners who have children in ‘care homes’ and come for a visit.

As for the mosque and the library, permission to use these spaces is granted by the Chief of Inspection, who may allow prisoners to use them freely, or limit their use, or completely prohibit it. In most cases, ‘political prisoners’, as well as, pre-trial prisoners are prohibited from using these facilities and the trend since 2013 was towards near total prohibition.

Newspapers: According to a prisoner with ‘money and power’, the administration typically permits prisoners -with prior permission- to subscribe to national newspapers, in addition to Al-Masry Al-Youm newspaper, for a monthly fee.

2. Enrollment in School/Studies

The Prison Administration permits prisoners to complete their school or university studies. In reality, however, the prisoner has to send her relatives outside the prison to complete the procedures that allow her to participate. If she has no one to help her outside, the prisoner will not be able to study.

3. Celebrations

Some administrations allow prisoners, specially ‘non-political’ ones, to rent ‘subwoofers’ -a loudspeaker to broadcast songs- and hold ‘parties’ inside the ward on occasions such as public holidays or special occasions such as an acquittal, an end of a sentence for a prisoner, or in celebration of giving birth for a pregnant prisoner.

VIII. Exercise (Going Out in Open Air)

Article 85 of Interior Minister Decree No. 79 of 1961 regarding the organization of prisons states that:

“Sentenced prisoners who do not perform work, pre-trial prisoners, and those in precautionary quarantine, each group is allowed separately during the opening period of the prison to exercise for an hour in the morning and an hour in the evening. Prisoners are not permitted to go out for exercise on Fridays and official holidays unless the holiday exceeds one day. On the second and subsequent days, they may exercise in the morning only for half an hour, provided that it is under sufficient supervision.”

1. Exercise Area Design

El Qanater prison has -in most of the wards- openair yards for exercise, of medium size, without a roof, and therefore prisoners are easily exposed to sunlight and fresh air. However, in most cases, the basin designated for washing (clothes) is located in the exercise yards, as well as the place designated for air-drying them, which makes it difficult for prisoners to sit comfortably or exercise.

2. Exercise Duration and Frequency

‘Non-political’ prisoners in El Qanater Prison typically go out to exercise for four to five hours per day, except for Fridays and official holidays. The period may be reduced to an hour or half an hour, and some prisoners listed in ‘political cases’ along with prisoners in in-processing and investigation wards, death row, and prisoners in solitary confinement may be entirely prohibited from going out for exercise at all, in violation of what is decided in the aforementioned regulation of prisons. However, some ‘political prisoners’ who have been housed in solitary confinement may be allowed exercise for about half an hour, without mingling with other prisoners.

Finally, prisoners housed together in a ward may be collectively punished and prohibited from exercising when some of the prisoners in that ward have an altercation with the administration or with “el nubatshias”.

At first, while I was in the ward, I could not exercise. I couldn't exercise until I went to ward 12 [...] I was exercising but I was not comfortable because this (exercise) was [a] new (concept) to the prisoners and they were always making sarcastic jokes about it. Then, when people got accustomed to exercise and wanted to work out with me, “el nubatshia” did not allow them. Also, exercise was difficult due to all the overcrowding, so I remained frustrated and caused frustration to those around me.”

An ex-prisoner in Damanhour Women's Prison

IX. Sales Outlets: The Canteen and the Cafeteria

Neither the *Prison Regulation Law* nor its bylaws address the existence of sales outlets in prison. Although the Interior Minister Resolution No. 691 of 1998 regarding the treatment of prisoners details the provision of meals, clothes, and personal hygiene products, El Qanater prison's goods are of inferior quality and/ or inaccessible forcing prisoners to either rely on food brought by their visitors, buy from the prison's canteen (a sales outlet similar to a grocery store), or the prison's cafeteria (an additional grocery that also sells ready meals) or both.

The Prison Administration raises prices in outlets to the point that they may be double the cost of comparable products outside the prison. For example, one of the prisoners who was imprisoned in El Qanater Women's Prison between 2020 and 2021, stated that the cost of water, when acquired through the prison, is estimated at 600 L.E. per month.

“Visitation is every month ... it was possible for water to cost 600 L.E. a month”

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women's Prison

In order to force prisoners to purchase items from the prison, the Prison Administration may prohibit visitors from bringing in many foods, products, and cleaning supplies, especially those items that are sold in the prison's sales outlets.

The most serious problem with sales outlets is that goods are not priced and the prisoner is not given invoices, so she does not know the value of her purchases, thus, the sums of money which are deducted from her ‘deposits’¹² are of a much higher value than what she bought, yet, she has no way to prove it.

“I used to bring water and fruit from the canteen because it was too heavy for mom to carry on her own. But, they were crooks and they didn’t list the prices of the items they sold. They could also claim that you owe them. When the National Council for Human Rights came, they put the prices of the products in the cafeteria and it was exactly like the prices on the outside. Yet, when a prisoner wanted to buy, they refused, and when the committee left, they removed the prices.”

An ex-prisoner in Damanhour Women’s Prison

“They divide the money they loot from us with the Prison Administration amongst them. Part of it goes for those who work in the cafeteria and the canteen, and part for the administration”

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women’s Prison

“Everything is available in the canteen, but at high prices. In Ramadan 2018, I decided to subscribe to el ma’isha. I paid two thousand Egyptian pounds a month. Sometimes, I would order certain food and it was much cheaper than [getting food from] visits. But, other things were very expensive. Now, el ma’isha is for four thousand pounds”

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women’s Prison

¹² Are akin to bank accounts that are supervised by the Prison Administration, and visitors put money in them. prisoners can then transfer from their ‘amanat’ to sales outlets, or to other prisoners.

X. Visits

Visits are especially important for the mental health of prisoners, as they are the only possible contact with the outside world. It goes without saying that phone calls are not allowed. A prisoner who is being held in pretrial detention is granted a visit once a week, and a prisoner who is serving a sentence is entitled to a visit twice a month.

1. Visitation Rooms Design

There are two areas for visitation in El Qanater. The first is the main place, where most ‘non-political prisoners’ visit. It is a large closed room with about five to six rows of benches with seating on both sides ‘back to back’. There is also a sales canteen located there.

“It is a place like a building, where people wait, and it has benches for people to sit in and a canteen.”

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women’s Prison

“At the time of COVID, they changed the shape of the place a little, and it became like a box that we were locked inside of, and the families entered the visitation area, of course, this is to prevent contact.”

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women’s Prison

As for the other room, which is called ‘the cage’, it is small in size, measuring about two by four meters. It is surrounded by iron fences on all sides, half of which are covered with a layer of thin sheets of iron and cement, and is surrounded on all sides by benches for sitting. ‘The cage’ is used for various purposes, such as a waiting room for prisoners going to or returning from court, or waiting to be searched upon their transfers from other places of detention. Prisoners on death row and some ‘political prisoners’ visit in ‘the cage’.

2. Surveillance and Bribery Requests

Prisoners do not feel that they can talk comfortably and in privacy with their families, as the persons in charge of visitation monitor the visitation room the entire time, and may even sit with the prisoner and her family throughout the visit. In addition, a member of the National Security Forces sits with some ‘political prisoners’, and the visit may be fully recorded. The problems do not end there; however, guards always ask for money from visitors throughout the visit,

and this is often done through emotional blackmail, with phrases such as ‘please me and I will take care of your daughter’, or as an acquired right by forcing the visitors to pay it.

“The informant stayed with us, not leaving, and she was eavesdropping on us, to the point that if the subject piqued her interest, she would intervene in the discussion.”

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women’s Prison

3. Length of Visits

Article 71 of the Minister of Interior Resolution No. 79 of 1961, as amended by Resolution No. 3320 of 2014 determines the duration of a visit. The period of regular and special visits that is authorized in the text of Article 40 of the Prisons Regulation Law is one hour, and the prison Warden may extend the period if necessary, after the approval of the Director-General of Prisons. However, the duration of the visit, in reality, ranges from ten minutes to a maximum of forty minutes, according to the administration’s discretion. As an exception, the administration may be responsive to the requests of some ‘political prisoners’, especially those who are listed in ‘civil’ cases , and give them the full hour.

¹³

“We could barely talk as the visitation only lasted for ten minutes. What’s more, multiple times throughout the visit, a guard would come asking for money; we can’t even say anything. Once, I wanted to write something to my mom. They intervened and took it [the note].”

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women’s Prison

4. Authorized Items

Most of the time, and especially for ‘non-Islamist prisoners’, the administration permits the entry of items not usually permitted in other prisons, such as various types of food and personal care, even cosmetic products (make-up). However, the problem lies in the inconsistency of the administration in permission/ prohibition and the search. Sometimes they permit certain items and then prohibit them without informing the prisoners. They may also permit the entry of some belongings for some prisoners in the exclusion of others without citing specific reasons. However, ‘political prisoners’ especially those who are counted as ‘Islamists’ are prohibited from many things that are supposed to be permissible in the first place, such as white clothing conforming to the law.

¹³ See more below, [Discriminating Between Prisoners](#).

“When I was imprisoned in El Qanater Prison during the winter, my family was prohibited from bringing in any clothing for me, and I was only allowed to wear el shull.”

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women’s Prison

5. The Visitors’ Plight

A. Reaching the Prison

Visitors from Cairo: Visitors who come from Cairo -the city of residence of most visitors- face a long and exhausting journey to reach the prison- located outside of Cairo; starting from the road to the prison, passing through the stage of waiting in front of the gates and registering names, all the way to waiting inside the prison.

“The trip takes about 4 hours. I’m from Menoufia so my family hires a car that takes them to prison for 450 L.E. It [Menofia] is even considered a nearby place. They used to visit 4 times a month for 2000 L.E.”

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women’s Prison

Visitors from Other Provinces: Rule 59 of the *Nelson Mandela Rules* states that prisoners should be allocated, to the fullest extent possible, to prisons close to their homes or their places of social rehabilitation. However, the Prisons Regulation Law and its bylaws neglect this detail despite its significance. Article 1 of the law only regulated the distribution of prisoners according to their sentences in different types of prisons (Public, Liman, and Central).

In reality, prisoners in El Qanater prison are exposed to de facto “el taghri” (estrangement) which is the distribution of prisoners to prisons that are geographically far from their governorates or places of residence. Belady has interviewed ex-prisoners in El Qanater who were from El Menoufia and El Minya, despite the existence of Women’s Prisons in those governorates (Shebin El-Kom Prison and El Minya Women’s Prison). This unfair distribution exacerbates the burden of individuals who wish to visit their imprisoned relatives while the costs, financial and otherwise, often exceed their capacities.

“To get to El Qanater, you must go from my home to Alexandria, from Alexandria to Cairo, and from Cairo to El Qanater. My family used to rent a car because of the difficulty of transportation. By car, they would leave at 3 in the morning and arrive at 7 in the morning.”

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women’s Prison

B. Stages of Waiting: After reaching the prison gates, visitors go through several stages of waiting and queues, until finally reaching the visitation room.

C. Queues outside the Gate: Visitors especially complain about the waiting queue outside the prison gate, as it takes long hours without seating, or canopies to shelter from the sun or rain.

“The queue in the summer is brutal, oh God. There were people who fainted because of the heat. They would allow only four at a time to enter.”

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women’s Prison

“People’s names are registered at 9 and they enter at 12. The boredom and fatigue are indescribable, and they take your phone from you, and everything that you might use to entertain yourself is prohibited. There was a bathroom, but the smell was so bad it was impossible to think of entering it.”

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women’s Prison

D. Treatment of Visitors: Article No. 38 of the amendment No. 106 for 2015 of the Prison Regulation Law calls for the good treatment of visitors of prisoners. However, it fails to specify the standards of good treatment. In fact, there are frequent accounts of visitors who complain of the degrading treatment they experienced, especially during the ‘body search’.

Visitors complain that those responsible for doing the search blackmail visitors to obtain bribes in exchange for searching them without violating their bodies. A system has also been established to deny the entry of visitors to ‘political prisoners’ until National Security permits it.

“The body searches for family members were very humiliating. My sister once collapsed because of the search that happened to her.”

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women’s Prison

“Mama and my sister used to come to visit me with tears from the searches they went through that got to the point of harassment, so much that I once found my mother crying, and I knew that she had been searched vaginally, like during in-processing, and they would have tried to do this with my sister too if she had not kept on screaming, she was only 14 years old at the time.”

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women’s Prison

6. The Cost of the Visit

In addition to the psychological harm and the physical stress that results from the visits, visitors incur huge financial costs associated with the visit, as the cost of transportation varies according to the governorates’ distance from the prison.

“Visits were every month. Transportation from Alexandria would cost 800 pounds.”

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women’s Prison

In addition to the cost of food and other items they buy for prisoners –usually no less than 1000 L.E. at a time- the cost of bribes that visitors are obliged to pay in order to facilitate the procedures of the visit, or are urged to pay to guards and inspectors, is no less than 100 L.E. a visit. Visitors also leave an amount of money for prisoners in their prison ‘deposit’¹⁴ accounts which are almost never less than 100 L.E. In general the cost of a single visit is no less than 1000 L.E. per month and often exceeds a few thousand.

“My visit during the time of the Coronavirus cost approximately 6000 L.E., because of the medicines I needed.”

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women’s Prison

¹⁴ See the Prison Currency and the Financial System section.

“My visits cost from 2000 to 3000 L.E., and if food is on me, it reaches 4000 L.E., other than the money that is dispersed in the visit (paid as forced bribery), about 150 L.E. My family spent about half a million L.E. on me during my imprisonment.”

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women’s Prison

Absolute Ban from Visitation: In many ‘political cases’, National Security officials issue a decision completely banning visits for ‘political prisoners’, especially ‘Islamists’, despite not having committed any infractions within the prison or violating any of its rules. As a result, they are unable to see their loved ones, or children, or even receive money, food, and hygiene products like other prisoners. Examples are Ms. Alia Awad, Ms. Aisha Al-Shater, Ms. Manar Abu Al-Naga, Ms. Somaya Maher.

XI. The Cost of Living in Prison

It is impossible for a prisoner in El Qanater Prison to live a dignified and decent life without money. As mentioned previously, every step in prison has its price. Below are the most important ‘stops’ for paying money:

1. The Most Important ‘Stops’ for Paying Money

- A. **“El Nubatshia” (Watch Prisoner) and Ward Cleaning Fees:** Upon entry to the ward, a prisoner has to pay the monthly fee of “el nubatshia” and the fees for cleaning the ward. Most of the time, the first fee is no less than five packs of cigarettes, in addition to one or two packs for each prison guard in the ward.
- B. **Renting a Bed and its Necessities:** Due to the constant and excessive overcrowding, the prisoner, in the first months or years of her imprisonment, is forced to pay money to “el nubatshia” and/ or prisoners who give up their bed for a fee, until she is officially ‘housed’ with her own bed for free. The rent for each bed increases depending on its location. The administration also delivers the beds without any beddings (just a bed frame). This is besides the ‘mosquito net curtains’ -that “el nubatshia” may oblige the prisoners to rent. Prisoners usually pay the rent for the bed and beddings monthly, unless they are able to purchase the bedding or obtain it from other prisoners.

- C. Bathroom Reservations for Showering: As a result of the inadequacy of bathrooms and their disproportionality to the number of prisoners, a schedule is created in which the names are registered, so that the prisoner can enter the bathroom, and some prisoners -according to the ward- pay a fee to reserve places in the shower line, otherwise they may not be able to shower for several days.
- D. Obtaining Clothes, Food, Hygiene and Personal Care Items: The Prison Administration does not provide adequate food, drink, and clothing, as explained, so most prisoners buy them or receive them from visitors.
- E. Visits: The cost of a single visit may reach 6000 L.E. or more, according to a statement by one of the prisoners who left El Qanater Prison in 2020. This sum is divided between the costs of transportation, provision of food and clothing, and personal necessities, in addition to the bribes that visitors are forced to pay to those in charge of visiting procedures at each step, as well as, what is paid to the prisoner responsible for calling for the visit, and others who carry visiting bags for her.
- F. Other Expenses: The prisoner may have to pay other expenses such as paying a monthly sum to a 'washerwoman', medication, and purchasing personal fans.

"The prison provides you with nothing when you enter besides "el shull" and the scarf, then you get bread and cheese and the rest is on you."

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women's Prison

2. Prison Currency and the Financial System

Prisoners are not allowed to circulate cash. Instead, they can deal in the following ways:

- A. "El Amanat" (Deposit Accounts): Are akin to bank accounts that are supervised by the Prison Administration, and visitors put money in them. Prisoners can then transfer from their "amanat" to sales outlets, or to other prisoners. Sometimes the inverse may happen, and the working prisoner transfers money to her family.
- B. "Bounat" (Vouchers): They are small papers that the cafeteria gives to prisoners in exchange for a transfer from their deposit accounts, or in exchange for cigarettes. Vouchers are mostly out of use now.

C. Cigarettes: Especially ‘Cleopatra’ which are the most common currency in prison as they are considered like cash because they are easy to circulate and are independent of the Prison Administration. There are also ‘chinese’ cigarettes, which are of lesser value, and ‘foreign’ ones, like Marlboro and L&M, of more value. There’s often a ‘cigarette exchange prisoner’ who can exchange currencies. Cigarettes are often used to pay for laundry ‘washerwoman’, bed rent, snacks, etc.

D. Mail: Families send ‘money orders’ by mail to prisoners inside. It is a newly added method in conjunction with the outbreak of the Coronavirus.

XII. Punishment

Typically punishment is directed against prisoners who: initiate fights, violate prison regulations, or have sexual relations with their colleagues - “mokhawah” in prison jargon.

Political prisoners, however, especially ‘Islamists’, often face punishment without committing misconduct as a result of ‘special directives¹⁵’ against them by National Security, along with some ‘non-political prisoners’ when they are persecuted by the Prison Administration. The punishments are as follows:

1. “Ta’deeb” ‘Discipline’ (Solitary Confinement)

Article 43 and 44 of the Prisons Regulation Law -which were amended by Law No. 106 of 2015 - stipulate the use of solitary confinement as a punishment for violating prison rules, for a period not exceeding fifteen days. They permit the Director-General of Prisons, upon the request of the prison Warden and the writing of a report, to detain prisoners incommunicado for a period not exceeding thirty days. It further permits the placement of the prisoner in a ‘specialized highly-guarded room’ for a period not exceeding six months.

Before the amendment, the same article permitted solitary confinement for a maximum of fifteen days and also authorized the prison Warden to detain the prisoner in solitary confinement for a period not exceeding seven days. It also authorized placing the prisoner in a special room specified by the regulation.

¹⁵ Special Directive: May be negative or positive. Prisoners may get a special directive by the authorities either (a) based on their classification according to their activity in the public sphere, their economic and social status, their affiliation or suspected affiliation to groups or ideological, political or sexual movements, their access to the international community and global media, (b) or based on their access to important persons, especially within the government.

A- In the first case, the ‘negative directive’: The Prison Administration treats prisoners harshly exposing them to various types of violations, including social exclusion, abuse or torture, and deprivation of basic rights.

B- In the second case, ‘positive directive’: The Prison Administration would treat prisoners respectfully and grant them rights, and even offer them special privileges.

By conducting a simple comparison of the law before and after the amendment, it becomes clear that the periods allowed for solitary confinement have multiplied and this is a noticeable and unjustified deterioration in the rights of prisoners and is inconsistent with international rules, especially Rule No. 43. of the Nelson Mandela rules that prohibit prolonged solitary confinement, as defined by Rule No. 44 as not exceeding fifteen consecutive days.

In fact, while the administration does sometimes use solitary confinement for its intended purposes -as a punishment for when rules are violated- or when altercations occur between prisoners themselves, or between prisoners and the Prison Administration, the administration at other times uses solitary confinement for the purpose of ‘housing’ some prisoners as soon as they enter prison, to serve their time in imprisonment there. In addition to violating the Prison Regulation Law, this procedure also violates the very idea of solitary confinement, which was originally intended to serve as a punishment or a means to correct the prisoner’s behavior inside the prison.

Here, we shed light on this practice by highlighting the names of some of the residents of solitary confinement, such as Ms. Sahar¹⁶ -a prisoner accused of espionage and then sentenced to life imprisonment- and Ms. Ola El Qaradawi, the famous ‘political prisoner’ who has been kept in solitary confinement since she entered prison in 2017 until her release in 2022. Sometimes the Prison Administration may allow the residents of solitary confinement to exercise for half an hour before closing the wards or after “tamam el adad” (carrying out the count).

A. Clothes and Personal Items: In ‘discipline’ (solitary confinement), a prisoner enters the cell stripped of all her belongings, including her undergarments. The administration explains that the practice is out of fear that the prisoner uses them to hang herself.

B. The Area: The disciplinary ward is a small ward consisting of three cells. The area of the solitary cell does not exceed two meters by two meters, and it is thus designed in a way that prevents free movement inside.

“I couldn’t even lay down properly.”

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women’s Prison

¹⁶ No further information is available about Ms. Sahar, all that is known about her was through testimonials of prisoners who spent time with her in solitary confinement.

C. **Ventilation and Lighting**: There are no windows in the solitary cells, sunlight never comes through, and there is no artificial source of lighting, which means that the prisoner remains in darkness for the entire period of confinement.

"The solitary cell has no window, and I could not tell night from day."

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women's Prison

D. **Water Circuits**: Inside the disciplinary ward, but not the cells, there is a small water circuit that prisoners are allowed to use once a day. As for the rest of the day, the prisoner must use a bucket or a bag to relieve herself.

"In solitary confinement, I used to relieve myself in a bucket."

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women's Prison

E. **Menstrual Cycle**: The prisoner who is sent to solitary for punishment is not allowed to bring sanitary pads into the cell.

F. **Food**: "El Ta'yin" inside solitary confinement differs from the rest of the prison wards, in most cases two meals are served per day. Each meal consists of a loaf of bread and a piece of cheese.

"A piece of bread and a piece of cheese is thrown to us through a hole in the door."

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women's Prison

G. **Visits**: Prisoners in solitary confinement are also prohibited from visiting and exercising and from engaging in any human interaction.

"I wasn't feeling well psychologically, and this manifested in a tremor in my leg and retinal detachment. I could not communicate while maintaining eye contact."

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women's Prison

2. “El Tashrida” (‘Displacement’ / ‘Forced Vagrancy’) and “El Taghriba” (‘Estrangement’)

A. “El Tashrida”: (a) Internal ‘displacement’: takes place inside the ward, where the prisoner is made to leave her bed and spend her punishment on the kitchen or bathroom floor, or hallway, depending on the ward, (b) external ‘displacement’: takes place outside the ward and the prisoner is transferred from the ward designated for her detention to another ward in the same prison. In both cases, the ‘displaced’ prisoner is stripped of all her food, drink, clothes and personal belongings, in addition to depriving her of the right to sleep on a bed.

“In 2014 we had a serious problem, at that time we went on hunger strike, and the Prison Administration’s reaction was that they displaced us in the wards, and we slept on the ground when it was freezing and cats ran over us all night.”

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women’s Prison

B. “El Taghriba”: It is the transfer of the prisoner and her ‘estrangement’ from the original prison designated for her detention -which is supposed to be close to her place of residence- to another prison far away.

In many cases, and before ‘displacement’ or ‘estrangement’ measures take place, security forces assault prisoners, especially ‘political prisoners’, and specifically if they are classified as ‘Islamists’.

“What happened to us is that they entered and beat us in the cells of the main prison where we were imprisoned, and then they transferred us to a second prison, and all this time we were beaten from the first time we left [our first prison], and of course, this second prison was our punishment because it is one of the most horrific prisons that one can go to.”

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women’s Prison

3. Beating

Article 55 of the 2019 amended Egyptian constitution stipulates that:

"Anyone who is arrested, imprisoned, or has his freedom restricted must be treated in a manner that preserves his dignity, and he may not be tortured, intimidated, coerced, or harmed physically or mentally, and his detention or imprisonment shall only be in places designated for that that are humanly and healthily appropriate."

In addition, Articles 43 to 48 of the *Prison Regulation Law*, enumerate many disciplinary methods such as warnings, deprivation of all or some privileges for a period of 30 days, and solitary confinement. Beating was not among the enumerated punishments.

However, the Prison Administration uses beating as a punishment from time to time. The beating could come from the security guards or "el nubatshias" who may carry out the beating either at their own accord or based on directives from the Prison Administration who may even enlist the help of 'non-political' prisoners favored by the administration to participate in the beatings.

Usually, the Prison Administration uses the security forces to beat prisoners when mass altercations occur inside the wards. The administration punishes the entire ward, and the beating is often followed by either solitary confinement, 'displacement', or 'estrangement'.

"The security forces entered and beat the entire drug ward, then they took the ones who made problems and put them all in disciplinary cells "el ta'deeb"."

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women's Prison

"The prison supervisor has the right to beat any non-political prisoner, and also searches her in a very humiliating manner in the middle of the prison without giving reasons."

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women's Prison

"Before estrangement, the security forces entered and beat us, and a day later "el nubatshia" gathered the non-political prisoners and they came and beat us, one girl had her finger broken, another was beaten senseless on her head, and we were hurt badly."

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women's Prison



“They first gathered a group of non-political prisoners and entered and beat us in the cell. Then they locked us up and then reopened, and we found ourselves being beaten by other informants and prison guards, and along with them were the officers of the women’s and men’s prisons. Not only that. Then they brought the Central Security Forces and beat us, and they were ready to use the tear-gassing gas on us inside the cell.”

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women’s Prison

“Before estrangement in the morning, the security forces, informants, and guards entered the cell and beat us all. They made us leave the cell in a queue. On both sides, soldiers and officers beat us.”

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women’s Prison

XIII. Sexual Abuse

Prisoners in El Qanater prison may be subjected to verbal and physical abuse at various stages inside the prison from the moment they reach the prison, passing through the hospital, the search they are subjected to upon returning from court hearings, ending with assault upon receiving punishment.

During the search:

“In El Qanater the guard tossed all my belongings under his feet and ordered me to pick them up. I did not wish to do it. Later, when I entered, he took everything including all of my clothes, and ordered me to go to the bathroom. I was completely naked and they forced me to undergo a vaginal examination using a dirty plastic bag. Even though I told them I am a virgin, she put her hands inside me. Then, she gave me “el shull” and asked me to put it on without anything beneath, even though you can clearly see through it.”

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women’s Prison

“It was not a mere humiliating search; it was harassment. I would quarrel because she would see our underwear color and tell the officer about it. In fact, she herself was harassing me.”

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women’s Prison

Therefore, some prisoners often resort to offering bribes to avoid harassment.

“During the search, you have one of two options. Either to offer a bribe and skip the search, or get the usual treatment: lift up your clothes, where she would touch your breasts, and you would take off your underwear. She would wear a plastic bag and touch your vagina and bottom to ensure that there is nothing there. Then, you will squat and stand up so that if you were hiding anything, it would fall out. Moreover, if you were found suspect, you would be forced to relieve yourself in a bucket. In addition, whoever spends the night in the holding cell [during court hearings], would be admitted to the in-processing ward and forced to relieve herself in a bucket.”

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women’s Prison

In the Hospital: Prisoners may be subjected to harassment during medical testing.

A number of prisoners have reported being harassed by doctors inside the prison hospital and blackmailed in exchange for medical care.

Rule 10 (2) of the *Bangkok Rules* stipulates that:

“If a woman prisoner requests that she be examined or treated by a woman physician or nurse, a woman physician or nurse shall be made available, to the extent possible, except for situations requiring urgent medical intervention. If a male medical practitioner undertakes the examination contrary to the wishes of the woman prisoner, a woman staff member shall be present during the examination.”

However, the *Prisons Regulation Law* does not consider the prisoners’ need in some cases to be examined by women doctors.

“The gastroenterologist was old and he was the only available doctor, and he was a pervert. In fact, he molested me when I went for an examination. I didn’t think much of it when he started examining my chest, thinking that he was doing a casual checkup. Suddenly, he held my breast and rubbed my nipple while using the stethoscope. When I objected to this behavior, he started yelling at me, kicked me out, and refused to examine anyone else. He also refused to run any tests for me.”

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women’s Prison

“A nurse tried to harass me in the hospital. I was not feeling well psychologically, which resulted in a leg tremor and retinal detachment. I could not communicate while maintaining eye contact, and no one agreed to respond to me. In fact, when I complained more than once, they took me to the harassing nurse again.”

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women’s Prison

XIV. Discriminating Between Prisoners

Living conditions of prisoners in El Qanater Women’s Prison vary depending on the authorities’ implicit classification of prisoners based on the following: (a) socio-economic status (b) identification and / or affiliation (or presumed affiliation) to different ideological and / or political groups (or currents). Indeed, ‘political prisoners’ are unofficially classified as either ‘Civil’ or ‘Islamist’.

Discrepancy in treatment ranges from access to rights such as going out to exercise, the right to visits, a bed, the possibility of employment and bringing in belongings such as clothes and food, the type of punishment to be inflicted upon transgression and even the possibility of being beaten.

A. **Socio-Economic Status:** Prisoners with access to ‘money and power’, but do not have any inclinations that contradict the orientations of the administration (political-sexual-intellectual) or do not receive negative special directives by National Security or “the higher authorities” can enjoy a relatively decent life and access to many privileges.

Prisoners with ‘lesser means’, may also be able to enjoy a better life, as they may be able to earn money inside prisons and provide for themselves an acceptable lifestyle and even earn some extra money to support their families outside.

Whereas prisoners with lesser financial means compounded with the inability to work, or are not permitted to work, would live as ‘vagrants’, and this way, they face double discrimination and are punished twice, where in effect, they would receive a harsher punishment than designated by the prison sentence, violating the minimum standards of justice that require equality between prisoners.

Finally, socio-financial privilege may transcend the ‘political classification’, and allow even ‘political prisoners’ to enjoy some amenities and privileges. Of course, this is subject to the whims of the different administrations and many other considerations, including the classification of the ‘political prisoners’ themselves, as will be explained below.

B. ‘Political’ and ‘Non-Political’ Prisoners: This classification is unofficial, for authorities in Egypt, officially deny the presence of ‘political prisoners’ in the first place, as communicated by president El Sisi in his speech¹⁷ on January 6, 2019 on CBS¹⁸. Based on this denial, there are no wards specifically classified by prison administration as ‘political wards’. Even “el askary” -the military ward- is a title dubbed by prisoners, not the administration.

While in reality, ‘political prisoners’, especially ones who come together in one legal case, are ‘housed’ together, and no ‘non-political prisoners’ are placed with them. Yet because of the lack of space, and other considerations, ‘political prisoners’, especially ‘non-Islamists,’ who are arrested individually, are placed in the same wards as ‘non-political’ prisoners, yet even then, the administration strives to prevent mingling between them to the greatest extent possible.

It is not easy to determine whether the prisoners classified by the authorities as ‘political’ or those classified as ‘non-political’ enjoy better treatment, for in some rights and privileges ‘non-political prisoners’ have more leeway, while it is the inverse in others. It is safe to generalize, however, that when it comes to rights that if unobserved, would damage the reputation of the authorities, as ‘political prisoners’ may have better access to the international community and the media, then some of their rights may be observed, such as access to the prison hospital, transfer to an outside hospital, letting visits last the allotted time. Some ‘political prisoners’ are even able to avoid intrusive body searches.

¹⁷ [Egypt's President El-Sisi denies ordering massacre in interview his government later tried to block](#)

¹⁸ In their denial of the presence of ‘political prisoners’, authorities try to play on the fact that the legal code no longer encompasses political crimes and the political police, at the time of King Fouad, were abolished.

“When I went there in 2021, of course, they would take us to the hospital in the deep hours of the night, something they never did with non-political prisoners. But we made them change that.”

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women’s Prison Classified as a ‘Civil Political Prisoner’

Yet, almost like everything else, whether classified as ‘political’ or ‘non-political’, the treatment of the prisoners depends on the whim of the administration.

“The new Chief of Inspection hated political prisoners. You feel like he wanted to take revenge against us. Unlike his predecessors, he favored non-political prisoners. He would allow them to spend the whole day roaming about the prison, but would only give us one exercise hour.”

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women’s Prison Classified as a ‘Civil Political Prisoner’

As for privileges, like extra exercise hours, practicing hobbies, painting, writing and receiving letters, accessing books, they may be granted to ‘non-political’ prisoners to the exclusion of ‘political’ ones.

“The chief of Inspection would keep my letters with him for weeks, and threaten me to prohibit them entirely if I complain. They wouldn’t even so much as glance at the letters of non-political prisoners. He also tried to ban my access to books. But I protested and held steady.”

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women’s Prison Classified as a ‘Civil Political Prisoner’

Further, discrimination is clearly evident among the classified ‘political prisoners’ themselves, as a distinction is made between:

- Those classified by the authorities as ‘Islamists’: Prisoners who have or are presumed to have ideology and / or affiliation with the Islamist Movement or groups especially supporting the late president Mr. Morsi, affiliated with the Raba’a sit-in, El Azhar protests, or come from the Sinai Province.
- Those classified by the authorities as ‘non-Islamists’: Prisoners who have or are presumed to have ideology and / or affiliation with the civil movement that advocates for a secular civilian State that refuses both military and religious governance.

Belady observed that the authorities would by all counts treat the ‘Islamists political prisoners’ more harshly than ‘non-Islamist political prisoners’, and generally speaking, even more than ‘non-political prisoners’. For example, most of them are prevented from exercising and accessing any of the prison facilities such as the mosque or library. Also, some of them are entirely denied the right to visit, as is the case with Somaya Maher and Aisha Al-Shater. In addition, the administration sometimes may even prevent them from papers and pens.

“In 2014, The Prison Administration prevented us from leaving our cell, our number was very large inside a small cell, so we used to look through a small window (Nadarah) in the door and see all the prisoners outside except us because we are Islamic prisoners”.

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women’s Prison Classified as an ‘Islamist Political Prisoner’

“We were forbidden from using any pen or paper. If they found one, it was as though they found a bomb”.

An ex-prisoner in El Qanater Women’s Prison Classified as an ‘Islamist Political Prisoner’

As for violations and retaliatory measures taken against ‘political prisoners’, ‘Islamists political prisoners’, like Ms. Ola El Qaradawi have been ‘housed’ in solitary confinement for years. Others have been brutally beaten in prison, ‘displaced’ and ‘estranged’. While, to the date of this profile’s drafting, Belady has not observed any ‘civil political prisoner’ subject to such extreme violations.

Also, LGBTQ+ prisoners, like the late Ms. Sara Hegazi are amongst the worst treated facing multiple discriminations against them. Before she died, she narrated to Belady:

“I was placed in solitary confinement until I could not bear it anymore. Then they transferred me to el-askary (military ward) with two other non-political prisoners. They were not allowed to talk to me. They were mean so start with.”

Finally, on the other hand, ‘special prisoners’ who have special access to media and international stakeholders may receive favorable treatment, such as Ms. Yara Sallam and Ms. Sana Seif, who had been sentenced in 2014 to two years imprisonment in “El Ettihadiya Palace Protest Case”. They have reportedly managed to persuade the authorities to relieve them from ‘intimate part’ searches and the mandatory head scarf. They were both released, in a presidential pardon on September 23rd, 2015, a day before president El Sisi planned to head to the annual United Nations summit of world leader ¹⁹, and less than a year prior to the completion of their sentence ²⁰, in an indicative example of the authorities sensitivity to international pressure.

Thus, it remains evident that laws bend and break, and there are no set of rules or minimum levels of treatment that can uniformly apply to prisoners.

Conclusion

In general, and after looking closely at the conditions of prisoners inside El Qanater Prison, especially with regard to the application of legislation related to prison construction and management, we can conclude that the authorities strive to implement some legislation regulating prisons, and are in violation of such legislation in other cases. We find that El Qanater Women’s Prison may be in accordance with the provisions of the law, such as the construction of the wards in a way that generally permits sunshine and fresh air, the presence of some facilities such as the mosque or the library within the prison walls.

On the other hand, the Prison Administration carries out practices that explicitly violate the law, such as placing prisoners in the in-processing ward for several months or housing them there in addition to not testing them medically, practicing physical violence against them in the form of beatings, and using solitary confinement cells to house them for the duration of their stay in prison, even without having violated any prison rules. Additionally, as a form of psychological torture and economic violence against them, they and their families are forced to drain their material resources in order to access the most basic rights such as food, drink, health and visitation, sometimes at exorbitant prices and even forcing them to engage in bribery.

¹⁹ [Egypt’s Sisi pardons 100 prisoners, including Jazeera journalists](#)

²⁰ Verdict upheld on Yara Salam and 23 demonstrators to two years imprisonment.

As for the compatibility of national legislation with international legislation, the former lacks many of the guarantees stipulated in international rules and laws, and thus the Prison Administration violates those international rules as they are absent from the national legislation. When making a simple comparison between the Nelson Mandela Rules for the treatment of prisoners, the Bangkok Rules regarding women prisoners, and the national prison regulation legislation, we find that the latter lacks many articles that take into account the needs of prisoners, such as articles regulating the provision of clothing and personal care necessities such as free sanitary pads.

Also, discriminating between prisoners on the basis of their socio-economic status or political background has direct and enormous impact on the life of prisoners. Leaving 'Islamist political prisoners' without visitation for years, and 'non-political prisoners' -who have few resources- to work in the service of their colleagues inside the prison only to secure enough food for the day.

Finally, despite the issuance of the National Strategy for Human Rights in Egypt, the Prison Administration chose to disregard it along with international human rights rules, and persists in committing violations, and then work on concealing them deliberately and carefully, even re-engineering the truth. These acts of deliberate disinformation become clearly manifest before the visit of the National Council for Human Rights or television recordings that take interest in El Qanater Women's Prison as it is the largest and most important Women's Prison in Egypt. Prior to such visits, the administration may set false prices for the cafeteria, and distribute sports clothing that are prohibited. That is until the end of the visit, when the situation returns to the way it was prior to the visit²¹.

²¹ [Five-Star Prisons..Payment before Imprisonment](#)