



Witness Statement of Zaynab Bayazidi

Name: Zaynab Bayazidi
Place of Birth: Mahabad, Iran
Date of Birth: 1982
Occupation: Store owner and vocational school instructor

Interviewing Organization: Iran Human Rights Documentation Center (IHRDC)

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Interviewer: IHRDC Staff

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The views and opinions of the witness expressed herein do not necessarily reflect those of the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center.

Statement

Background

1. My name is Zaynab Bayazidi and I was born in 1982 in the city of Mahabad. In my birth certificate, however, my year of birth is registered as 1979. I am a women's and children's rights activist. I was arrested four times by the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and was convicted and sentenced twice.
2. My last conviction was a four-and-a-half-year jail sentence. I was released six months ago. Prior to my [last] arrest, I was given a suspended sentence of six months' imprisonment in exile in Maragheh Prison. When I was arrested [for the last time], convicted, and sentenced to four years, my original six-month sentence was added to my four-year sentence, making it a total of four-and-a-half years.

Human Rights Activism

3. My human rights activities were mainly concentrated on women's and children's rights issues. One such activity was my involvement with a group called the Mothers for Reconciliation, which is a group of mothers who have lost their children to executions or in armed conflict. These women get together on the anniversary of each loved one's death, console each other, and distribute statements. Various members of the organization and I interviewed these mothers. Sometimes we photographed or filmed them, and then uploaded the end product to international human rights sites to increase public awareness.
4. We also produced documentaries (films, pictures, written material) about the plight of the children. We even received some funding from a human rights organization in Europe to help put some impoverished youngsters through school. We also wrote articles in the [legal] *Khatoun* magazine¹, which was a journal written for women and university students. Currently, the magazine is banned. They banned it just before I was incarcerated for the last time.
5. In general, any human rights activism, such as the Mothers for Reconciliation activities, would be closely monitored and controlled by security forces in Iran. Activists would repeatedly be summoned, interrogated, and threatened. Sometimes, even their families would be put under pressure. After I was released, I came to a realization that these harsh psychological pressures and the divisive propaganda (used by the government) had taken its toll on the activists' determination and had reduced the number and intensity of the activities.

Government Treatment of Activists

6. [The authorities] were especially alarmed by women's movements, but their interrogations were not focused solely on my women's rights activism. Although they tried to act nonchalant about the Human Rights Organization of Kurdistan, they were extremely anxious about its activities. For example, one of my arrests occurred when we were trying to obtain a permit for a gathering

¹ A word of disputed origin common in Persian and Kurdish usage, khatoun is roughly the female equivalent of the title of khan used by tribal nobility. See, for example, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/bologan-katun-the-name-of-three-of-the-royal-wives-of-the-mongol-il-khans-in-iran>.

to honor Serveh Kamkar, a human rights activist concentrating on women's issues, who was brutally arrested at the hands of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Intelligence Division. Our permit application was met with strong opposition. They visited my home and the homes of the other members of the women's rights group to question us. Eventually they summoned us to the office of the Governor. I went with Mr. Sherko Jahani²—a human rights activist who fled the country after my arrest—as a representative of the Human Rights group. By the time we got there, the office was closed, so they took us to the local MOIS office.

7. This was in January 2006. In spite of our objections, they interrogated us for hours. When we intensified our objections, they were forced to take us back to the Governor's office, open the doors, and keep us there until after midnight for more interrogation. That night, the Revolutionary Court magistrate, MOIS local office interrogators, and, if my memory serves me right, the Mahabad prosecutor were there to interrogate us. I do remember that the Majles representative for Mahabad was also present. They insisted that they did not want this civic gathering to turn into something else. We promised to abide by security measures, so that no rioters would take advantage of the gathering and no slogans would be chanted.
8. We were going to carry some banners with written messages. This was very common during demonstrations. We were also going to take a copy of the Iranian Constitution with us as a reminder that according to Article 27 of the IRI Constitution we were allowed to hold such gatherings³ provided they were peaceful and did not break any Islamic principles. We spelled out all the details of the gathering and tried to establish their legitimacy, but to no avail. We even reasoned with them, saying that since people were already aware of the gathering, they could go ahead and arrest us right there and then. Eventually, they agreed to give us the permit at 8:00 AM the next day, just two hours prior to the designated time of the gathering. But when we showed up at 8:00 AM to collect the promised permit, no one there seemed to know anything about the permit. After two or three hours we headed towards the gathering site in the city center. We were heckled all the way to the gathering. We knew that the hecklers were all agents of the local MOIS office.
9. When we got to the demonstration site, we noticed that in addition to uniformed members of the regular police (NAJA), there were plainclothes agents present as well. These agents work with the government to create chaos in these situations. We call them local mercenaries. We figured that if we went ahead with the gathering it would not only cost a lot of money but also tempt the security forces and their agents to take advantage of the crowds and create chaos. We thought that such a turn of events would surely result in many arrests. Therefore, we decided to pass out sweets to everyone. The government agents numbered between 50 and 100. While offering sweets, we explained to them that we weren't seeking a confrontation and that our gathering was a peaceful one. We reiterated that the purpose of the gathering was to claim our dignity, in the hope that such things [like the arrest of Serveh Kamkar] did not happen again. We said to them: This was supposed to be an absolutely peaceful gathering, but since we felt that you were going to deal with us [harshly], we canceled the gathering. We did this because we come in peace and do not approve of violence.
10. Later, during my trial [after my second arrest], the prosecutor alluded to the fact that I had offered sweets at our gathering. I explained the reason behind the change in plans and reminded him that passing around sweets is not a crime. In truth, they were just very upset because their plan to

² See witness statement of Sherko Jahani Asl, available at: <http://www.iranhrdc.org/english/publications/witness-testimony/1000000160-witness-statement-of-shirku-jahani-asl.html>.

³ See http://www.iranchamber.com/government/laws/constitution_ch03.php.

disrupt the gathering and create chaos had been sabotaged. In the end, they were not able to take advantage of the situation.

First Arrest and Detention

11. I had gone to Sardasht—a town that borders Iraq—to visit a girl who had set herself on fire. On my way back, I was arrested with my friends by [agents of] the Sardasht MOIS office. We were in detention for six days. After interrogating us many times, they charged us with having illegally exited the country and sent us to the Revolutionary Court of Sardasht. Since there was no evidence against me, I was acquitted. Regardless, I was sent to the Mahabad MOIS office and then to Mahabad Central Prison. A few days later, I was sent to Orumiyeh.
12. For a while they would take us to the MOIS local office during the day and bring us back to the prison at night. They took us to court many times, but there was no trial. They would just take us to solitary detention rooms. They were a few steps lower than the ground. They would take us there at 8:30 in the morning and leave us there until closing. With no trial, nothing! Then, in the evening, they would take us back to prison. While we were there, however, they made us listen to the lashing of male detainees, which took place in a [nearby] narrow hallway. This was done so that we could see the whipping and hear their agonizing cries of pain. They lashed them a lot, and by making us witness it all, they tried to scare us and put pressure on us. Then with no court appearance or trial, they took us back to our prison.
13. The worst of all the prisons and detention centers I was detained in was [the MOIS detention center] in Sardasht, where I stayed for 6 days. It was extremely filthy and had a foul smell. Besides my friend and I there was a woman with her three children. She had escaped from her [abusive] husband. She was also charged with illegal escape from Iran. Her children ranged from 3 to 6 years old.

Second and Third Arrests

14. My second arrest was the one related to [our gathering for] Serveh Kamkar. My third arrest resulted in a [suspended sentence of] six months' imprisonment. It happened past midnight. My family was asleep and I was working on my computer, when I heard the brakes of a car. I looked down on the street and saw a car with many passengers. [They got out of the car], walked towards our house and knocked on our door. When my father opened the door, they forced themselves in to the house. No matter how much my father asked them to wait for the family to wake up and get dressed, they ignored him and without producing any arrest order forced their way in. After they came in, they showed my arrest order, but only after we engaged in a heated argument. They did not introduce themselves, which is not surprising. Given their [rude] behavior, it was obvious that they belonged to the Ministry of Intelligence, and these people are not in the habit of giving out their names. MOIS agents are always plainclothes. The police was not accompanying them. They forced their way in and frightened everyone in the house. Only I was expecting them, because I had seen them from my window.
15. They had a warrant for my arrest, but the one for my sister had an error so I told them, "You have the warrant for my arrest, I will come with you, but leave the rest of my family alone. They refused. They had a number of local mercenaries who were Kurds working for the government with them. We call them jash. They bring them from surrounding cities. That night, they bombarded us with insults and extreme profanity. This resulted in a verbal scuffle and finally

erupted in physical violence. Their insults were not just pointed at me, but my family as well. This enraged me and left me with no choice, so we got into a brawl.

16. I complained about them taking me in the middle of the night. My brother tried to convince them to allow him to take me to the office in the morning. They refused and insisted on taking me right then. The way they raided our house was absurd. They handcuffed me, but kept on insulting my family. I couldn't take it anymore and began to physically resist. They dragged me and I fought them. They pulled so hard on my wrists that they were bruised and irritated me for a long time after my arrest. This struggle went on for a while, until suddenly we heard a bullet. We were all transfixed. I was petrified, thinking that I had lost one of my family members. Fortunately, however, the bullet had only hit the corner of a window.
17. My family was shocked by my midnight arrest. They had been woken up. They were not expecting anything like this to happen. On top of that, they had to endure all the insults. It was particularly hard on my brother and my father, to see their sister and daughter being dragged away in the middle of the night. In Kurdistan this is very hard to take, especially when it happens at that time of the night. I had been summoned to the local MOIS office or to court many times, but never in the middle of the night. This was too much to take. They had no female agent with them. Our pleas to allow my family to turn me in the next morning fell on deaf ears.
18. [That night] they took me, my sister Zahra Bayazidi, my father, and my older brother. They released my father and brother the following afternoon, but they kept my sister and me. That night, our neighbors, who had been woken up by all the noise, wanted to come out and see what was going on, but they were threatened at gun point not to step out of their houses. [The authorities] had surrounded the entire neighborhood. I checked the number of the cars. There were many. They all had private license plates. I can't remember the make of the cars. In the chaos of that night, I couldn't really stop and notice such things.
19. The entire ordeal took a little longer than half an hour. After the scuffle started in our house, they called in the police under the pretense that a domestic dispute was taking place and they needed help to control the situation. All this after they had raided our house and [abused us with] profanity and insults. All we did was to try to convince them not to arrest other members of our family. They had guns. We had nothing. Moreover, I was ready to go with them. Anyway, when the police came and saw that it was not a domestic dispute, they did not interfere [and left].
20. The night they took us, they made my mother and my younger brother sit still facing the wall for an hour or so, at gun point. At one point, they even struck my mother on her upper arm with a gunstock. It bruised her arm. After this, they had searched the house. They took some of my belongings, including my computer, some CDs, and a few other things. After my release, I followed up through the court and retrieved them. They had not found anything that could justify my conviction.

Interrogation

21. The first time I was interrogated was when I was in university [before my arrest]. It was during the 1379-1380 (2000-2001) academic year. I cannot remember the exact date. They called me into the herasat office of the university. They were actually MOIS agents and tried to accuse me of being one of the instigators of some of the activities that were taking place in the university. My other arrest took place after I had gone into a village to do research on the self-immolation of some of the women in the village. I was interrogated, but not detained.

22. After this, I was regularly questioned by the local MOIS office, either in person or via telephone. They did not blindfold me during the face to face interrogations. When traveling to and from the detention center, however, I was always blindfolded. Once, they made me wait on my feet, with a blindfold on, for hours outside the detention center. Most of the time I only had one interrogator. One of them was a man from Orumiyeh named Hossein. He questioned me for hours, and almost every time the interrogation would end in an argument [between us]. They tried to push me into cooperating with them by playing mental games with me. In Sardasht, the interrogator was a skinny young man. From his behavior you could tell that he was green and new to the job. He called himself [Mr.] Jahani and had an aggressive attitude and a foul mouth. We got into a lot of arguments. They tortured me psychologically and this was very difficult for me.
23. At another time Mr. Jahani's supervisor, whose name I can't recall, interrogated me together with Mr. Hedayati, who was a local MOIS agent. Mr. Hedayati later became the head of the Mahabad MOIS office.
24. The questions they asked were more about my relationships and connection with others. Without any evidence, they accused me of being connected with counter-revolutionary elements. These accusations made me laugh. Their goal, of course, was to scare me.
25. Once, they took me to the head of the local MOIS office. Their tone was humiliating and disrespectful. For example, during the interrogation, they left the door open with a soldier standing at the door. I cannot recall the details of what my interrogator said, but a sentence stands out for me. He said: Do you know why I left the door open? With a soldier guarding it? Because you and I are of the opposite sex, and leaving us in the same room is like playing with fire. So I did not want people to get any ideas or say things about us!
26. I think he was trying to endear himself to me, but his demeanor and the expression in his eyes were not endearing. This kind of treatment was very hurtful and created a lot of emotional stress. Of course, this was not an isolated case. [Jahani,] the young interrogator from Orumiyeh at the Mahabad center, tried a softer approach after realizing that he could not get anything out of me with aggression. He began to speak to me in a tender voice and tried to flirt with me. Even after I was released on bail, he continued to pursue a relationship with me. He called my house many times, but I turned him down.
27. For example, once after a long interrogation session, I was sitting blindfolded in a corner of the courtyard [of the detention center], when I heard him talking to me. This kind of behavior from an interrogator was very odd. The truth is, he wanted to use me to advance his own career. This happens with male detainees too. They send female interrogators to form some kind of sentimental bond with the men so that they might be persuaded to change their minds and abort their activities. Sometimes, too, they [document and] used the detainees' [emotional] vulnerabilities against them [in court]...or they would blackmail them into cooperating with them.
28. During my interrogations, I noticed that the authorities had been eavesdropping on my telephone calls. [My interrogators] even admitted to having taped some of my international phone calls, and some calls pertaining to my activities. Nevertheless, in court, they had no evidence against me. They wanted me to know that they were watching every step I took, [and that] my house was under strict surveillance, even after my arrest. My mobile carrier was Iran Cell and my number was listed under my brother's name, so he was also interrogated.

Last Arrest and Trial

29. On July 7, 2008 I received a call and was told that I had been summoned for questioning by the Mahabad MOIS. After a few hours of interrogation I returned home on the promise that I would return on July 9 to complete the interrogation. On that day, after a few more hours of interrogation I was arrested and sent to the Revolutionary Court of Mahabad for provisional detention during which I was questioned two or three times by a procurator named Mr. Zaheri, and [then] I was taken to court on two occasions.
30. I was charged with distributing propaganda against the government, illegally exiting the country, using anti-regime slogans, engagement in anti-government activism, cooperation with anti-regime parties, etc. This is normal: in [Iran's] Kurdish region any kind of activity, whether civil, political, or in any other field is automatically linked to cooperation with [anti-regime] parties. There's a reason for this: [these charges] increase the seriousness of the accusation and make it more difficult for families to follow up [on an arrested relative] or for lawyers to build a defense case.
31. During my sessions with the procurator, he charged me with membership in the Human Rights Organization of Kurdistan and with giving interviews to foreign media like Radio Farda, and also accused me of having attended the memorial service of an anti-government family member. Most accusations were of that nature. They showed me a copy of an article I had written for a website. They also reiterated my membership in the Human Rights Organization of Kurdistan. I, of course, did not accept any of the above as "criminal" charges. Nevertheless, I was deemed guilty of these 'crimes' by the court. But I never received a written copy of my conviction by Branch 1 of the Revolutionary Court of Mahabad, the presiding judge of which was a cleric named Judge Chabok.
32. I had four lawyers [all in all]. One of them, Mr. Ajhdar Azarhabashi, resigned as a result of pressures [from the regime]. My lawyer during my hunger strike was Mr. Mehdi Hojati. But I did not have a lawyer during my hearings. When I asked for one, I was told that my charges were not substantial and that I would be released within days. When my discharge did not happen as predicted, I became convinced that the local office of the Ministry of Intelligence and National Security (MOIS) must have intervened. I knew this because when I was being transferred from the local office of MOIS for interrogation, I asked about my case and was told that it all depended on whether I changed my mind [about my activities]. This is how the MOIS interfered and I got four years.
33. Every single one of my charges was based on undocumented reports. When I was read my conviction order, I was informed that I had been convicted on the basis of 'reports.' They never gave me a copy of the court's judgment.
34. Many times, the prosecutor had demanded that I ask for forgiveness in return for my complete freedom. My family asked him: Why should she apologize for a wrong she did not commit? To which he had responded that Zaynab must come and say that although she did not do anything wrong, she is willing to apologize. This is how they try to take away your dignity. It would have been very belittling for me to go beg for forgiveness for a crime I did not commit. I was often a witness to seeing real criminals pardoned on the basis of their dealings with the authorities; something I could not swallow. I said to myself: What is four years? I would not ask for pardon

even if I had a forty year sentence! This way, when they discharge me after four years, I can hold my head up. My integrity will remain intact and I will be proud of myself!

35. I never asked for pardon, even though I could have. Every prisoner has a legal right to ask for pardon, but I never did it. I am of the conviction that someone who is innocent has no reason to, and should not, ask for forgiveness. In my defense statement, I announced that my opposition was not against Iranians in general or any one particular person. I said that I was vocal in defense of the people of Iran, and since I had done nothing wrong, I was not going to ask for forgiveness. To ask for pardon meant to ignore my pride and compromise my integrity.

Conditions in Maragheh Central Prison

36. My sentence was four years, but I had to serve the extra six-month suspended sentence from my prior conviction. This brought my incarceration to a total of four-and-a-half years. During the last six months, I was imprisoned in exile in a prison in Maragheh.⁴ Conditions at the Maragheh detention center were deplorable. They were so bad that even calling it a prison would have been euphemistic. Our room was small and had four three-tiered bunk beds. Fitting twelve inmates in that room of approximately 20 square meters was a challenge.
37. But they crammed an extra number of prisoners in that space who had to sleep on the floor. At one point the number of detainees exceeded the prison space and inmates were crammed into the rooms as well as in the hallways, all the way to the very unsanitary lavatories. The guards in this section of the prison were all female, but in case a fight or a brawl broke out amongst the inmates, male guards were called in to intervene. In this case the Mahram-Namahram phenomenon [whereby it is considered immoral for Muslims to touch non-relatives of the opposite sex] would go out the window. They had over-crowded the prison to the point that sometimes two women were forced to sleep on a single bed. The irony is that during the day, two females were not allowed to sit on the same bed together and talk. This would be considered an offense. If the guards found two women sitting together, talking in public, they would reprimand them. But during those over-crowded days, in addition to women sleeping on cell floors and narrow hallways, some were forced to sleep together on the same bed.
38. After four years of imprisonment I had but one square meter of sleeping space. I had people walking all over me. I kept my belongings close to me at all times. I was surrounded with drug addicts, which made me very uncomfortable and was the cause of many sleepless nights.

Health and Sanitation in Prison

39. The conditions were atrocious. It was a very old building. There were no medical supplies or services available, not even a bandage. Getting medicine was almost impossible, even for those who had prescription medication. Even they had to struggle to get their pills on time. The only reason prisoners were ever given their medication was that the guards were afraid of being held responsible for a mishap [like a death in prison]. Otherwise, they did not really care. There were so many examples of medical neglect. There were also inmates who were sick and no one knew. We had no idea who had which contagious disease, or who had AIDS. Who knows? Due to proximity and physical interactions, people could have even been infected with something and

⁴ Maragheh is 70 miles northeast of Mahabad, the hometown of the witness.

not know it. All of this was hidden from the prisoners and no effort was made to separate the ill from the healthy.

40. Hygiene was appalling. They deprived us of cleaning and sanitary supplies. This place was really old compared to the Mahabad prison. But Zanjan prison was the newest and cleanest among the three. The prisons near the capital or big cities are usually kept in much better shape than those in small towns. At Maragheh Prison no medical services were offered. The situation was terrible. Once they brought in a prisoner convicted of an assault charge who had been stabbed in the hand. Her wound was open and had not been stitched up.
41. Incidentally a few days later, an inspector came from Tehran to ask about the prison conditions and listen to our complaints. The problem was that because the prison was small and the guards had threatened us into silence, we could not really say what was on our minds. The guards threatened us with reprisal if we didn't keep our mouths shut during the inspector's visit. As a result most of the female inmates did not complain. I had seen this happen so many times that I decided to bring up the issue of lack of medical attention with the inspector.
42. I divulged all of this to the inspector. I even informed him about the woman with the infected injured hand. The inspector looked at the wounded hand and reprimanded the guards for not taking her to the clinic. Finally, the following day, they took her to the clinic where they stitched her up. But for the first days after her arrival, she was left alone with an open and infected wound. Because of the extremely poor hygiene in the detention center, any open wound could easily and quickly be infected, leading to an array of other diseases. We even had inmates infected with HIV/AIDS. Not only in Maragheh, but in Mahabad and Zanjan. Some were even our cell mates. Besides the addicts there were many with inmates afflicted with AIDS, Thalassemia [sic] and Hepatitis.
43. These were never publicly acknowledged, though. The women themselves knew they were sick, the guards knew they were sick, and the clinic knew of their ailments. In some of the better prisons, like Zanjan, they received as much treatment and counseling/consultation as was possible in prison. But in Maragheh, none of this happened. Even though we were given lectures on AIDS prevention, there was never an acknowledgement of its existence in the prison. Then there were some who would develop physical illnesses while in prison. This was especially true about women who developed feminine infections due to poor hygiene and medical facilities in prison.
44. Bathing conditions also varied from prison to prison. There were four wards in Zanjan prison and each ward had its own shower/bathroom facility. But in Maragheh, for each 25 to 30 inmates there was one shower and one toilet. Sometimes, we had no hot water for days and no one could shower. Or, even if we did have hot water, it would quickly turn cold. And no one would care to fix it. In Zanjan, however, the showers worked fine because the building was new and the authorities listened.

Suicides in Prison

45. Suicide was not an unusual phenomenon in prison. Indeed, there were women who did attempt or commit suicide while in detention. There seemed to have been a number of reasons for this: it was either because their court case was taking too long, or because they had no one outside of prison to pursue their release. Sometimes it was because they were in emotional distress and felt a deep sense of despair. Others believed that even if they were to be released, they would be ostracized and shamed by their families and friends. Moreover, some were pushed into taking

their own lives when they were treated badly in prison and no one heeded their calls for justice. Most attempts, however, were unsuccessful. Some never meant to die, but only made attempts on their own lives in the hope of some kind of resolution. They just wanted to attract attention to their plight in prison. And then there were cases of self-harm. Some women would beat themselves, and some did actually die.

46. There was this case of an 18-19 year old woman who was suffering from depression. I cannot remember her name. She became permanently paralyzed, because the prison guards did not respond to her attempt promptly enough. Some said that she had used illicit drugs. Some believed that she had ingested a deadly chemical. There also was this rumor that she had stolen medicine from the prison clinic and overdosed on them. But when she fell very ill, after ingesting the drugs or chemicals, the guards paid no attention to her. After accusing her of over-exaggerating and seeking attention, they ignored her for 4-5 hours. They only they took her to the hospital after 4-5 hours, when they finally noticed that her condition had worsened. Her suicide attempt happened at 5:00 or 6:00 in the evening, and she was taken to the hospital at 10:00 at night. First, they had the prison doctor examine her and they realized that she was indeed very sick. Her pulse had become dangerously low. So they transferred her to the hospital, where she stayed in a coma for 15 days. When she came out of the coma, she was completely paralyzed. She has no control over her movements and is permanently disabled. Her charge was 'being in a relationship.' She knew that she was going to be released soon.
47. She should have been taken to a rehabilitation center after this [suicide attempt].
48. I remember that once, we had four suicide attempts in a week. Illicit drugs were not always involved, as the prison personnel wanted us to believe. Drugs were expensive and difficult to access in prison. Some overdosed on pills stolen from other inmates or from the prison clinic. Most, however, did it by using their headscarves to hang themselves, or by beating themselves in the shower, or slashing their wrists with razors.

Children in Prison

49. In prison, there are a number of children, including infants, living with their mothers. They are kept in an environment surrounded with sick or mentally ill people, or those who are morally unsound. These children live in an environment that is not conducive to their well-being. The wards are often loud and tumultuous.
50. Sometimes these children are witness to the scuffles and fights between adults. They hear insults and profanity, which is commonplace. Not only do these children have to live in such an environment and be deprived of [normal life] opportunities, they are at times also subjected to abuse and exploitation. You see, we had all sorts of people in prison: homosexuals, those who are incarcerated for morality offenses, drug addicts/traffickers, and so on.
51. At any rate, there are many in detention who have moral/ethical problems and perform these acts of abuse. I was witness to many such cases. I even reported them, directly and indirectly, to prison security and morality authorities and to the guards, but nothing was done. It seems that the authorities intentionally cover up such incidents and ignore all complaints.
52. In our prison there was no opportunity for the children to play. Other prisons have some playground equipment, like swings and seesaws. Ours had none. From what I know, boys over 2 and girls over 7 were not allowed to live in the women's ward. As far as I know, this was a rule

set by prison authorities. But the rules were always broken. The law said that these children [above the permitted age] had to either be delivered to public health authorities or be entrusted to the care of relatives outside the prison. But no one really cared.

53. There was little boy [who was three years old when I was there] who was born in prison. His mother was sentenced to life in prison. His father was on death row and was eventually executed, as was his uncle. His father was executed for the charge of drug trafficking. It was his first charge and they executed him. His uncle was first convicted to eight years [in prison] for possession and trafficking of arms, then his conviction was increased to 10 years. He didn't even have an execution order. But they executed the two brothers on the same day. At the time of his father's execution, the little boy was 7 months old.
54. Two years after his father and uncle were executed, his family, who lives outside of Iran, applied for their grandchild to leave Iran. But, since they are not Iranian—they are Iraqi Kurds—they never received a straight answer to their application and he remains in prison with his mother.
55. Some guards were sympathetic to children and warned inmate mothers against harming their kids. They threatened to take away their kids if they saw any harm inflicted on the child. But this was never enforced. But then there were other cases too. I remember a woman who was convicted for murder who actually confessed to the crime only after she was threatened with the torture of her child. They even brought her child to her and were about to torture him, when his mother agreed to admit to committing the murder.

Sexual Abuse of Female Prison Inmates

56. You asked if I was ever taken advantage of sexually. The answer is no. I was never bothered in this way. But I heard, first hand, about ten such cases. There are things that happen to prisoners that the ordinary person has no way of knowing. During years of incarceration one such phenomena, of which I became aware, was the sexual exploitation that happened—not inside the prisons, but outside. I saw it myself and was informed about it by the people who had fallen victim to this exploitation. Some of the prisoners who had turned themselves in, or had been forced to do so, realized that the only way to get a break like a pardon, a reduced sentence, or such, was to give sexual favors [to the authorities]. For example, to get a few more days of furlough, they would go to court and they would be asked [and they would agree] to give these favors by the court personnel, especially by those who had a say in the prisoners' sentencing. I heard about this from the very women who had experienced it.
57. Sometimes even inside the prison, some of the personnel would take such advantage of the female inmates.⁵ For example, there were women who during their furlough would pay a visit to the home of a prison employee. Even those working in the prisons were guilty of this exploitation. I am not saying that these women were dragged by force into doing this, but it is likely that their condition was such that in order to get what they needed, be it pardon, reduced sentences, or otherwise, they felt that they had to perform sexual favors.
58. Some women even told me that they were told similar things when they referred to judicial authorities in Tehran to appeal their sentences. [Some female prisoners] told me that when they had to go to judicial authorities in Tehran, they were told: you scratch my back, I scratch yours. One of the judiciary officials made this promise to a woman prisoner and then took advantage of

⁵ For further information, see IHRDC's report, "Surviving Rape in Iran's Prisons", available at: <http://www.iranhrdc.org/english/publications/reports/3401-surviving-rape-in-iran-s-prisons.html#.UkmfgWX6FLc>.

her sexually. He then gave her a letter asking [the authorities] to pardon her. This was not an unusual phenomenon. It happened a lot, and I had heard [many] women talk about it. I heard this not just once or twice, but many times from women whom I trusted.

59. How far did this sexual exploitation go? Nowhere really. The women who were taken advantage of never spoke of it again. They did not dare talk about the promises they were made, even if the promises were never fulfilled. [For these women] there was no organization or body to which to complain. The smallest of demands remained unanswered. There was no law to defend them. The authorities would turn around and blame the women. Not only would the authorities not hear the concerns of the women, they would end up adding new charges to the list of the women's charges. They did this to shut the women up. For a prisoner to accuse a government authority, you would have to have evidence. Nothing can be done without evidence. The truth is that the female prisoner's [sexual exploitation] complaint would never advance to that level of investigation anyway, because she would be ignored from the very beginning. The fact that she had accepted to perform such favors, regardless of her circumstances, worked against her. In the end nothing would come out of it and the women would end up being too scared to say anything to anyone, especially to the authorities.
60. Of course, there was also rape. This did not happen inside the prison. In the Prosecutor's office some forms of sexual assault did happen, but not rape. Rape happened in other places and never in prison itself. Prison is a very strict place and they try to observe the Islamic custom [of not mixing the sexes together]. Although this law became flexible when there was a brawl in the women's prison. Then, they would call in male guards and the law would go out the window. The men showed up when there was a scuffle amongst women inmates, or when there was a meeting of some sort. I heard the warden announce the prison rules and then warn the inmates: If you don't adhere to prison rules, then you have to be prepared to deal with the *Mahram-Namahram* issue. There may be a time when men will come and take you by your hair. They will drag you by the hair to the prison quarantine area. In that case, do not expect them to observe the Mahram-Namahram custom! I heard this from the prison warden with my own ears.

Violence in Prison

61. I also saw male guards beating up female prisoners. I even saw the warden engage in some of these beatings with my own eyes. I was never beaten. I was pushed, but never beaten. Prisons [in Iran] always hire female bullies, whom they disguise as prisoners and have them live amongst the inmates. Their job is to maintain control over other prisoners, which means that in case of a disagreement, brawl, or fight amongst inmates, the prison guards don't have to get involved or take the blame for any subsequent mishaps, such as acts of violence or murder. This protects the guards from ever being incriminated and puts the blame squarely on the prisoner. I once saw one of these mercenaries beat up on a village girl for no reason. She was beating her very severely. All the prisoners were trying to intervene. I watched the whole thing. Meanwhile, the guards were standing there doing nothing to stop it. They were desensitized to these situations. After all, this bully was probably doing what the guards had asked her to do. This was not the first time, either. She had beaten and injured many of the inmates. [As I was watching this] in my anger I said: Let her kill her! Maybe if she is killed, someone will take notice and do something about this! As soon as I said this, the bully turned around and came towards me. Then I said: Just look at how this guard is standing there, doing nothing! When she heard me complain about the guard, she charged at me and dragged me into the physical exchange. I had never been in a prison fight before.

62. We had a bit of a scuffle, but the other inmates pulled her away. At this point, the male guards were called in. One of them was a tall man who was known for his aggression who had beaten the female prisoners many times. He walked in and slapped the village girl instead of blaming the instigator. I yelled out, "When a prison authority acts like this, what can one expect from the prisoners!" He walked towards me, put his arm up, and threatened to strike me if I did not shut up. I was very angry and yelled, "Do it! Slap me! Slap me!" He grabbed my arm and dragged me saying: I am taking you to quarantine. I said, "Yes take me [to quarantine]. I will go proudly." So they took me and two of my friends who had also objected to the bully's behavior to [solitary confinement in] the quarantine ward.
63. We had complained to the [senior] authorities about the injustice of one bully inmate beating other prisoners many times. We complained, but no one listened. Before they took us to quarantine, the prison warden showed up and he also slapped the girl who had been beaten up. It was painful and disturbing to see this. We only spent a few hours in quarantine.

Hunger Strikes

64. I went on hunger strike twice during my imprisonment—once in Mahabad Central Prison and once in Zanjan. In Mahabad, I did not initiate my hunger strike for reasons related to my case alone. I did it to protest the government's unjust rulings against all civil and political activists, myself included. [My hunger strike] was a protest against the disrespectful and insulting behavior of the regime towards these human rights activists. And I had first-hand experience with this. I was also protesting the openly discriminatory treatment some received in prison.
65. Let me give you an example. In Mahabad prison there was a judge by the name of Mr. Sheikhlu who had oversight over the prison. It was his job to oversee matters such as furloughs, pardons, and other matters. Most prisoners did not like him and were not happy with his rulings. The judges that oversee prisons have a lot of power in their designated fields. They are not only in charge of the decisions mentioned above. They also sit on a seven-member committee called the Prison Committee. This committee meets once a week. The prison judge has the authority to decide the extent to which each prisoner is able to enjoy his/her legal rights in prison. [Mr. Sheikhlu] questioned me in [Mahabad] Prison and accused me of being in contact with the foreign media and of leaking information about cases of human rights violations in the prison to them.
66. For example, there was a woman on death row. She had been in prison for nine years and no one was heeding her appeals or investigating her case. I protested this injustice, but in response the [aforementioned] judge treated me very badly. So I went on a seventeen-day hunger strike, during which the judge paid no attention to me. They tried to get me to break my strike in subtle ways, but generally speaking, they [the prison's personnel] ignored me. I even heard that the warden once said, "Zaynab is just imitating the political prisoners. Ignore her and she will break her hunger strike herself." And I considered this an insult.
67. The first three days were not that difficult, but after that my health problems began. I developed an ulcer, felt dizzy, and became nauseous. I was considered a political prisoner, but was detained in the public ward [with ordinary criminals], where I did not feel safe. I was in a cell with nine or ten other people, but my cellmates changed from time to time. Fights between prisoners were very common and it was not a safe place for everyone. Many times I was even insulted publicly by other prisoners. I would have definitely felt safer if I had been detained in a ward with other civil and political prisoners.

68. Throughout the time I was on hunger strike, I was not allowed visitors or phone calls. Before I began my strike, however, I was allowed weekly contact with my family. My family has been under immense pressure during these past years. For instance, over the years, they were given many false promises about my discharge. These broken promises became a source of tremendous emotional anguish for them. In order to obtain my discharge, or to reduce my sentence, my family spent an extraordinary amount of money—to no avail. Despite the authorities' repeated promises, none of the above happened.
69. [Another cause of my hunger strikes was that] on their way to and from Zanjan Prison [to visit me, my relatives] were faced with life-threatening situations such as car accidents. I had repeatedly requested to be transferred to a detention center in my hometown, or in a nearer county. All of my requests were denied. My family had repeatedly presented letters from the Judiciary chief, Mr. Shahroudi, asking for my transfer. But none of the letters were seen by my attorney or placed in my file. Even letters that were supposedly sent to Mahabad and later to the Human Rights Commission in Orumiye, the capital of West Azarbaijan Province, never surfaced. They were probably just filed away in Mahabad, or completely discarded. Notwithstanding the fact that my family and our city's representative in the Majles each had copies of all the letters, there seemed to be a glitch in my file. The letters sent from Tehran never seemed to reach their destinations. People who were pursuing my release, like the Mahabad member of the Majles and others had copies of the aforementioned letters, but the originals were nowhere to be found.

Release from Prison and Continued Harassment

70. I was eventually released after four-and-a-half years. During my entire incarceration, I never asked for pardon. But my family actively worked for my release. All these years, I was not only in prison, but also in exile. I was away from my hometown, thrust into a strange culture and surroundings. It was very difficult for me, but after some time I got used to it. Throughout my incarceration I was deprived of ordinary privileges that other prisoners had. For example, I was not allowed furlough.
71. After I was released, I was not left alone. The local MOIS agents would constantly harass and threaten me, directly and indirectly. This put a lot of pressure on me. Before my arrest, I owned a store. At that time, they did not bother me about my shop. The only objection they had was to its name, Zilan, which is a Kurdish name. It is the name of a flower and a region in Kurdistan. The name itself is not illegal: it is registered as a legal name with the department of statistics. You can also find it in the book of legal names. I owned this store and I also taught computer programming at a private vocational school. Due to my incarceration, of course, I lost my job. But my friends who are still working there (in my shop) were not allowed to contact me, even after my release from prison. They were forced to give their word that they would not connect with me in any way. And I was warned not to contact them or go to my store. They would not hire me back to my job at the vocational school with a criminal record either.
72. I believe I was under surveillance even after my release. I felt that way especially when some of my friends were arrested. Also, every time I would get together with my friends in my home, there would be trouble.
73. The pressure did not end here. Our house was under constant surveillance. Even our casual daily comings and goings were questioned. For example, if I wanted to go for a walk or to exercise,

there would be some suspicious-looking people watching me. I was scared for my life. Apart from friends who were detained and tortured, there were many of my other friends who had been summoned for hours of questioning and interrogation. It seemed as if they [the authorities] were trying to completely isolate me. Moreover, Intelligence agents were very openly present around our house. Sometimes they were there for days on end and this was a source of immense pressure for my family. They threatened us both directly and indirectly. They were always plainclothes agents, some of whom we recognized and knew as official employees of the local office of MOIS. One of these agents, if I recall correctly, was Mr. Rasouli. These agents maintained surveillance over our house.

The Case of Death Row Inmate Habibollah Golparipour

74. I don't know anything about [Kurdish activist and long-time death row inmate] Habibollah Golparipour's relationship with the Mothers for Reconciliation.⁶ But look, the phrase 'mothers for reconciliation,' alone says a lot about the nature of the group and what it stands for. It's a group of mothers who by nature are against any form of violence and inhumane behavior. The word mother, itself, conveys a lot about the group. And then, there is the word reconciliation, which also connotes nonviolent behavior. The only charge that I can think of for Mr. Golparipour with regard to his relationship with these women, would be one of connection with a non-registered, illegal group [which is true of the Mothers of Reconciliation]. That is all! Their activities are peaceful and non-violent. All their activities fall under the definition of civic activism. They are mothers! I've had some connection with them. Some, actually, were bereaved mothers. Some lost their children in the war. I have no information about the nature of Mr. Golparipour's cooperation with the group. I was in prison at the time of his arrest. But as far as I know even as a member of the PJAK [Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan, an armed political organization affiliated with the Turkish PKK that advocates independence for the Kurdish region of Iran] his activities at the time of his arrest were nonviolent. The fact that he was involved with a pacifist group such as Mothers for Reconciliation is proof of his belief in nonviolence. From what I heard, they have no evidence against him, except his membership in PJAK. This is the only evidence for his charges and conviction. After all, it is possible that the activities of some members of militant groups are nonviolent and limited to civic activism.

Escape from Iran

75. That fact that the local MOIS office was determined to put pressure on me and to completely isolate me was one reason for leaving Iran. But what really drove me to leave was my fear of them shutting me up using inhumane and immoral methods. This had not yet happened to me, but I was fearful because I had seen it happen to others. An example was the kidnapping of Ms. Serveh Kamkar. Or what had happened in the cities of Bukan and Sardasht, where a number of girls had been kidnapped, raped, murdered and their bodies thrown away on street corners. Their deaths were classified as accidental. Worried that the above might happen to me, I decided to flee. For those unfortunate victims, the chance to tell their stories was gone forever.

76. [The authorities] did this to those human rights activists who they knew could not be stopped with a prison conviction. This brutal fate could befall any activist. The impact of this kind of brutality

⁶ For the court opinions in Habibollah Golparipour's case, see appendix 1 of IHRDC's report "On the Margins: Arrest, Imprisonment, and Execution of Kurdish Activists in Iran Today", available at: <http://www.iranhrdc.org/english/publications/reports/100000089-on-the-margins-arrest-imprisonment-and-execution-of-kurdish-activists-in-iran-today.html#23>.

on the victims as well as on their friends and families was significant. It also put a dent in many people's determination. This is why I left Iran. A few days ago I spoke with my family. They told me that they are still under surveillance and that there are some suspicious activities going on around our house. Most probably, [the authorities] know that I have left. It is not uncommon for the authorities to raid an escapee's family's home and comb through the house, even years after the escape. My family is no exception. It is very possible that they will continue bothering my family for years.