

Prisoners' Art Lifts Lid on Albanian Women's Plight

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A new exhibition highlights the violence that women routinely face in what remains a patriarchal society.

Women make roughly 2 per cent of Albania's prison population, and for good reason. In this traditional and patriarchal society, a woman is far more likely to be the target of a crime than a perpetrator.

According to Amnesty International, over a third of women in Albania have experienced some sort of violence inside the contours of the family.

They are hit, beaten, raped, and in some cases killed. Many more endure psychological violence, physical but also economic control.

In many cases, women who commit crimes have endured physical and psychological violence from their husbands, partners, neighbours and family members for years.

To highlight their plight, Anila Rubiku, an Albanian artist in residence at the Tirana Institute of Contemporary Art, embarked on a several-months-long project to document their stories and bring the issue of violence against women to the forefront.

"The idea came from the level of violence that women face in this country, which for the past two decades has grown," Rubiku said.

"Even in the streets sometimes you can be faced with such violence, and this is something that I experienced personally as a woman, not once but many times," she added.

Rubiku said she chose to work with women in prison in order to highlight violence against women because in Albanian society those who experience it rarely talk openly about the subject if they live on the outside.

"Women in Albanian society are often perceived as the property of the family, so you often cannot talk about them because the attitude you get is: why do you want to talk about me? Mind your own business," Rubiku said.

After securing access to the Ali Demi Women's Correctional Facility in Tirana, Rubiku teamed up with British psychologist Jeffrey Adams in a collaborative art project.

Adams says the one of the worst things that happens to inmates is that they become so institutionalized they cannot think straight.

Adams added.

For several months, Rubiku and Adams worked with a dozen women in the correctional facility to draw their pain, hopes and dreams in an effort to get closer to what they went through and prompt a discussion about violence against women in Albania.

They used a questionnaire designed by Adams, asking them to describe what led up to their crimes, the process of incarceration, their family and lawyers, and the way the justice system treated them.

Adams engaged the inmates in several psychological exercises, such as getting them to identify with an animal, a tiger, for example.

“We were trying to get in touch with what they really felt and get them to open up and talk about it,” he said.

On Monday, Rubiku, who divides her times as an artist between Tirana and Milan, opened an exhibition in the FAB gallery.

Her previous work has included drawings and installations that often incorporate local people into community projects, and combine tradition and art, local history and a contemporary perspective.

The exhibition involves 12 portraits of the women she worked with during the project, the questionnaires in which they described themselves and their life and the drawings they produced.

The opening of the exhibition was followed by a discussion with civil society actors and women’s rights activists on the violence that women face in Albania and their treatment by the court system.

The drawings by the imprisoned women, who were presented anonymously, are aesthetically naïve and at the same time very powerful.

“We asked one woman whose husband beat her for 22 years, and she draw his stick; this not me, it’s them and their reality,” Rubiku explained.

In another drawing, one of the inmates depicted her neighbour who repeatedly raped her and who she ended up killing.

The man is depicted with his gun on the fence of her garden, the place where she was often assaulted.

Other scenes point fingers at the corrupt justice system in Albania, where lawyers exchange cash for freedom with judges.

Another woman drew her children around the dinner table, who, after the crime she committed, now live in the streets. A simple but subliminal message of motherly love is written in one corner.

Rubiku said she gave the women water colours to draw with, as they dry fast and capture emotions better. Otherwise, for her portraits, she used cast iron geometrical sculptures.

She says the exhibition is very much personal, underlining that no matter how cultured and accomplished a woman is in Albania, they are still widely perceived as worth less than a man.