

# Elliniko detention center. Narratives and thoughts

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“We were approaching with the police car the detention center of Elliniko. I asked a police man: “what is this place...?” He started to laugh at me. “Here is camp” he said. I got inside and a police woman told me to undress myself and she checked me. I went outside and met two Iranian women... they came to speak to me and calm me down... I was constanly crying. I yelled to the police to find my husband, to let me talk to him for at least two minutes... they told me that this place is a prison, not a camp, and that it is not possible for me to go and meet him.”

Narrative describing the moment of the arrival at Elliniko detention centre of Z,<sup>1</sup> a woman of Iranian origin imprisoned in Elliniko for approximately one and a half months.

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this article, the initial letter of the migrant women's names are not their real ones in order to maintain their anonymity.

Detention centers establish a specific condition of confinement, a special type of imprisonment. Migrants are imprisoned in these places not because they have committed some sort of crime but because they lack a certain type of legal status through which greek state would allow them to enter and inhabit its territory. This kind of detention is legally unjustifiable, no trial takes place and there is no possibility for migrants to defend themselves.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> According to the international, european and national law, migrants' detention occurs as an ultimate measure imposed in extremely exceptional circumstances and for the shortest possible period of time. Contrary to this stance, what really happens is the systematic, protracted and not considerate migrants' confinement.

Confinement criminalizes the very specific status of being a migrant. It is a practice of controlling freedom of movement and it is exactly this practice that exposes the foundations on which the politics of migrant populations' management is based meaning their spatial and symbolic exclusion via restriction. the establishment, preservation and reproduction of their segregation from a supposedly united nation and the reinforcement of the dominant narration perceiving migrants as potentially dangerous for natives and their safety.

Spoted and forcedly confined migrants are categorized during their detention according to their legal possibility of residing in the country. The ones that don't fulfill those criteria that would offer them this

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possibility are forced in deportation. Deportation, an act of violence, usually occurs very early in the morning and the means of transport used are deliberately chosen for this occasion. Both of these ways contribute to minimize as much as possible the chance of a public viewing of the deportation. More often than not, physical violence takes place during the procedure of deportation, as it happened, for example, in the case of five women from Georgia imprisoned in Elliniko detention centre that were forced to deportation at the end of October (2015). Sanaa Taleb, a woman of Moroccan origin living in Greece for the last six years also imprisoned in Elliniko detention center, was found in a similar situation when, while she was falsely informed of her release (6.11.2015), she was instead brought to the airport where there was an attempt of a forced deportation. This attempt was unsuccessful because of her resistance. As a result of this incident, charges were pressed against her concerning disobedience and damage of private property and thus making her case the first known in which a migrant was legally accused because of her act of

resistance against her deportation.<sup>3</sup> Two months later (8/1/16) she was convicted in three more months of detention by the assertion of her pending deportation.<sup>4</sup>

The present article is focused on Elliniko detention centre while it was operating as a space of confinement exclusively for female migrants, making it the first detention center operating under this condition within Greek state. At 24 of January 2017, Elliniko was shut down and twenty six migrant women imprisoned in it were brought and held in "Foreigners and Immigration Services of Athens", Petrou Ralli. It is not known what happened to them from then onwards.

What was made clear since the beginning of the interaction with this specific detention center was the fluidity of its own operation, of its own conditions of existence. From the permanent change of the incarcerated female migrants to the constant alteration of detention status, from the transformation of

<sup>3</sup> Her trial took place at the 18th of October 2016. She was found innocent.

<sup>4</sup> Sanaa Taleb was released from Elliniko at 27 October 2016.

its operation to detention center of specifically female migrants to its shutdown. Nevertheless it's not only this detention center that is characterized by this volatile situation. Its unique history in time and space with its engendered connotations is interwoven with the stories of the rest of the detention centers, official and unofficial, which have appeared in Greece since the last decades. These centers, also characterized by the same kind of fluidity, have never stopped opening, being shut down or reopening.

And although there are no official announcements about what is going to happen with Elliniko detention center -if it is going to reopen and under which conditions-, since some time now government has announced that it will open some new and reopen some already existing "closed detention centers", as a result of implementing the agreement between EU and Turkey.

Having in mind the above, the act of recoding the stories of these spaces, the struggles and the resistances of its imprisoned migrants may constitute a kind of knowledge from

## The act of recoding the stories of these spaces, the struggles and the resistances of its imprisoned migrants may constitute a kind of knowledge from below.

below reminding us again and again the reasons to stand against such places today and always, against these atrocious politics that allow these spaces to exist and being perpetuated.

In this article there will occasionally appear the narratives of two female migrants, former detainees of Elliniko, which occurred after a conversation I had with them.<sup>5</sup> I took the choice to talk with them because I recognize the necessity for them to speak their own experience. Trying to stand against essentialist generalizations that would construct a universal figure of the migrant Woman and also to be critical towards narratives of heroism or victimization of migrant women, we should keep in mind that this article is already an act that mediates their word. Finally while speaking from a privileged position -that of owning legal papers-, it is considered useful to bring in the spotlight the distance that exists between this position and the position of people without papers. A distance nevertheless, that hopefully will not distance us more, but by highlighting it, will bring us closer.

### Elliniko Detention Centre for migrant women

Elliniko detention centre is situated on the north part of the ex-Elliniko airport. It is located within the urban fabric of Athens, neighbouring the

5 The conversation took place in April 2016.

municipality of Elliniko-Argyroyropoli on the south part of the city. A camp of a few thousand migrants -a so-called "hospitality center"- also operates in the wider area of the airport since March 2016.

Until 2014, Elliniko detention centre was destined for male migrants. During its operation under this status, the first known death of an imprisoned migrant was recorded, on July 2011. It was the death of Baber Han from Pakistan, of 27 years old, who while being sick and despite the fact of asking medical help, police in charge let him die. In December 2014, eighty five female migrants were transferred to Elliniko detention center and the center was transformed by this way to a detention center for migrant women.

Migrant women imprisoned in Elliniko detention centre came from several countries among which Ukraine, Georgia, Russia, Albania, Cameroun, Ethiopia, Tibet, Iran, Morocco, Somalia, Congo, Sri

Lanka, Vietnam, Sierra Leone, Syria, Afghanistan, Burundi, Dominican Republic. Many of these women had been living in Greece for many years, others had just arrived in the country and wished to move to another. Lots of them were incarcerated for the first time, but others not. Some were forced in detention followed by their children who in some cases were only a few months old.

The usual number of imprisoned migrant women ranged around fifty. And while the total number of imprisoned women remained more or less the same, the detainees were constantly changing - a fact making even more difficult the already existing complicated situation as far as their communication and organization was concerned. The duration of their detention was arbitrary, basically it remained unknown and had mostly to do with the process of seeking asylum or deportation. At the same time, a complex combination of reasons formed the final period of time that each migrant woman was forced in detention. Some of them were the free space in the detention centre, the content of transnational financial agreement about deportation depending on the country of origin, the fulfillment of a crucial number of female migrants so that the deportation procedure could be of the lowest possible cost. Therefore, some migrant women ended up being detained for a few months, others for seven, eight and nine months while Sanaa Taleb was imprisoned in Elliniko detention



عشرا متقدروا تكسرني

translation: "You will not break me."

center for one year and one month, which means two times longer than the officially legal maximum amount of time that a migrant could be detained. The way Sanna Taleb was treated during her detention as well as her resistance during the attempt of her deportation combined with the unjustifiably and extremely long period of time of her detention are points that demonstrate that her case was used for intimidation and as a political example showing what will happen to potential future migrants' struggles.

## Conditions of detention

Some serious burdens that migrant women had to face were complete absence of heating, lack of medicines and doctors, as well as of translators and lawyers. The last ones, as migrant women denounced, used to promise their liberation in order to take their money and disappear. Referring to the conditions of their detention, Z. pointed out:

Z.:“(...) There were four rooms. In one it was twelve beds... not beds... like wood made with hand and dirty blankets. We were all fifty women in Elliniko. We didn't have hot water. There was only one bathroom. We had four bathrooms but one was not good. We had three toilets with ntous and we should wait for four-five hours in the line to have a shower for five minutes with cold water. And we needed shampoo... we should for one hour call the police for a plastic glass just for a little shampoo.”

And continues:“(...) and in Ellinko there was just a very very small area, very dirty, for walking.”

Q.: How long were you allowed there?

Z.:“If it was the good police two hour in the morning and four hours in the afternoon. But if the bad police comes, it was closed. And the food was very very bad. Fasolia. All the time fasolia. At 12.00 o'clock in the night, they were turning the lights off to sleep but the police were speaking and watched TV and we couldn't sleep. And at 5.00 o'clock in the morning the police changed shifts and opened the door with the foot and closed the door and we woke up very bad. And if we were asking them why did they open the door with the foot, they were telling me that if I had problem I could go back to my country. And the doctor from “Praksis” came just one time per week to visit us... and lawyer once in a week.”

T., of Iranian origin detained for one month and a half, responding to a similar question reminds us of another parameter present daily in the lives and thoughts of the incarcerated migrant women.

A.:“Horrible. Yes it was horrible. First of all the whole situation of not knowing what is going to happen... why are you arrested and then not knowing

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what is going to happen next. Everyday you have to live thinking what is going to happen tomorrow and whenever you ask a lawyer, the police officers... everybody is saying that they don't know.”

In March (2016) Z., while being pregnant and detained, had a miscarriage despite her constant calls for help and transference to the hospital. Far from being an unfortunate circumstance, this event enters a very narrow and complicated field. That of the body and its discipline in a personal as well as in a population level· of the female body and its experience, its social and cultural significations, its constitution through discourse, its gendered and sexual categorization, its biology.

Migrant women and their bodies are homogenized and marginalized as surplus and alien. As dangerous and profane, they are forced to confinement and they are controlled.

One of the few means through which they could be heard and push for their demands was the use of their own body as a vehicle of resistance.

At the same time migrant women and their bodies are bounded divergent compared to the implicitly self-evident and “ideal” norm of white, healthy, cis, straight, native man. Meanwhile, they are often victimized by the side of humanitarians who are willing to offer their help only after having first presumed an image of migrant women as powerless by definition.

These bodies who have migrated and still do for numerous reasons and one of which could be in order to liberate themselves from patriarchal family structures (as happened for example to Z. who had to flee her country in order to avoid stoning because of accusations of adultery), who have been exposed to forms of gender-based violence and who have to face sexism and racism during their movement, who have crossed over hills and dales wishing to stay alive and for whom migration at the same time might be their own choice and probably a lonely one· these bodies are not physically neutral but politically defined. They are marked by multiple types of power and oppression. Marginalized as alien, these bodies re-enter, are evaluated and prioritized on the bases of gender, race, class, sexuality, nation, ethnicity and the interrelations among them. It is within this kind of state that their bodies and lives are stigmatized in

order to become of less value. It is within this state that the deprivation of self-determining their bodies, as for example a woman’s choice to give birth, is taken for granted.

It is nevertheless these exact bodies that destabilize the imposed limits of the norm· they are them themselves that upset their own conditions of exclusion. At the end of the day it is these embodied lives that feel, wish, suffer, shout, demand and fight.

### The hunger strikes

Detainees of Elliniko expressed daily opposition to their forced confinement and built relationships of mutual help and support. Overcoming multiple difficulties, such as that of language, they used to invent ways to communicate among themselves and organize their resistances. As a matter of fact, as a way of protest they used to bring their mattresses outdoors and shouting slogans for their liberation.

One of the few means through which they could be heard and push for their demands was the use of their own body as a vehicle of resistance. They had carried out several food abstentions -individually and collectively- while they also twice organized altogether a hunger strike. The first one took place in mid-December (2015) and lasted for two days. By this struggle they managed to get improvement of the conditions of their detention. During this strike detainees published the following text:

“1. is very cold inside, we have to stay in our bed to get warm.  
2. we need freedom, because they can’t give us what we want, when we ask some medicine the answer we

are taking is the government doesn't have money. So we need freedom we want go out, to our house.

3. there is not hot water to drink hot coffee, hot tea, they told us the machine is not working.

4. they don't allow anything from out, from our visit.

5. when they bring the food is very cold. We can't eat the food. Everything is cold the bread is strong like stone."

The second hunger strike took place from the 13th-18th of April (2016) and almost all migrant women participated in it. The text published for this occasion was the following:

"We are the women from elliniko station we are writting this to you to make you people know how tired and sorrowful we are. We are 47 in all now and we (standed) the hungerstrike and we don't want to eat. because we don't know what is going to happen to us. Some of us are here for one year, some for 11 months, some for six, seven, five, four and so on. Most of us live here in the country for many years and we have our jobs waiting for us and husbands and children outside, so please we are begging for our freedom, if there is anything you people can to do help us go free we will be so happy. Thanks"

After the end of this strike some women were liberated, including Sannaa Taleb.T., who also participated in the hunger strike and was also liberated after it, when asked to comment on the strike she said:

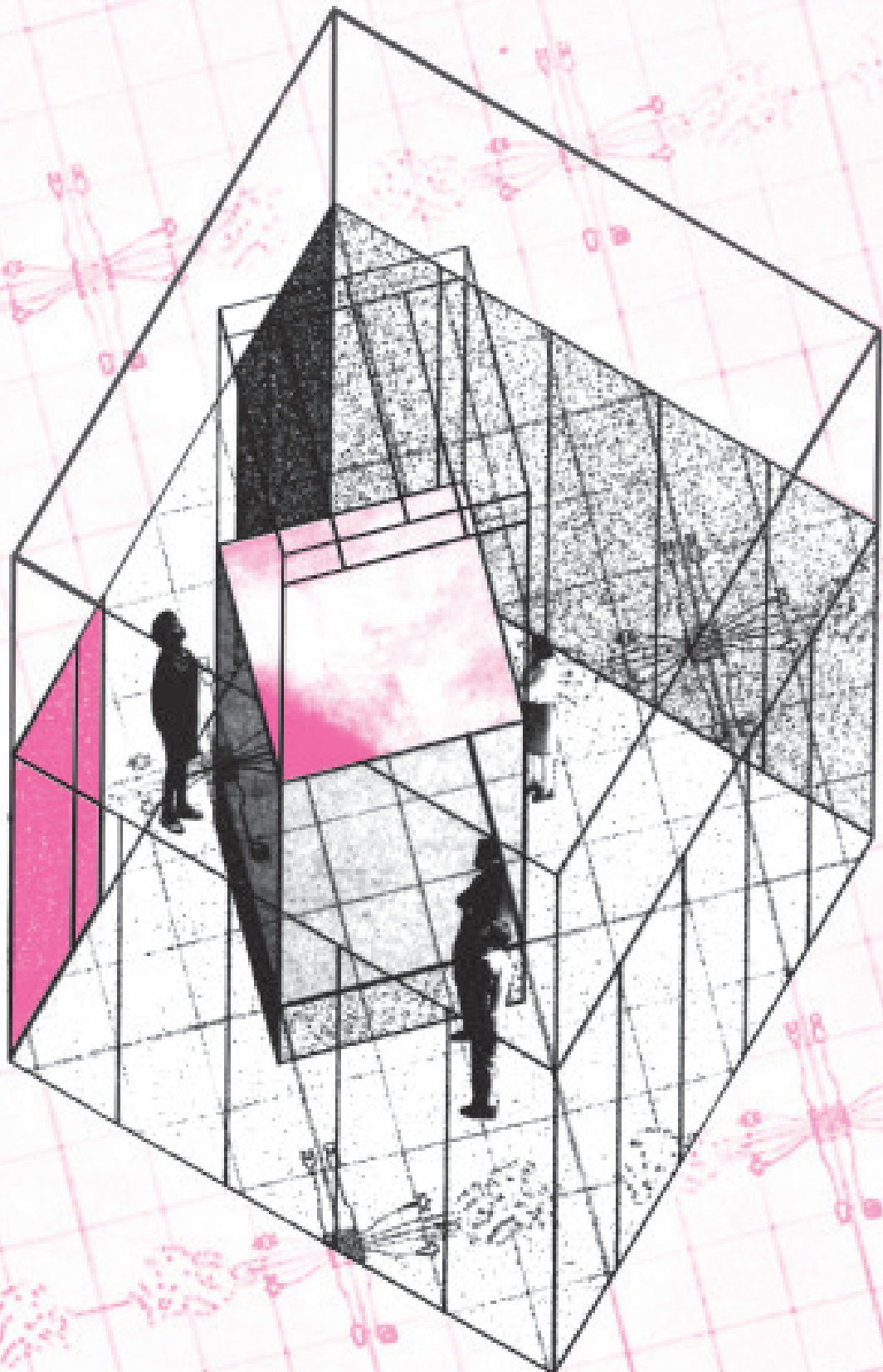
T.: "(...) So strated the strike and the police officers the first day they asked us what is the problem,"why do you want to go on hunger strike?"... And we said "first of all we need some answers. We need to know why are we here." I can understand for the paper but other than that we haven't committed any crime... we are just here for a paper... so what is going to happen to us, when are we going to be released? It is impossible to keep a person in a prison or in a detention center and not answering when they are going to be released. If they tell us like "two months, three months, four months you are going to stay and then you are going to be released", that is ok. But to stay there like for a year and not knowing when you are going to be released that is very hard. And then they said that if you need to change something about the condition in the camp, as they said, we can do something about it without going on a strike."

Preventing attempts, indirect manipulation and repression of their struggles didn't only occur through "friendly" urges by the side of the cops. Punishing practices such as confinement in their rooms and

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prohibition of receiving stuff from their visits were another two forms of pressure and appeasement of their struggles. Moreover we should note to these ones an incident, the leading actor of which was this time an NGO and not the executive power. This incident indicates to some extent NGO's role as far as migrants' management is concerned. This incident is about the visit of some lawyers of the NGO "Praxis" to Elliniko detention centre on the second day of the second hunger strike and their urge towards migrant women to stop it while at the same time promising them their liberation within 6 months, a period of time that had anyway already elapsed for a large number of detainees.

Meanwhile, during the time of operation of Elliniko detention





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center as a space of migrant women’s imprisonment, individuals and political groups, a lot among which were feminist, expressed in various ways their solidarity towards the detainees and their struggles. Protests outside the detention centre, demonstrations in the region of Elliniko as well as in the centre of Athens, calls to the court of justice regarding Sannaa Taleb’s case, banners, posters in Athens and other greek cities. All of them were attempts trying to bring forward the case of specifically Elliniko detention center but also more broadly the operation of detention centers, the migration issue and its gender perspective.

Returning back to experience of detention, T. said the following while closing her own narrative:

“The problem is that it is not just us. The problem is that there are still lots of women inside, like for example my friend Mariam. She is still there, she doesn’t have any hope. She is there alone, she cannot communicate with anybody... And other girls are waiting and hoping. It is never ending. Like when I think of Marta for example and I think that she is there for eleven months... I don’t care what she did before or whatever happened. She is there for a paper and she spent eleven months. I am not sure if my mental situation could allow me to

go through all these for that amount of time. So she is really... Marta, Taleb, Eirini... the other girls that spent so many time... they are very powerful women. For me I am not sure if I could mentally go through that period of time in jail. Maybe I go crazy but they are still holding up. They are very strong. They have their hopes. It is not just us. It is other people as well. Maybe before going to the detention center I used to think that “ok, me, my life, ok let’s get it over, done and forget about that...” but after this thing in Elliniko... that really changed my way of thinking. It is not only about me... it is so many women... Let alone the men. Ok the men have their bigger problems but also the women in Elliniko... And everyday they are bringing more people so it is never ending. I kind of thought that in a free country you wouldn’t be having those kind of problems. Now

that I see it, it is just the same. It is the same situation all around the world. And wherever you go, there will still be these laws that go against you like for no reason.”

### (Self-)critical note

Attempting to understand, make visible, deconstruct, stand against the dominant discourses of power (whether patriarchal, national, historical, juridical, medical etc.) and mechanisms which try to construct migrant woman as Other is a never ending process. At the same time though, while acknowledging that we necessarily contemplate and act within this exact framework, constant re-determination of the ways we think and of the practices that we choose to use, un-learning and continuous doubt of our political certainties constitute some points through which we are probably able to maintain open a space of encounter with migrants· maintain open the possibility of creating relations of intimacy and experiment with new forms of political act and ways of living.