

Sorority inside and outside as a means of survival and resistance: Experiences of women imprisoned in Mexico

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This article tells the stories of two formerly imprisoned women with recent experiences in a Mexican prison.¹ As Marthita's and Ana's accounts demonstrate failures of Mexico's neoliberal prison, which continues to operate according to the logic of the 'coloniality of power' in which women are made more vulnerable according to their position on colonial racial hierarchies.² They not only find themselves subjected to discrimination and sometimes physical abuse, but also — more than some of their (white) male counterparts — face glaring deficiencies in provision, including food and personal hygiene products. The gaps left by what has been described as Mexico's 'failed democracy' and an 'absent state',³ have to be filled to ensure physical, psychological, and social survival. This article explores the consequences of the 'absent state' from the perspectives of women who have struggled and fought — and continue to struggle and fight — to create livelihoods, wellbeing, and community through sorority.

Although they only represent 5.7 per cent of the overall prison population,⁴ women make up 53 per cent of the people processed and sentenced for federal offences.⁵ Crimes related to drugs are the primary cause of imprisonment for women at this level, their

numbers having grown dramatically since the declaration of the War on Drugs by president Felipe Calderon in 2006.⁶ Since the beginning of his sexenio — the six year term to which Mexican presidents are elected — over 3,000 women were imprisoned for 'crimes against health', as drugs crimes are euphemistically known.⁷ This growth in the population of women in prison is not proportionate to that of men. In 2021, for example, the population of women in prisons rose by 7.1 per cent while that of men grew by 4.1 per cent.⁸ Against this background of gender inequality, injustices within the justice system multiply:

The pattern which is repeated in Mexican prisons and across the continent is that, once they are inside the justice system, women — often facing low levels of education, poverty and/or social exclusion [...] — are judged according to a clear framework of gender stereotypes, judged to be bad mothers and given disproportionate sentences. Often they complete long periods of preventative detention with no contact with their families with no trial and with no sentence.⁹

1. The prison is anonymised throughout the article.
2. Whitfield, J. (2018). *Prison Writing of Latin America*. Bloomsbury.
3. Ávalos Tenorio, G. (2013). La democracia fallida en México. *Veredas*, 26, 121-142; González Placencia, L., coord. (2011). *Impunidad: síntoma de un Estado ausente*. Defensor, Comisión de Derechos Humanos de la Ciudad de México.
4. ENPOL (2021). *Encuesta Nacional de Población Privada de Libertad*. INEGI (National Institute of Statistics and Geography). Available at: <https://www.inegi.org.mx/programas/enpol/2021>
5. Blas, I. (2016). El mundo de Sofía o el abuso del derecho penal para abordar problemas sociales. *Derecho en Acción*, CIDE, CONACYT. Federal offences are a particular category of serious crimes judged to harm the "wellbeing of all Mexicans". See Moreno Colmenero, S. P. (2001). *Valores para la democracia Delitos e infracciones administrativas*. Instituto Nacional para la Educación de Adultos.
6. See footnote 5: Blas, I. (2016).
7. Redacción Animal político (2019). #LiberarlasEsJusticia: Más de 3 mil mujeres están presas en México por delitos menores contra la salud. *Animal Político*. Available at: <https://www.animalpolitico.com/2019/06/campana-liberar-mujeres-presas-drogas>
8. Angel, A. (2021). 2021 cerró con casi 10 mil personas más en prisión. *Animal político*. Available at: <https://www.animalpolitico.com/2022/01/2021-tercer-ano-aumento-poblacion-prision>
9. See footnote 5: Blas, I. (2016).

Two decades ago, Elena Azaola spoke about how women in prison in Mexico suffer what criminologists call 'double deviance',¹⁰ a particularly severe punishment for having transgressed not only the law but also gender roles: they are bad women, bad carers, or bad mothers. The punishments imposed on them are not only juridical but also moral and social, coming from both state authorities and their own families and communities. This accentuates the levels of isolation and abandonment for imprisoned women, leaving them in situations of extreme vulnerability.

Against this context of social abandonment, the Editorial Collective of Sisters in the Shadow has been collaborating with a community of women in a women's prison in Mexico for more than 15 years, building alliances and projects centred on social justice. The main 'outside' members — Elena de Hoyos, Aída Hernández Castillo, Marina Ruiz, Carolina Corral, María Vinós, Daniela Mondragón, Paloma Rodríguez, Marcia Trejo, and Lucía Espinoza — seek to dignify imprisoned women through creative, artistic, writing and editorial workshops and by producing books to showcase this work. The collective has published around 20 books to date, as well as participating in talks, conferences, and book fairs among many other activities, to amplify the voices of some of Mexico's most marginalised and vulnerable people.¹¹

Over the years, the collective has developed a form of sorority that Elena de Hoyos defines as 'solidarity between women'.¹² In *Reborn in Writing: A Manual for Feminist Intervention in Spaces of Violence*, de Hoyos, Ruiz, and Hernández Castillo explain that 'the challenge is to construct autonomy not from the place of exclusionary individualism which capitalism promotes, but rather from the sorority that seeks to strengthen us personally. Sharing writing we create links between women and establish

commitments to self-care and sorority, both individual and collective'.¹³ But what does sorority mean to imprisoned women themselves?

This article grapples with this question through the voices of Marthita and Ana, whose accounts reveal the alternative forms of (co)existence that have allowed them to survive during and after their imprisonment by the neoliberal, colonial, and racist justice system.¹⁴ In prison, Marthita and Ana developed networks of sorority with women inside and outside. These networks allowed them not only to survive, but also to resist the alienating and isolating rules imposed by the prison authorities, along with the social stigma generated by the multiple sexist racist and classist discriminations of Mexican society. Through acts of kindness, affection, and care, and diverse forms of grassroots community building, these imprisoned women resisted the neoliberal ideology that governs globalised Mexican society and the prison system that is one of its key pillars.¹⁵

We wrote this paper according to the dialogical and decolonial methodologies of the *Hermanas* (Sisters) themselves.¹⁶ We began by putting together some preliminary ideas, which we discussed as a group, deciding together with Marthita and Ana to focus on the themes of sorority and survival. After immersing ourselves in the academic work of some of the Sisters who move in the

academic sphere, and reflecting on the collective's work, we formulated a set of guiding questions about cooperation and solidarity as well as the barriers to both these things during and after imprisonment. Ana and Marthita wrote first drafts responding to these questions which we wrote up, translated, and edited, continuing to communicate with them via WhatsApp messages and calls, requesting further details and clarifications where necessary. We then read through

Through acts of kindness, affection, and care, and diverse forms of grassroots community building, these imprisoned women resisted the neoliberal ideology that governs globalised Mexican society.

10. Azaola, E. (1996). *El delito de ser mujer*. Hombres y mujeres homicidas en la ciudad de México: historias de vida. CIESAS-Plaza & Valdés.
11. See <https://hermanasenlasombra.org>
12. De Hoyos, E. (2013). Libertad en el encierro: ensayo sobre trabajo con mujeres en prisión. In *Libertad anticipada: Intervención feminista de escritura en espacios penitenciarios*, 17-50. Colectiva Editorial Hermanas en la Sombra, 36.
13. de Hoyos Pérez, E., Ruiz Rodríguez, M., & Hernández Castillo, R. A. (2021). *Renacer en la escritura Manual para la intervención feminista en espacios donde se viven violencias*. Colectiva Editorial Hermanas en la Sombra, 19.
14. Segato, R. L. (2007). El color de la cárcel en América Latina. Apuntes sobre la colonialidad de la justicia en un continente en deconstrucción. *Nueva Sociedad*, 208(1), 142-161.
15. Pérez-Ramírez, B. (2016). La prisión como un eje de la política neoliberal. Reflexiones sobre el papel del trabajo social penitenciario en México. In E. Pastor Sella & L. Cano Soriano (Eds.), *Políticas e intervenciones ante los procesos de vulnerabilidad y exclusión de personas y territorios. Análisis comparado México-España*. Dykinson.
16. See footnote 13: de Hoyos Pérez, E., Ruiz Rodríguez, M., & Hernández Castillo, R. A. (2021).

the completed draft aloud as a group, making further final changes.

The accounts in this article thus represent a dialogue that inverts the normal direction of academic knowledge. Instead of imposing our theoretical concepts on the 'subjects' of the research, Anna and Marthita begin with some key concepts that have been developed in the intellectual work of the Sisters in the Shadow — survival, resistance, solidarity, sorority, collective work — and relate these to their own stories, experiences, and realities. These women are of course the true experts. We hope to have honoured their experience and expertise through co-production, a process in which we have learned less from our academic readings than our conversations and written exchanges with Anna and Marthita.¹⁷ At one point at a point in Marthita's testimony where she was not able to describe what happened to her we have, with her permission, added information in italics in our own words.

Ana's words

My name is Ana, originally from the State of Morelos. At 18 I started working as an educational assistant with children from ages of 0 to 4. I did not go to university, but when I started working in day care centres the government gave us courses to train us in childcare. When I was 19 years old, I started a relationship with the cousin of a friend of mine, and through him I met a friend of his who was dedicated to making and changing counterfeit banknotes. That's how I got involved in the crime of 'counterfeiting and use of counterfeit currency' for which I was sentenced to 5 years in prison.

In 2013 when my trial began, I had no children. The following year, my first son Ernesto was born and two months after his birth came the judge's final verdict, and I was given 5 days to present myself to the prison. I was afraid of leaving my son and of missing out on so much of his early life, so I did not give myself up, and an arrest warrant was issued against me. In 2017 my second son was born, and when he was almost two and a half years old there were only two months left before my arrest warrant would expire. On the morning of the 4th of June 2019, I was re-arrested by the federal police, and this time I would not leave only one son, but two...

My children were 2 and 4 when I was sent to prison in 2019, just 3 days before my 26th birthday, and I spent almost 3 years there. Like everyone else, I had terrible ideas about prison, which turned into sheer terror as I went through the blue door behind which we

imprisoned people leave our lives, families, jobs, friends, and unresolved problems.... They took my fingerprints and details and took me to the medical area where the doctor makes out a report — something they do because sometimes the authorities in charge of transport beat or torture, or even sexually abuse, our comrades.

Then, the officers led me to a door that said 'clothes store'. They looked for clothes in my size and I had to change into the beige prison uniform. Extremely nervous, I went into the cell they had assigned me to drop my mattress off, and the comrade who already lived there came straight in. She told me that I could take whatever I needed from what was there (soap, shampoo, toilet paper, etc.) — a small act of care but a very important one: she knew that we all arrived with nothing. She also told me our area's allocated time for calls (4pm) and that she would lend me her card to talk to my family. Soon Marti and I began to talk, and I felt calmer and fortunate to have her as a comrade.

Marti and I spent almost 15 days sharing a cell until she was taken to the C.O.C. area. I was alone for 2 days until a new girl arrived, and as soon as she arrived, I tried to be as kind to her as Marti was with me. Without a doubt I think that the first impression or experience in that place was something that influenced me to define the type of comrade I would be.

In the 2 years and 10 months that I was inside, there were a few companions that I became very fond of and with whom I shared loyalty, sincerity, and trust. The Apodaca sisters were two of them. Originally from Sinaloa, they are one of the few with whom I never had any conflict or misunderstanding. It was always a sincere friendship of mutual trust and support, and they always had good advice for me and the best words to lift my spirits on difficult days. Other friends were the Naranjo sisters, Colombians who arrived almost a year after me. We developed a great friendship and a bond of mutual support. We had fun, but we also helped each other by finding ways of working together to make money and share what we had. Generally, my family brought me everything I needed, and I shared what they brought with the Naranjo sisters, who had no family support other than their mother, who could rarely visit them because the prison was very far from their home. They were noble hearted and very generous. Generally, whenever we had a visitor, we always shared the food that the guards let us keep.

I tried to be supportive and kind with other comrades, but just as there are many women with very noble hearts in prison, there are also some who tend to take advantage of the good intentions of others, and I ended up staying away from them so as not to have

17. Marthita and Anna's reflections are unique, particular to them, and in certain respects contrasting, owed partly to a temporal gap: Ana spent time in prison in a *sexenio* and regime that was much stricter; Marthita spent much more time inside, but at an earlier period in which there were fewer restrictions.

problems or misunderstandings. Sometimes it is the imprisoned comrades themselves who make it difficult for us to practise sorority, by letting others down or failing to reciprocate the good will or support that we have shown them.

Generally, however, it is the authorities who make it more and more difficult for us to build sorority among comrades. When I arrived, the situation was already strict, but as time went by, things got worse. The authorities began to impose absurd rules of 'non-coexistence', prohibiting us from spending time together, sharing our things, or simply having a space or time to talk or to help the new comrades find self-employment. The law states that remand prisoners and sentenced prisoners cannot live in the same area, but it does not say that it is forbidden for us to spend time together. However, the institution imposes these rules as if they were the law, thus imposing its own regimes of control on us and forbidding us access to the other wings for social or work reasons.

With this policy, how are newcomers supposed to learn how to work? Who is going to teach them? If, when you arrive there, you do not know how to do the work that is done there, if we cannot mix at mealtimes, what kind of model of reintegration is being practised? Is good daily coexistence not a fundamental part of social reintegration? How can we prepare to live outside if we do not learn to relate to each other in the already very restricted prison community, if prison regulations do not allow us to be empathetic to those around us, if we are forced not to share with or care for our comrades, if we cannot even support each other when we have problems?

In some cases, the authorities even offer privileges in exchange for our collaboration as 'witnesses', to help them deny all the abuses and human rights violations. That means having to lie and say that whatever injustice our comrades are denouncing is not true. Some collaborate to obtain privileges and others because they know that if they do not, at some point it will go against them and the authorities will take some kind of revenge, make it more difficult for their family to enter, or deny them access to food or personal items. This means we end up making enemies of each other whether we choose to collaborate or not. The authorities can make it very difficult for family to visit by

doing ever more thorough checks and searches, until the visitor gets tired of it and visits less and less until they end up not visiting us at all. Our prison authorities do not care that the maintenance of family ties is not only a right, but also a fundamental part of social reintegration.

Sometimes we were denied the right to call our families, especially when there was a riot in the men's area when we were locked in our cells and could not even go out to get our food. We had to cover the windows with our clothes to keep out the tear gas they fired to try to subdue the men although really, the protests were the fault of the authorities, whose mistreatment and violations of human rights forced the men to rebel.

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Solidarity from outside prison

In terms of social networks with the outside world, many of the comrades with whom I spent time in prison had very little contact with their families because they live in other states or countries, or simply because they did not have the support of a family member or friend. For them, life in prison is much more difficult. Fortunately, my brother and my mother came to visit me. My brother was two years younger than me — 23 — when I arrived. Our life was always difficult, and we struggled to complete our education, but at the age of 23 he decided to go

back to high school and after two years he went to university to study criminal law. He was the one who visited me most often. My mother, who was in her 40s, struggled to visit every weekend because of her job, but if they could not come every week, they would still always make sure to bring me everything I needed to look after myself and to work. My mother always told me that if what she brought was enough to share with someone who needed it, to give it to them without charging anything or expecting anything in return, because she knew that those who did not have visitors had to buy everything in the shop and that everything there was very expensive.

I was also always part of the Sisters in the Shadow writing workshop. I remember that the first time I attended the workshop was because of a colleague who invited me, who knew that I really liked reading and told me that I would like it very much. She was right. For me, participating in those workshops always

gave me a very comforting feeling because I could express myself freely and because of the kind treatment from Aida and Maria.

Life after prison

On 5th April 2022, it was finally time for me to be released. I was not only excited and anxious to leave but also really nervous about seeing my family again. I was pregnant again. I had started to talk on the phone with a man from the male section of the prison and we began to have a relationship and see each other more often, though our visits were always in secret. My family did not know that I had a partner. They did not find out I was pregnant until 15 days before my release, because I had been transferred to a more distant prison where they couldn't visit. I was already at 6 months. I was very, very nervous about seeing them, about what would happen when they saw me, about what my mother or my children would say when they found out that they would be getting a new baby sister.

When at midnight the notification arrived that my release had been authorised, and that I would be released immediately, I had to do something I never thought I would do inside the prison... Ask to spend one more night there (for my own safety given how late it was, and given that my family could not come to pick me up because the prison was so far away). Finally, my brother arrived, accompanied by his partner and a friend of mine. The truth is that I felt very calm and happy to see my brother again, the whole way we talked, and I felt as if everything I had lived through in prison had only been a dream. My brother's partner was extremely kind and attentive, and my friend kept offering me things to eat and drink, asking if the music was OK, and so on.

When we arrived at my mother's house my nerves returned, as did the excitement of knowing that I would see my family again and that this time we would never be separated. When we embraced, my children, even though they are small, cried with sheer emotion. After having a wash, I went into the bedroom and my mother came in carrying a dress with a wide skirt. She looked at my belly without saying anything, but I suppose she thought the dress would be comfortable for me because of the bump.

When I got out of prison, my mother and my brother helped me, both emotionally and financially. Another very good support network that I also found when I got out was what I least imagined. One

afternoon when I was leaving the house where I live, I heard a voice that sounded familiar. I stopped to see a woman with her back turned. I was almost sure that I knew her. As I approached, I realised it was Elena de Hoyos. Through her, I was able to make contact once again with the Editorial Collective of Sisters in the Shadow. I was very happy: Elena knows everything that we went through in prison, she knows my comrades and many other things that no one on the outside would understand. She told the Collective that she had seen me and soon I began to make contact with the others. When she told them I was pregnant, they all gave me gifts for the baby. The Sisters are a support group for which I feel extremely grateful, and I consider myself very fortunate to have been able to take part in the writing workshops that they gave.

As for the few friends I made in prison, I made an effort to keep in touch with them. As soon as I could, I contacted their families on Facebook, and sent them my mobile number so that they could call me. I talk to them very often on the phone: we talk for a bit and have a laugh, and I try to support them whenever I can. Sometimes I also call their families to ask how they are, because I know that sometimes things happen in prison — like the riots I described above — that make it difficult for them to communicate regularly.

The most difficult thing after leaving prison is finding a job, and not only because of the criminal record. Those of us who are released through early probation are still barred by the state from participating in all sorts of legal and bureaucratic processes. We cannot, for example, get formal employment, social security, credit from a bank, or even get official ID. This makes it very difficult for us to find employment because in order to get access to jobs, social security, or any benefits, we need updated documentation, and that is not possible until the end of our time on probation. The law in Mexico is absurd, unjust, and contradictory. How are we supposed to reintegrate into society, how are we supposed to get our lives back if we have no way of even getting a job to take care of ourselves? This is why we remain dependent on other people's support, and since we cannot rely on the state, we depend on our families, if we are lucky, or other support networks that we have to create ourselves.

How do we overcome these problems created by the state? In my case, in addition to the help of my family, I have had friends who know my situation and who have been able to support me. Some of them have

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even invited me to work with them or to go back to doing things that we did together before my imprisonment, for example making organic personal hygiene products like soap, toothpaste, or deodorant, and on other occasions we make handmade pastries to make a bit of money. It is nothing stable or secure, but it helps.

In our lives as ex-prisoners, it is the same authorities that continue to put obstacles in our daily lives. They prevent us from finding formal jobs and even from helping our friends who are still incarcerated, because former prisoners cannot get in easily for visits. Since I already knew this, I decided that I would at least try to support my friends with things that I know are needed there, like basic belongings such as hygiene and cleaning products. But when I went, the officer would not allow anything in, not because they were prohibited items but because of who I was. In other words, despite the fact that we are no longer in prison, the authorities continue to limit our freedoms simply because we have been there. And these are the same authorities who discriminate against us, stigmatise us, and make our lives — and our reintegration — difficult by denying us the possibility of supporting one another even after we leave.

Marthita's words

My name is Marthita. My mother tongue is Tsotsil, a Mayan language they speak in the Mountains of the Chiapas, although I was born close to the border with Guatemala. In Tsotsil, the name of the language is bats'i k'op [original language] or jk'optik [our language]. When I was 12, I went to live with nuns in Mexico City, but I had come from a very quiet village and the contrast was very hard. Later I got married and I went to live in Morelos to escape the pollution and the smog. My husband sold tacos and I supported him, although it was very hard because we didn't know anyone. Little by little we got to know more people and later some neighbours lent us a bit of land on which we could grow maize.

I lived and worked outside the city (Cuernavaca), in the forest, where there was very little electricity. My house was made of recycled cardboard and had no doors. It was in the month of June when some policemen showed, wounded, looking like they had had an accident and begging me to feed them. I didn't think anything bad. An uneducated woman from the countryside, brought up by nuns. My first thought was that I should love my neighbour. I had no idea of all the problems that would follow. I didn't understand Spanish very well which made things much more

difficult: my inability to communicate was exhausting and harmful. My life took a 180 degree turn that night. It was destroyed like a broken glass. That life ended, another life in the women's prison began.

[The policeman asked Marthita to feed and care for a child they had with them who later turned out to be the victim of a kidnapping, for which she and her husband were convicted. Marthita is still traumatised by her experience and struggles to recount these details].

Sorority with women inside

Prison is also a world where there are fights, screams, people reporting each other, suicides, thefts, and so on. But in contrast with the things imposed on us and the violence of everyday life in the prison you can also form connections of sorority which allow you to survive and resist injustice. In the almost 14 years that I was in prison my relationship with cellmates was good because we gave ourselves rules. Our main rule was respect. We repeated what our president Benito Juárez said 'respect for the rights of others means peace'.¹⁸ This was necessary because, due to overpopulation, three or four of us lived in tiny cells designed for two people. We had to respect our cellmates, not touching their toiletries like shampoo, bath soap, sanitary pads, flip flops for the showers, etc. That's how we lived in harmony with our comrades.

There are women who support you when you first enter. You arrive with no shoes, with the clothes you have worn for a whole week, unwashed, tortured, beaten up, cold and hungry, with no blankets, no shampoo to wash yourself, and no towel or changes of clothes. For me a great figure was Maria, another indigenous woman from Acapulco who supported me when I arrived. She was also there because of a kidnapping she knew nothing about. She no longer believed in God because she should not have been there. She knew how to sew and embroider. She taught me a way of embroidering that she had learned in Puebla. I had never seen such beautiful fabrics. She had a real gift for expressing what she wanted in her work. She embroidered beautiful precious tablecloths and handkerchiefs. When visitors came her creativity and beautiful combinations of different colours really caught their attention. We worked every day to make money by selling to the visitors. We also made cushion covers. Our comrades bought them and sent them out to their families so that they in turn could resell them on the outside.

18. Benito Juárez was a liberal president who served between 1858 and 1872. He was of Zapotec indigenous heritage, the first indigenous head of state in the postcolonial Americas.

There were incredible women like my friend Maria in that prison. Women who knew how to look after their children even though they were in prison, women who called their children on the phone, asked them about what medicines they are taking, made sure they were ok. Indigenous women like us. The prison doesn't care about the children left behind. No one can know what it is like to be a mother leaving behind small children, unless it has happened to them, like it happened to me. This fortitude, the strength they have, that we give others, allows us to maintain our children and even send them money despite being in prison. I really think women are incredibly strong. They have values and principles and manage to survive. I really admire my former companions and their children who are now working in spite of what happened to their mothers. Maria is now free, working happily in the countryside.

Alma is another close friend from prison. From her I learned how to cook. She knew how to write and how to express herself. She could write letters and complaints to be sent to the prison authorities which others paid her to do. One day when we were sewing, she said, 'let's go eat'. I told her that I didn't have any food and she said, 'I'll give you some.' She took out an iron and put a taco on it to heat up then she put cheese and made a salsa by grinding chili on a plate. Mortar and pestles were forbidden. She said to me, 'I think we should work to put together a kitchen.' I said I didn't know how to cook but she said, 'You will learn.' She explained the rules of the work to me. You couldn't just stand there chatting with our comrades, you could not ask them what crime they were there for, you just had to sell and work and not get into trouble so that you could avoid misunderstandings that might land you in trouble with the administration. We hugged each other and that is how we began a friendship and a food business.

But these forms of sorority, that helped us to survive in that repressive and racist institution, were not always possible. After many years the administration of the prison changed in 2013 and imposed extremely strict rules: many women were segregated and there was no communication between comrades. We were no longer permitted to sell things, so I had to look for another job and that is how I met Angeles.

Angeles was transferred from another prison where she had learned to sew. She invited me to work in a sewing workshop where she made things to be

sold on the outside. My role ended up being to iron the uniforms that comrades from Guerrero made. In this group there was a lot of harmony, peace, and teamwork. The other women taught me to use the sewing machines. But that work ended because the authorities made it very difficult to bring the materials into the prison. They put a lot of obstacles up for the businessman who employed us, making the checks of the garments very onerous, and he ended up leaving. So, we began making face coverings for hospitals, and time kept passing. This group had its rules as well; about how to close the workshop properly, etc. The kitchen and the sewing workshop show how women can work collectively as a team to overcome the difficulties of the prison: we women help each other, we support each other, and teach one another to work.

Sorority with those outside

The main experience of prison is separation from those 'outside'. I didn't see my family for many years. I couldn't go to my daughters' graduations. I couldn't support them; I couldn't even be a spectator. There were so many things that I missed, people who died while I was inside. I missed the birth of my grandson; I couldn't care for my daughter. But I did have the good fortune to make new alliances

with women outside. Our chompis (friends) Aida, Marina, Elena, and other Sisters in the Shadow, their breakfasts, their food, their books, helped us forget our reality. We learned to write with them, and writing became an important escape from our problems. The Sisters were a breath of fresh air because they did not see us as criminals, they saw us as unlucky, or people who had made mistakes, people paying a high price for some arbitrary life lesson...

Life after prison

I will never forget the day I left. My nerves, the paperwork that had to be signed, the long wait outside because you know the date but not the time that they will let you leave. In these moments the love of your family is very important. A hug from your children cures all pain and all anxiety. More than anything I remember breathing the good air of the forest. Feeling that free air, I sank to my knees giving thanks to God for allowing me to leave prison, for letting me go home. Where my house had been was just flat land with nothing but trees. It had been built of recycled wood

The main experience of prison is separation from those 'outside'. I didn't see my family for many years.

and cardboard and, as my neighbours later recounted, the very police who had arrested me had taken away everything they found in the house: the TV, the fridge, everything. That's our reality. It happened to lots of women I met in prison: sometimes they even do it while they are arresting you, they take everything of value and never return it. I had to start from scratch, from spoons to beds. I had to begin a new life and leave the past behind, overcome, let it go, and move forward.

In spite of the distances, I still maintain some of the social networks that the eye develops inside the prison including the Sisters in the Shadow. We stay in touch, and this is something very important. Their support has many forms: a visit, a call, a WhatsApp message, financial support... My teacher Shantal has been a real help in psychological, moral, and economic terms too. She is always there for me, and her support really gives me strength. I went to her house, and I slept, and I slept. That was real trust. My friend Alma also continues to give me moral support. We have not seen each other for years for financial reasons as she lives in Guerrero. Ángeles lives in Guerrero as well. One day we will see each other again.

I have faced many difficulties after leaving prison, such as adapting myself to my surroundings, adapting myself to technology, adapting myself to strangers. More than anything it is difficult to find employment. But I have used the knowledge that I gained in the prison to survive, like sewing work in a laboratory and from confectionery. I sell jelly, yoghurt with fruit, and cakes. Given my age it is not easy to find work, so I just have to sort myself out.

A friend told me, 'you reap what you sow'. I didn't get it at the time because I grew crops in the countryside, I thought she was referring my plot of land, but now I understand. It is about the friendships that you cultivate, the people that you meet.

Prison teaches us women to help one another to become self-sufficient. When I left prison, I rebuilt my house and went to work for myself. My friend Maria became president of her village, she took her

experience and did good things with it. Alma built her own house when she came out, and she also worked in the presidency of her state. She had been in prison because someone asked her to transport some marijuana. Her child had been shot and was paralysed. It was out of necessity; she just wanted to protect and help her son. But they have survived and are doing well, including her son who does para-sports.

How terrible is the government, I say. How terrible to take a mother from her children, and for what? The true criminals carry on as they want, robbing and killing. If they have money, they can get away with murder: it's as if they hadn't committed a crime. The people who should not outside are there inside. And vice-versa. It is so very hard. Thank God I survived it and my children. Now it is a new life.

Discussion

These stories demonstrate how women in Latin America are unjustly imprisoned and, once inside, continue to suffer stigmatisation, abandonment, and discrimination. Compounding this problem is the fact that of the 428 prisons in Mexico, only 10 are exclusively for women, which means that 40.2 per cent of the imprisoned women find themselves in women's prisons, while 59.8 per cent are in mixed centres with a small area assigned to women in a mainly male facility.¹⁹

Consequently, and as the above testimonies reveal, there is much less space for them, they do not have the full range of services, activities, or spaces for recreation, and what is more, they are subject to policies and procedures which have been designed for the men's prison population.²⁰ It also means, as Anna describes in the case of the Naranjo sisters, that women are often imprisoned very far from home. This fact, combined with the systematic gendered stigmatisation, leads to family abandonment and results in a significant lack of visits by family members and partners of women in prison, compared to men.²¹ This is particularly significant in places like Mexico, where the importance of regularly receiving 'visita' for people imprisoned cannot be overstated. In Mexico's neoliberal prison

I have faced many difficulties after leaving prison, such as adapting myself to my surroundings, adapting myself to technology, adapting myself to strangers.

19. CNDH (2019). *Albergan 18 penales femeniles al 40% de las mujeres privadas de libertad*. Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos.

20. Hernández Armas, C. A. (2018). El estigma de las mujeres en reclusión en México: Una mirada desde el interaccionismo simbólico. *TraHs*, 3(1), 159–171.

21. Wittner, V. (2016). *Salud mental entre rejas: una perspectiva psicosocial y de género*. JVE Ediciones.

system in which even the most basic necessities like hygiene products, tampons, and medicine must be bought or brought in by visitors, a lack of visits is not only damaging for women's mental health, it can potentially cost them their lives.²²

Marthita's account, is strongly marked by her indigeneity. As a woman from the Tsotsil indigenous group in Chiapas, her lack of literacy and facility with Spanish combined with poverty and social exclusion, mean she was targeted and easily scapegoated by organised crime, and lacked the social and economic resources to defend herself. Her experience of the criminal justice process shows how indigenous women are disproportionately discriminated against. The invention of race by Western colonial powers — since colonisation but extending to the present day through enduring structures of coloniality — has legitimised discrimination, repression, and human rights abuses against the indigenous peoples of Latin America.²³ For racialised women, this has been compounded by their gender.²⁴ As Hernández Castillo underlines, criminality in Mexico is 'permeated by gender and ethnic difference'.²⁵

*Prison in Mexico is for poor people who coincidentally are mostly brown and of indigenous descent (many of them urban marginalised people who have been racialized by exclusionary ideologies and practices). [...] In Mexico prison has a colour and failing to recognise this is to deny the racism that continues to rule in our society.*²⁶

However, Marthita's testimony also demonstrates how indigenous women resist the triple stigmatisation

that they suffer through sorority with other racialised and marginalised women, and through the construction of alternative identities. Specifically, Marthita describes the figure of the hard-working woman, which has very different associations from that of neoliberal capitalism: for Marthita, the hard-working woman is a figure of mutual support, collectivity, and sorority. In fact, given the 'absent state' — and the consequent lack of education programmes provided by state authorities — women like Marthita gain education, skills, and experience thanks to the support of other hard working-women. This also explains the acerbic criticism Anna directs towards the new authorities and their rules and restrictions that prevent free association. Such rules made life in prison much more difficult by preventing contact between those who had been 'processed' and those who had been 'sentenced', thereby breaking the connection between 'hard-working' women and their 'trainees'. Indeed, while part of the value of this work is social, another is economic: on the inside, an important mechanism of resistance and survival is the creation of ways to make money. That is why many of these hard-working women teach the learners skills like sewing, cooking, embroidery, etc. and either pay them for their work or give them the tools so that they themselves can earn money through the sale of their products. In the absence of state support, these women show that creative sorority of this sort must be mobilised to fill in the gaps.

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22. See footnote 21: Wittner, V. (2016).

23. Quijano, A. (2007). Questioning 'Race'. *Socialism and Democracy*, 21, 45-53.

24. Lugones, M. (2011). Hacia un feminismo descolonial. *Revista La Manzana de la Discordia*, 6, 105-119.

25. Hernández Castillo, R. A. (2013). ¿Del Estado multicultural al Estado penal? Mujeres indígenas presas y criminalización de la pobreza en México. In M. T. Sierra Camacho, R. A. Hernández Castillo, & R. Sieder (Eds.), *Justicias indígenas y estado: Violencias contemporáneas*, 299-338. FLACSO: CIESAS.

26. Hernández Castillo, R.A. (2013). Viajes compartidos: metodologías feministas en espacios penitenciarios. In *Libertad anticipada: Intervención feminista de escritura en espacios penitenciarios*, 55-85. Colectiva Editorial Hermanas en la Sombra, 56.