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Women in Spiral: Creating, Free, Inside a Women's Prison

Talking about women in prison implies analyzing one of the country's most precarious, corrupt, forgotten systems, the penitentiary legal system, and the administration of justice for women. Historically, women's imprisonment has been constructed from a heteropatriarchal viewpoint and logic, which has strongly influenced the legal and social meaning of the female offender. According to researchers like Dolores Juliano, Elena Azaola, Elisabeth Almeda, and Claudia Salinas, since ancient times, justice for women has been administered based on the intersection of two systems: legal and patriarchal. This has led them to have to deal with two kinds of sentences: one for the crime committed and the other for having failed in fulfilling the gender role that society, their families, and the state expected of them as good citizens, mothers, wives, or daughters, the guarantors of the reproduction of good and of life.

In this regard, in her well-known book *Los cautiverios de las mujeres: madresposas, monjas, putas, presas y locas* (The Captivities of Women: Mother/Wives, Nuns, Whores, Prisoners, and Madwomen), Marcela Lagarde mentions that women in prison actually live in captivity because society also levies sexist, classist, and racist moral judgments against them, criminalizing and constantly emphasizing their offences.

In this sense, for them, more than providing conditions to truly help them forge a new life project, far from the context that led them to situations of risk and crime, jail has become a space to bury them socially, as Laura Larrauri said. There, they are easily forgotten, and with the passage of time, their families stop visiting them and abandon them. This makes them even more vulnerable, given that, even before going in, most of them already come from



Maye Moreno, *Canastera*, 2015.

extremely precarious, unequal, violent social contexts. Thus, for them, prison is experienced differently due to the gender specificity permeating their sentences and prison stay, since their imprisonment is focused on getting them to return to the road they “deviated from.”

In the Mexican case, Article 18 of the Constitution states that the penitentiary system must guarantee job training, education, health care, and sports for a successful return to society for both men and women prisoners, to avoid recidivism. However, the courses women receive there reproduce and reinforce gender stereotypes, limiting them to feminized, docile, passive activities like artisanal decorative chocolate-making, EVA foam or candy

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Torre (2008-2013).

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arrangements, raffia fiber modeling, embossing, beauty training, cleaning, cooking, or embroidery, among others. All of these keep them quiet the entire time, heads down, bodies bent over, not moving or expanding the body, not speaking, and doing no collective work or expressing any critical thinking.

Clearly, for women in prison, a bias exists in the opportunities and training activities against them rethinking their lives, their relationships, and the reasons that led them to commit a crime, as well as how they see themselves as women from critical, reflexive points of view. For them, jail is a border on a vacuum of another alternative of being able to project a different future for their lives.

The following is a participatory research project and action plan, Women in Spiral: The Justice System, Gender Perspective, and Pedagogies in Resistance. Using artistic activities as well as teaching and legal practices, it proposes a very particular objective: “the construction of a voice, taking the floor, in one of the most silenced and educationally most precarious places in existence: women’s prison.”¹

Doing/Undoing Time: Artistic and Pedagogical Practices

In 2008, the University Gender Studies Program, today the UNAM Center for Gender Research and Studies (CIEG), then headed by Dr. Marisa Belausteguigoitia, received a request from a group of women inmates at the Santa Martha Acatitla Women’s Social Reinsertion Center who wanted to paint a mural in their jail. Without realizing it, what began as a request to bring some color to the grey walls typical

Women in Spiral’s gender sensitivity and artistic production processes inside the prison have had an impact on the structures of punishment, time, and control the women are subjected to.

of penitentiary architecture became a call to reassert the university’s public character in dealing with one of the country’s most urgent problems and scenarios.² Beginning then, an artistic, educational, and legal project consolidated itself: Women in Spiral has now been operating for more than ten years, with an impact on two places where knowledge is produced: a public university, the UNAM, and the women’s prison.

Women in Spiral’s gender sensitivity and artistic production processes inside the prison have had an impact on the structures of punishment, time, and control the women are subjected to. They have used artistic, pedagogical, and legal practices related to culture, literature, short films, poetry, creative writing, and cultural and gender studies. The results have included murals, short film subjects, fanzines, a “joint” dictionary and recipe book,³ and a book of poems in the shape of an accordion.⁴ These have made it possible for the women to delineate cultural outlines different from their being women and revisit their legal cases from those new ways of representation. They have also allowed them to sensitize and create awareness among their relatives, the general public, academics, students, and administrators of justice about living conditions in prison, the criminalization of women, and the excessive sentences they receive.



La palapa, aula expandida, 2017.

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Cristian Salvatierra

Leelatu Fanzine.

For the Women in Spiral project, it has been fundamental to put to one side the punitive dynamics of “doing time” that create forgotten women, punished, atrophied, reduced to docility and femininity. In their place, it offers a change of perspective, a wider view of their way of situating themselves and seeing themselves as women, beyond what patriarchal culture has imposed on them and told them they must be like, as well as the possibility of imagining and extending their horizons beyond the grey walls, the barbed wire, the rollcalls, or their court dates.⁵

In Marisa Belausteguigoitia’s words, the project has fostered an activated academy for studying, problematizing, and making visible the legal-penitentiary and patriarchal systems that lock up, process, and confine women. From that artistic, educational, and legal activity, in 2008 Women in Spiral appropriated the walls that close them in and put four visual narratives on them: *The Shout; Strength, Time, and Hope; Pathways and Forms of Freedom;* and *Collective Action for Justice*. They all start from a desperate cry, move through their strategies for surviving in prison, and end with a call for justice. In 2013, they transitioned from walls to paper and carried out an internal epistolary collaboration with the inmates from the Sisters in the Shade

Publishing Collective of the Atlacholoaya, Morelos prison. This resulted in two projects: an *Illustrated “Joint” Dictionary* that humorously gathers the languages and cultural vocabularies “in the joint” with which the women communicate; and a *Poetic Accordion*, in which the women of Santa Martha Acatitla document in words and images the poetry written by their sisters at Atlacholoaya.

The takeover of the jail and the transition from walls to paper continued with the publication of the *Leelatu 1 Prison Living Conditions* and *Leelatu 2 Work* fanzines in 2014 and 2015. These independent, self-managed publications became a political-pedagogical tool for denunciations, “a blade with a sharp tongue,” as Lulú, a sister released from prison, said. In the first fanzine, the living conditions that the inmates survive are explained; the passing of time; the lack of basic services like clean drinking water; the abandonment; the rollcalls; and the trips to court, as well as the conditions and particularly the violations of labor rights in prison. The second fanzine exposes the costs — not only economic, but also emotional, physical, and emotional — of being imprisoned, and explains the strategies for resisting and maneuvering that the women go through to generate self-employment based on their knowledge and life experiences.

In 2016, the women changed format again and began to make short films, producing *Cinema/Labels: The Offense/Mourning of the Weeping Woman*, where they redefine the Mexican cultural legend of a ghost-like woman, generally considered a “bad mother,” condemned to wander and weep eternally for having abandoned her children. Tired of weeping, the women in prison show how they move from



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Mirada, 2019.



The Antigones of Santa Martha, 2017.

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weeping to denunciation to raise their voices and expose the existing negative predisposition to judge and criminalize them, permeated by gender mandates. In 2017, they produced the film short *Cihuatlán: Antigones of Santa Martha*, in which the women rewrite the myth of Sophocles's Antigone. In the original myth, when Antigone disobeys and faces the ruler of Thebes, she is condemned to die walled up in a cave. In the rewrite, instead of hanging herself, she takes the noose off her neck and, like the inmates, in a different kind of imprisonment and suffocation in prison, demands a fair trial, with a gender perspective and respect for her human rights, in which the judges take into consideration their life contexts and the reasons that led them to venture into risk and crime.

In 2018, the visual storytelling continued with different artistic techniques: they wrote an erotic short story, in which the women write fable and illustrate stories in which they have superpowers and explore their desire and sexuality; made a piece called "The Collective Wound," with pins with two drawings ("a gnawed heart" and "empty", referring to the abandonment and oblivion by the authorities, society, and their own families); "Bestiary," an artistic-pedagogical instrument where they appear through collective animal bodies to escape the prison space; and, finally, a piece called "Prints and Bags," where they face the invisibility and oblivion of women inmates. In these bags they place their footprints to leave a trace of their presence, and later, their sisters embroider their prints and take them outside the prison.

In 2019, they produced *Recipes from the Joint: Raw, Cooked, and Finely Chopped. Flavors and Frustrations of Women in*

Prison. It includes, on the one hand, recipes written by the women to deal with punishment, abandonment, prohibitions, precariousness, and the punitive dynamics in jail; and on the other hand, it explains the obstacles they confront in preparing their food, as well as the need to use their ingenuity to make their own kitchen implements with the objects they have at hand, thus showing their living conditions.

When the Covid-19 pandemic hit, it became impossible to enter the prison to continue our work. So, in 2020, the Women in Spiral "on the outside" collaborated with the UNAM Institute for Aesthetic Research and produced the fanzine *Bodies and Antibodies: Maneuvers and Other Contagions in Times of Pandemic*. The aim was to expose the precarious, vulnerable circumstances of women inmates, but also to ask ourselves how we can recover their wisdom for surviving imprisonment in a world context in which those of us who were "free" had to be in lockdown.

We have not been able to enter Santa Martha Acatitla since November 2019; for the first time after more than ten years of uninterrupted work in the prison, the pandemic banned us from entering it due to the health and safety restrictions. Today, the Women in Spiral project is reexamining its objectives, both inside and outside prison. The aim is for the knowledge, experiences, and wisdom deposited in the products created by our imprisoned sisters can contribute to generating public and educational policies that will contribute to transforming the access to justice and guarantee decent living, labor, educational, health, and sexual health conditions for women in prison, so they can sketch out other futures, other horizons, and other possibilities for living. ■■■

Notes

- 1 Marisa Belausteguigoitia, "Mujeres en Espiral: justicia y cultura en espacios de reclusión," in M. Belausteguigoitia and R. Lozano (comps.), *Pedagogías en espiral: experiencias y prácticas* (Mexico City: PUEG, UNAM, 2012), 331 pp.
- 2 Tania Gisel Tovar, *Des/hacer la cárcel, hacer un fanzine: la toma de los muros y de la palabra por mujeres en reclusión*, bachelor's thesis, National Autonomous University of Mexico, 2018, <http://132.248.9.195/ptd2018/mayo/0774385/Index.html>.
- 3 Prison jargon for "jail" includes "the joint." [Editor's Note.]
- 4 To see all the products, go to the project website at <https://www.artejusticiaygenero.com/>.
- 5 Marisa Belausteguigoitia, Rián Lozano, and Patricia Piñones, *Manual de formación y sensibilización. Arte y justicia con perspectiva de género. Mujeres en condición de reclusión* (Mexico City: Inmujeres, 2014), 107 pp.