

Corina Giacomello (2013)

Género, drogas y prisión. Mujeres privadas de su libertad en México

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Over the last decades, the so-called ‘War on Drugs’ has been accompanied by the implementation of prohibitionist and repressive policies that have generated great economic, social, and political impacts. Violence and corruption are two of the most visible social costs of these policies. The scholarly and popular preoccupation with the male narco-trafficker, and in particular the capo or drug lord, however, has left hidden another insidious aspect of the drug trade: the participation and criminalization of poor women. To fill this gap, a growing field of Latin American scholars has begun to undertake the task of documenting the increase of women incarcerated for drug-related crimes (see Azaola and Yacamán 1994; Del Olmo 1998; Ribaz and Martínez 2003; Briseño 2006; Anthony 2007; Torres 2007; Carrillo 2009; Zamudio 2009; Hernández 2010).

This new scholarship finds a relationship between this increase and a series of socioeconomic developments: poverty and the economic deterioration of the region; the inequality women face in both the private and public spheres; the economic opportunities provided in the production and sale of drugs

that have attracted historically marginalized sectors; and the intensifying of policies to combat the drug trade and harsher penalties for related crimes.

One vocal participant in these debates is Corina Giacomello, a researcher at the Center for Juridical Studies at the Autonomous University of Chiapas (Mexico). Her recent monograph, *Género, drogas y prisión*, studies the participation of women in drug trafficking and their experiences of incarceration in order to analyze the impact of gendered social hierarchies and anti-drug legislation on the criminal justice system. Her discussion is undergirded by an in-depth bibliographical review, as well as analysis of quantitative data, court files, international treaties, laws and regulations, and interviews with women serving drug-related sentences. By sampling a diverse set of sources, Giacomello is able to effectively describe a complex phenomenon complicated by an array of economic, political, social, and cultural factors.

Through six thematic chapters, Giacomello examines how social structures and power

relations, particularly gender hierarchies and norms, influence women's participation in drug-related crime and color their carceral experiences. To problematize and understand the unique experience of these women, the text first assesses the presence and importance of drug trafficking in the Mexican and Latin American economies and social contexts. The monograph also historically contextualizes the prohibitionist approach taken by national and international agencies to combat drug trafficking. As Giacomello states, many experts and social organizations have registered concern over the negative consequences of these policies, as well as highlighted the geopolitical and economic interests that mediate them. In particular, these critics flag as unproductive the prosecution of *correos humanos* (human mail), or petty drug dealers comprising the lowest echelons of drug trade networks. They view these 'narco-employees' as individuals trying to escape poverty through the social mobility conferred by drug trade profits. Their detention does little to deter drug trafficking; instead, they become cannon fodder for organized criminal networks and scapegoats of a judicial system unable to distinguish between cartel leadership, secondary actors, and the consumers. Giacomello finds that a significant part of Mexico's penitentiary population is serving time for drug-related crime. This fact explains the exponential increase of women in prison in Latin America and Mexico. The profile of these women is marked by their social exclusion. In their urge to 'show results' police action has focused on secondary actors: young men and women with scarce resources who are easy to detain.

In order to unveil the participation of women in drug trafficking and their experiences in prison, Giacomello conducted seventeen interviews with female inmates in Mexico City's Centro Femenil de Reclusión Social of Santa Martha Acatitla over the course of two years. The author is consistently cognizant of the particularities and implications of conducting field research in the prison. Giacomello understands this space of anthropological research as a microcosm that reflects the society from which it is born, making visible hierarchies, power plays, and social contradictions. One of the book's strengths, thus, is Giacomello's reflection on how space, personal interests, power relations, and identities that emerge in a prison mediate the relation between the researcher and the female subjects under observation. In making clear to interviewees that she would not intervene in their legal situations, Giacomello attempted to minimize reward-seeking behavior and create an atmosphere in which informants would reflect on their experiences with objectivity and agency. This ethnographic work informs the author's analysis of the women's hybrid conditions, such as subject-object, trafficker-trafficked, victim-offender. Less explicit in her discussion is the hybrid status inmate-free woman, a condition demanding the attention of future scholarship.

Giacomello locates her interviewees' roles within the drug trade, categorizing them as consumers, petty dealers, *aguacateras* (prison smugglers), *mulas* (drug couriers) or *pagadoras* (women that assume the responsibility of a crime committed by a son or partner). These case studies allow the

author to create a narrative arc that explores the women's conditions prior to detainment, the different processes to 'roping' them in to illicit behavior, the motivations for committing the crime, the rewards they receive, the information they have, the way in which they are detained, and the sentences they received. Furthermore, Giacomello analyses the meaning and implications that their work in this criminal network, prison, and their sentences have for these women.

Throughout the text, Giacomello highlights the ways in which gender impacts the participation of women in drug-related criminal behavior. The life stories of the female inmates reveal long-term engagements with episodes of violence, injustice, discrimination, and inequality. In many cases, these elements persist and worsen when women enter the criminal justice system. This fact is due not only to the harmful practices on the inside of the systems, but also, as the author highlights, to the consequences of institutional gender blindness. Giacomello provides an insightful review of international treaties that propose measures for incorporating a gender perspective into the treatment of women in prison.

Once again, the women's narratives guide the reader through a description of the realities of incarceration, specifically the day-to-day experience of prison and the way in which the women signify, live, and survive it. The text notes how prison experiences are textured by factors like age, sexual orientations, marital and motherhood status, educational and income level, religious

affiliation, nationality, and race. This diverse set of women, according to Giacomello, is unified by their experiences of social exclusion. Paradoxically, prison—a place of confinement par excellence—also brings them a space of freedom and recognition. Many women find in this space, away from the violence and demands that permeate daily lives, the possibility of studying and working.

Finally, the author merges scholarship and activism by concluding with a political commitment. Accompanying her analysis are several proposals and recommendations related to anti-drug policies, law enforcement, and prison reforms that could positively impact the lives of incarcerated women. Accordingly, Giacomello's text will be of great interest to both academics and policymakers involved with investigating topics on gender, organized crime, and the penitentiary system. This kind of scholarship is especially necessary in Mexico, as well as in other Latin American contexts, in order to better understand the high social costs of both organized crime and the ineffective policies implemented to combat it.

References

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