



## The Many Prisons of Women Predestined to Commit a Crime. Sadomasochism as a Female Survival Strategy

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**Abstract:** This is an approach to Mexican female delinquency from a Frommian sadomasochism and a non-punitive criminal justice perspective, based on autobiographical life stories written by women confined in Mexican prisons. Those women have always lived in a society which assaults them in a thousand ways and treats them with inequity; whatever their crime, they are not judged with a gender perspective. Almost all are

poor, many of them are mothers forced to abandon their children to serve their sentence behind bars in despicable conditions, accused of crimes that many times they commit induced by their partners' behavior against them.

**Keywords:** Erich Fromm, Mexican prisons, female delinquency, gender inequity, destructiveness, necrophilia.

Olivia: »Without him my life would not make any sense. When my daughter was born, my husband became more jealous. One day he pushed me off the dance floor and started hitting my face with his fist. At the third blow I felt my nose and mouth burst. »Why did you cheat on me? You made me look as an asshole. I'm going to kill you.« In spite of all that, I loved him. I felt that without him my life wouldn't make any sense and, when he asked me for forgiveness, I forgave him.«<sup>1</sup>

Today I will present a preliminary approach to Mexican female delinquency from a Frommian sadomasochistic and a non-punitive criminal justice-per-

1 Olivia Arredondo Grimaldo, accused of organized crime and crimes against health; Tepic, Social Rehabilitation Center, Mexico (DEMAC) 2016.



spective. I will do it based on autobiographical life stories written by women secluded in different Mexican prisons, within the context of a necrophilous, violent and tumultuous Mexico.

Every day there are more women confined in Mexican prisons. These women have always lived in a society which assaults them in a thousand ways and treats them with inequity; when they commit crimes, they are not judged with a gender perspective and are usually sentenced to greater penalties than men. All of them are poor. Most are mothers forced to abandon their children to serve their sentence. A good number of these women have been victims of crimes whose perpetrators will never be prosecuted. Meanwhile, they will spend years behind bars in despicable conditions, accused of crimes that they often commit induced by their partners. Those data come from statistics, but:

Who are those women being behind bars today?

How were their childhoods?

What experiences have left a mark in their lives?

What faces of marginalization have they seen?

Is it justified for them to be behind bars?

Inspired by the Frommian hypothesis that a punitive criminal justice based on punishment is doomed to failure because it does not address the root causes of crime—which for Fromm are poverty, unconscious motivations and what happened before the crime (see Anderson & Quinney 2000, p. 124). For 20 years, DEMAC<sup>2</sup>, a non-profit association, has been offering an autobiographical writing program for women held in Mexican prisons.

It is a space seeking to pave the way towards a non-punitive justice by encouraging these women to commit their lives to paper, to reflect on their life experiences and, if the circumstances allow it, to become aware of their deep-rooted motivations. If they agree, their texts are then published and disseminated by DEMAC.

Next, I will present to you some excerpts of writings (edited for time's sake) that I consider representative of the 500 that make up the DEMAC collection of autobiographical texts of women behind bars.

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2 Cf. the website of DEMAC ([demac.org.mx/quienes-somos](http://demac.org.mx/quienes-somos)): »We are women devoted to make known the stories of other women of different ages and life conditions through the dissemination of their autobiographical testimonies. We intend to create an open and pluralistic community fostering an exchange of experiences and knowledge and, at the same time, bringing about social changes.«



## Rosa Elia Escobar Galván: A dog bothering and causing pity

» I am from my childhood as if it were a country,« Antoine de Saint-Exupery in *Flight to Arras* (1942) said. Thus, from that hostile country that was her childhood, and secluded in a prison in the State of Puebla, Rosa Elia Escobar Galván introduces us to her life through a writing that she dedicates to herself and that not in vain she entitles: *My Prison before Being Jailed*.

»My childhood and my adolescence went by among fears, beatings, sexual abuses and emotional blows. Bertha, my older sister, beat me for anything. Many times I wanted to take my life and I took many pills; I had no one to tell what happened to me.

I attended school with broken shoes; I was ashamed to be looked at. I did not even have pencils. When the teacher asked questions, out of fear I did not respond. If my mom had been by my side, this would not have happened.«

This 34-year-old woman with four children was accused of crimes against peace, blackmail and threats; she was sentenced to ten years in prison. From a very young age she had developed a fearful and shameful attitude towards life, leading her to submit to her fate and to everyone and everything.

»During Mother's Day festivals, I looked at my classmates with their mothers and it hurt my soul that my mother had abandoned me. She left us when Bertha was 10 years old and I was only three months old. We were seven siblings.

My grandmother took care of us and the beatings began. She left and we lived alone until my father brought another woman to live with us. She had 3 sons and she spoiled them. For my brothers and for me there were only blows and words that hurt: »Your mother abandoned you like dogs because that's what you are; you cause pity and you bother, she told us.« Those words marked my life.

When I was five years old my father harassed me sexually. When I was seven, a 40-year-old man pulled me to his room and masturbated in front of me. Then my sister's brother-in law raped me. I kept silent. I feared no one would believe me. At that time I met a gang and I started to drink; from then on, I drank.«

Before being jailed, Rosa Elia's prisons were poverty, beatings, sexual abuses and abandonment. Faced with rape and multiple sexual harassments, she kept



silent. She always kept silent. She was frightened. Out of fear she didn't answer her teacher's questions. Out of fear she abided by her stepmother sentence. Fear was not the least of her prisons before she was jailed.

This woman recounts what happened to her without emphasis or shock. Only the abandonment by her mother shamed her, made her stand out in shame before her peers; about that, she dares to say that her soul *hurt*. The rest doesn't move her; as if her poor woman's lot was necessarily meant to include the absence of the father, humiliations and insults.

In a family led by a ten-year-old girl, Rosa Elia and her siblings lived in total abandonment. They spent days without eating. There were no hugs or kisses; no birthdays or Christmas celebrations. These seven children survived by keeping silent and obeying. Most of all, they survived by destroying themselves, like the children of *Lord of the Flies*. Their selves were broken before they knew them.

Rosa Elia has no other alternative. Her only choice is to face life based on that legacy, as well as on grievances, ignorance, alcohol, social indifference, impotence and its corresponding rejections; she must get ahead in life with the definition of herself and her own value that her stepmother tattooed on her soul: like a dog that bothers and causes pity.

Her sadomasochistic attitude towards life is already settled. It was already settled when her father, arbitrarily, marginalized her from school.

»Only my sister Carmen went to secondary school. My father had no money for all of us to attend school, so he chose her because she was the prettiest. When she was in second grade she met some slackers and ran away with them.

We found her inside an old car, smashed, drugged and sexually abused. She decided to go look for my mother. She found her, alone and with four more children, whom she had also abandoned.

Carmen paired up with Antonio, a friend of my mother's. She got pregnant. Antonio hit her and told her that he had taken her out of the dirt. When she found a man who swore to love her, she left Antonio and went with him.

We knew nothing about Carmen until we came across her in a market where she was selling herbs surrounded by children, all of them as filthy as herself. They lived under a tree surrounded by reeds and palm-tree branches. All slept and ate on the floor. The next day we were told that she had had an accident. We went to identify the body. There we found out that her husband had killed her.«



Rosa Elia learned at home that feminine beauty is worth more than any other attribute. Her sister Carmen has chosen by their father to study because she was tall and beautiful. Beauty and poverty didn't turn out to be a good combination for her sister. Neither beauty blended with ignorance in her favor. Rosa Elia shows no signs of having noticed her father's lack of respect when he disqualified her for not being pretty. Maybe she even considered his decision fair; after all, her sister Carmen was prettier than she was.

That same masochistic attitude is shown by her sister Carmen. When facing problems, she turned to the mother, despite her abandonment. In this second chance she chooses to give her mother, she finds humiliation and death. We don't know the circumstances of her murder. Was it due to her husband's jealousy, because she looked at another man? Or maybe because another man looked at her because she was beautiful?

Rosa Elia wanted to study nursing, maybe to learn how to cure her own ills. However, at age 17, an event—which in another culture would be banal—forever curtailed her ambitions: she had sex with her boyfriend and then had to run away because her father found out and wanted to force her to marry him.

When she returned, her chances of studying had vanished and, as an alternative, she began to have boyfriends; one after another. They all cheated, beat and abandoned her. At 19, she got pregnant by Alejandro and the mother of this young man takes away her baby. Alejandro sided with his mother and hit Rosa Elia savagely. She planned to leave him, as she once had planned to study nursing.

This time it was not her father who thwarted her decision but three magic words: »I love you.« When Alejandro said to her »I love you,« instead of abandoning him, she married him and had four more daughters. Then Alejandro got into shady business without her knowledge. Things went wrong and both of them ended up in jail. Rosa Elia was accused of complicity. She had the opportunity to go free through the efforts of a feminist lawyer. Alejandro threatened to divorce her if she left prison without him and she chose to stay with him, ignoring her children.

»It's incredible, she says in her autobiography, we always thought that my mother had been very bad with us when she abandoned us... and unintentionally, we all did the same thing.«

Sadomasochism is hard to eradicate.



## Predestined to commit a crime

Recent studies indicate that early sexual assaults make the women who are victims twice as likely to commit a crime and be arrested than those who have not been assaulted. This implies that women who are in prison today who report that they were sexually abused in childhood were predestined to commit crimes and to be behind bars.

Perhaps that first aggression set (at least to some extent) the tone of their future relationships, because from then on they were all of a sadomasochistic type, which affected all areas of their lives and not just love relationships. These women were never able to fight for their rights or to act against anything crushing them. For them, even the possibility of being free matters less than the threat of the sadistic man.

Although very few claim to have been raped, as a matter of fact rape is a frequent assault amongst them. Indeed, they only define rape as the imposed sexual relationship that led them to lose their virginity; they don't consider other forced relationships to be rape. It is as if they still feel an obligation to consent to the sexual demands of their partners regardless of whether they want to or not, even when there are serious impediments. This happened to a woman who was raped by her husband in front of her son when she had just given birth.

For these women, sexual relations are synonymous with pregnancies. It is as if there were no contraceptives. They hope for their men to react with joy when they announce that they will be fathers, but what they actually get is more blows, more aggression; or even death, as in the case of Rosa Elia's sister.

Pregnancies also come with the accusations of infidelity. That's what happened to Olivia, the woman I mentioned in the epigraph, remember? When her daughter was born, her husband became more jealous. He told her that without him, she is nobody; he hit her face with his fist until he smashed her nose and mouth, accusing her of cheating him and of making a fool of him in front of his friends. Any learning on the subjects of love or sexuality doesn't exist. The women eternally return to naivety or to fantasy, and they have a lack of awareness corresponding to that of a 6-year-old. The sequence of blows, rapes and grievances continues indefinitely in all areas and contexts of their lives.

Hundreds of women incarcerated in Mexican prisons have participated in the DEMAC program. They had never had such a reflection space, and they experience real illuminations during the process of writing their autobiographies. The testimonies they produce bring us closer to what their lives were before committing their crimes and also to the living conditions and cultural patterns of the lowest socio-economic strata of the population. Their texts are not easy



to read; these women must handwrite them and they have never before tried such an undertaking.

Nonetheless, their texts are clear enough to show us what their lives have been; what has moved them and, most of all, what they have lacked. The glimpses of academic interest that some may have had, vanished under the rule of patriarchal laws; the lack of cultural references and of leisure interests other than the consumption of alcohol is obvious in these texts, and as a result most of these women have not been able to gratify or sublimate their instinctive impulses because they lacked a way to channel them. It may be because of economic reasons but also because they simply ignore the free access they can have to certain cultural activities that their society offers them (cf. Anderson & Quinney 200, p. 137).

### **Teresa Ramos Moxo: To be born again as a baby**

Although most of the women confined in Mexican prisons are poor, there are some who, due to their extreme economic scarcity, suffer equally extreme social disadvantages. One of these women is Teresa Ramos Moxo (2012, pp. 9–15); she recounted her story verbally to the workshop coordinator who transcribed it.

Teresa is an indigenous woman who does not know how to read or write; she never attended school. She began to work collecting ears of corn when she was ten years old; she got married at sixteen. She always lived in the countryside and she doesn't speak Spanish.

»They brought me here because of some piece of land. They told me that I sold to a man a piece of land that wasn't mine because I had already sold it, and he gave me fifty thousand pesos. I don't deny it. I even told the judge. Yes, I sold it to him. [...] I didn't sell it to him out of choice and besides nobody lived there. They assaulted and beat my son ugly and he spent many days in the hospital. The medicines cost me five thousand pesos a day.«

One day, when leaving her house, some judicial agents grabbed her by the neck and snatched the money she had earned selling *gorditas*. With that money they bought cigarettes and beers that they consumed teasingly in front of Teresa; for her, that money meant a week's food. When she arrived at the prison, she didn't understand what they were telling her; even so, she put her fingerprint in the paper they put in front of her [...] thus accepting her guilt. She was sentenced to seven years and fifteen days in prison.



Teresa did not understand yet what happened, what she did wrong, or why she i=was in jail. She lived far away from the city and she ignored its laws. She did not consider it wrong to sell her land twice in order to save her son's life.

»I used to cry a lot. But not anymore. I forgot the nightmare. Since I arrived here I go to church more often; I attend the DEMAC workshop and I do more things. I feel calm. [...] Out there I lived alone and I thought: »How am I going to maintain myself?«

I had seven children; two are dead and I still have five. None of those five come to visit me. Here I weave and I sew to kill time. [...] I wanted to study more, but it's difficult; I suffer from diabetes and my sight is already failing me a lot.

In this place I feel that I've changed. I'm going to be born again like a baby. I'm a new woman. I'm going to be a woman again.«

For Teresa, jail was a blessing. In jail, for the first time she stopped worrying about what she would eat the next day. For the first time she was listened to, and for the first time she has the opportunity to learn something and be someone. She will be born again. Again, she will be a woman. When did she stop being a woman? Has she ever been a woman? What does it mean for her to be a woman?

No one visits her. It's not surprising, she's a woman. Men get a lot of visits and, at each visit, their women bring them homemade food. To their congenital social inferiority, women who are behind bars must add the stigma of being delinquents, something that makes them a disgrace for their families.

When Teresa's case became known after the publication of her writing, a university provided her with legal assistance and she was released before serving her complete sentence. Would she still be alive had she stayed in prison, the place where she would be born again?

Like Teresa, many other women confined in Mexican prisons say that being in prison opened their eyes to the fact that there were alternatives to the life they had lived. It is in seclusion where, due to the different cultural and self-help programs like AA, the DEMAC programs, and others of a similar type organized by the civil society, for the first time they hear words that have to do with a dignified life, with self-respect or with some kind of spirituality; here they come into contact with art. When one of these women saw her text printed in one of DEMAC's books, she burst into tears, saying that she had just realized that she was a human being.

These women don't know the meaning of respect as it applies to women. Their models are dictatorial grandmothers or battered and/or batterer mothers





who abandoned them to follow a man who ended up abandoning them. Through an analysis of the words they use when recounting their stories, we found that respect is not among the 100 most mentioned words, nor violence or rights. The most mentioned words are house, in the top place, followed by mom, life, dad, family and God.

To say that Rosa, Teresa, Olivia and Carmen are objectified, that is, treated as objects, doesn't do justice to their sufferings; it minimizes their dramatic condition. Objects lack feelings and what men—due to their sadism—look for is that they are human beings who feel, who suffer; human beings who feel pain when they beat them; who endure their psychological affronts in total submission; who humble themselves before them; who accept their condition as socially inferior beings; who behave as if they do not have a soul. It is as if the evolution and revolution of women had not occurred; as if these women could not even foresee it.

The only human contact that they have had since childhood are those early sexual aggressions and those occurring later, which follow the same pattern: sadomasochism everywhere in every relation, and not just with their mates. And yet, in the absence of other satisfiers, given the impossibility of sublimating their impulses, it is precisely these relationships that keep them alive.

Perhaps it is not an exaggeration to say that Frommian sadomasochism has one of its best expressions in the world of Mexican female delinquency.

### The punitive criminal justice and the necrophilous and cruel Mexico

For Fromm, the punitive criminal justice system is not destined to correct the offender but to influence the social nature of the huge non-criminal population;

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*¡Hola! mi nombre es Teresa una mujer como cualquier mujer que existimos en el mundo con defectos y virtudes con sueños e ilusiones por circunstancias del destino algunas mujeres tenemos que vivir historias terribles y dolorosas que nos marcan y nos cambian por completo la vida, los sueños y las ilusiones, Cada historia es diferente pero a la vez entrelazadas como eslabones que forman una cadena, la cadena del dolor y del sufrimiento y solo nosotras mismas debemos de tener el valor y la fuerza necesaria para romper las ataduras ¡como buena pregunta en primer lugar con amor, queriendo me yo en segunda con fe amando a dios, tres dando cariño a los que me rodean amarlos y respetarlos, cuatro valorarlos y valorar el don de formar parte de esta tierra, este suelo al que sé me caigo 7 veces me devo levantar ocho.*



that is, it is not destined to protect the non-criminal population against the criminals, but to boost the liberation of the sadistic instincts of that population against those criminals (what suits the rulers so that those impulses are not directed towards them). And that has been very effective (see Foucault 2009).

A few days ago, Jaime Rodríguez, pre-candidate for the presidency of my country (Mexico), proposed to whip the criminals and to cut the hands of the corrupt people. Some days later, three individuals assaulted and amputated a hand of Ramón Figueroa Cantoral, former dean of the University of Tabasco. They tried to steal his belongings and, as he didn't have money, they attacked him with a *machete* (Pérez Marín 2018).

A short while after popular voices demanded the implementation of the death penalty. »Kill Jesus,« the multitude asked Pontius Pilate two thousand years ago. »Cut off the hands of criminals and kill them,« today Mexicans demand their rulers. Also, put more women behind bars even if they cannot read and don't understand what they sign.

Put more women behind bars even if they have weak conceptions of themselves, having always lived in submission to their men and have no other choice but to obey even when they induce them to commit a crime. How could Rosa Elia disobey Alejandro if she is nothing but a dog that gives pity and bothers? How could Teresa face the district attorney's agents if she doesn't know the language they speak and she is not »born« yet?

Despite the punishments and the threats, social violence in Mexico has worsened, reaching levels of unprecedented sadism: heads without torsos and dismembered bodies found in trunks of abandoned cars are commonplace. Today, human life counts very little here. What counts is the money to live with luxuries. And if expectations get frustrated, then everything goes. One can amputate a hand; one can torture; one can rob society; one can state that your goal in life is to be a mobster.

Marlem Belem Fragoso, nicknamed Loba (»She-wolf«), was tortured by the police when she was detained:



»They put me on the van and started kicking me. [...] Once in the heathland, they undressed me and hung me from my armpits. [...] They gave me electric shocks with a buzzer. [...] My mind was blank, I wanted them to kill me once and for all. [...] They covered my head with an ice bag many times and, in one of those occasions, I passed out. In the distance I heard one of them saying: We overdid it.« (Fragoso Cifuentes 2017, p. 207)



The wife of a former governor of the State of Veracruz filled entire pages of a notebook with the phrase »I deserve abundance.« There she also wrote down the number of bank accounts where she deposited the resources she diverted from the state's social programs.<sup>3</sup>

Through musical references and popular sayings, Karene Dafne Vázquez, a young Mexican high school student just 17 years old, has already defined her life goals (Vázquez Velázquez 2011):

»Fashionable and in good cars, [...] well dressed in a two-piece suit. Prada glasses and bright rosaries everywhere. [...] The pot you stole from me you're going to pay for dearly because you left me alive. Better you should have killed me; you won't finish it when I lock you up in the trunk. If everyone leads a mafia life, why not me?«

Sadomasochism and necrophilia have made our society their home.

### Notes as a manner of conclusion

The punitive criminal justice system at work in my country has been unable to reverse crime rates and reduce the sadist and necrophilous tendencies of our society. Women are getting the worst part of the situation as they are being unjustly committed to jail by not being judged with a gender perspective.

If we really want to reverse this situation:

- ▶ We must think differently about those who commit criminal acts. We need to look into their lives, into what happened to them before they committed their crimes and go to the root causes of their motivations.
- ▶ We must also promote socioeconomic mobility and rescue the biophilic values that have fallen into disuse.

That is, we need to look back at Fromm's proposals concerning a non-punitive criminal justice system in the light of the new world reality and, especially, of the dramatic current situation of women and their love relationships.

A first approach to the autobiographical texts written by women in the Mexican jails under these parameters has shown us that sadomasochism acts may very well be a survival resource for women who are currently confined in Mexican prisons.

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3 »Sí merezco abundancia dice la esposa de Duarte,« in: [www.debate.com.mx](http://www.debate.com.mx) (February 21, 2017).



Feminine delinquency can be understood, at least in a preliminary way, through:

- ▶ the women's sadomasochistic approach to life acquired in their early years
- ▶ their weak selves
- ▶ their submission to men
- ▶ the impossibility of their sublimizing their drives due to their lack of cultural and academic means
- ▶ the impossibility of their providing economic means for themselves.

Paradoxically, Mexican jails can act as promoters of women's empowerment and awareness through programs like DEMAC *Autobiographic Writing Space, cultural corners, reading sessions, spiritual talks and other programs of the same kind, organized within Mexican jails by the civil society.*

With these programs these women have the possibility to be born again like Teresa, realize that they have been acting like their mothers, as Rosa Elia suddenly did, or suddenly realize that you are human beings, as happened to Olivia when she saw her text published in a DEMAC book.

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