State racism, uprooting and memory loss:
Indigenous women in Ecuador's prisons

Official statistics obscure the fact that the number of criminalized individuals and communities belonging to indigenous peoples far exceeds the number of prisoners who actually self-identify as Indigenous, because these figures exclude family members devoted to supporting them as well as the communities they were part of and to which they will eventually return once released. Similarly, statistics hide the fact that the majority of the prison population is of indigenous and African origin and had been affected by racism, deprivation, massive waves of displacement to cities and oblivion.

By Andrea Aguirre Salas and Typhaine Léon - 1 April 2021

We write in turmoil. Shocked, perplexed and pained by the 23 February massacres in four prisons in Ecuador. Marked by the multiple impacts these have had on the most diverse sectors of a society challenged for decades by penal populism. Active in the dispute to interpret the scenes of self-inflicted cruelty to which we were all exposed. Hand in hand with individuals, collectives and organizations, and establishing alliances at the national and regional levels, we place ourselves firmly on the side of a world without prisons. We write in the heat of a society which, unlike others in our region, has not yet normalized extreme violence and the destruction of henceforward disposable bodies, and which is debating the issue on at least three levels: hegemonic, which defines the prison population as mafia-like; civic, which expresses incomprehension, fear and cruelty; and those of us who question incarceration as a way of implementing justice at all. We write in the context of war as an everlasting expression of patriarchal politics, a politics that condemns women to invisibility: our susceptible bodies, our sons and daughters, our reproductive labour exploited by the mafia and the criminal state. We write to recognize each other and to recover together.
Where are Indigenous women in this violent scenario?

If we are to achieve some kind of understanding of the presence and situation of Indigenous women in prisons and raise awareness of the impacts of the penal state on them and their communities of belonging, we must work to reconstruct the racism of the state, the history of plundered territories, of forced migrations and an ancestry lost in the adversity of these processes. What we propose here is a discussion on the importance of undertaking research in this regard with the aim of deepening our critique of the punitive state as a racist institution aimed at managing poverty. Such efforts are also important in order to build bridges with comrades, intellectuals and organizations which, in their lucid critique of the modern/colonial capitalist state, have left the issue of prisons unchallenged. Such is the case of the Ecuadorian Indigenous movement.

We write from a feminist perspective: attentive to the presence and situation of women as singular subjects but also to the feminized work of weaving the bonds that tie family and community together. We are thus able to reflect on why there are so few self-identified Indigenous women in prison and argue that the numbers of our ancestral peoples and nationalities in prison actually far exceeds the number of prisoners that self-identify as Indigenous. We further question the official statistics that show that Indigenous prisoners are in a clear minority because, to include in this category only those women and men who self-identify as such is to ignore the vast majority of prisoners that are actually of Indigenous and African descent but who have been ravaged by processes of uprooting and memory loss. We argue the need for a more critical understanding of the term “mestizo”, a group that is over-represented in prison population statistics due to processes of multiple dispossession and one of the reasons why women prisoners with Indigenous roots are so often invisible.

Self-identified Indigenous women in Ecuadorian prisons

According to the 2008 Prison Census and Survey conducted by the Ecuadorian Ministry of Justice, Human Rights and Religious Affairs, which is the most complete and reliable information available, out of a male prison population of 12,110 persons, 593 men self-identified as Indigenous, or 4.9%. And, according to the same source, out of a total female prison population of 1,422 people, only 59 self-identified as Indigenous, or 4.1%, giving the impression they are in a clear minority. Indeed,
even in conditions of absolute deprivation, women have tended to seek alternatives to committing crimes due to the *over-criminalization of their transgressions*, especially those who are challenged on a daily basis by the moral responsibility of their community membership.

Approaching these people as individual offenders therefore prevents us from measuring the true impact of incarceration on the families and communities to which Indigenous prisoners belong. In this sense, it is essential to recognize that the criminalized population far exceeds those actually in prison, as it includes the families and communities to which prisoners belong: family members devoted to supporting their loved ones while they are in prison as well as the communities to which these people return upon their release from prison. They may be recognized as the relatives of male prisoners and exposed to direct state violence, as manifested in practices such as humiliating searches on entering detention centres as visitors or they may be considered *de facto* jointly responsible by providing economic support to their imprisoned relatives. However, they are also - as women – themselves exposed to indirect and invisible forms of state violence, such as the delegated work of caring for and containing men under stress from poor and violent living conditions during family or intimate visits, or the delegated work of organizing someone to replace the person in what used to be their family and community responsibilities. These, among other direct and indirect forms of state violence, have to be considered when measuring the extensive impacts of the prison system.

The same is true for the families and communities of men released from prison, and to whom the prison system returns them, their masculinity riddled with experiences of homosocial isolation, overcrowding, material deprivation and physical violence. These, and other experiences of imprisonment, have to be identified and described if we are to measure the impact of the penal state: intensive on the subjects locked up and released with the burden of these experiences, and extensive on the people and communities surrounding them.

**Indigenous masculinity and prison**

According to a July 2020 report by the National Service for the Comprehensive Care of Adults Deprived of Liberty and Adolescent Offenders in Ecuador (SNAI), the total prison population is now 37,519 people. And according to another report from the same institution, published with data from
August 2020, 606 men self-identified as Indigenous out of the total male prison population. If we consider the crimes for which these men were prosecuted, those of a sexual nature and femicide are notable (Table 1 and Graph 1).

Table 1: Male prisoners in Ecuador who self-identify as Indigenous, by offence group, as of August 2020

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OFFENCE GROUP</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Harmful acts of a sexual nature and femicide.</td>
<td>338</td>
<td>55.78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acts that cause or are intended to cause death.</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>12.05%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acts with and without violence against property.</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>10.73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acts related to controlled drugs or other psychoactive substances.</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>8.42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other criminal acts not elsewhere classified.</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>5.94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acts against public order, authority, security and state regulations.</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>4.62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acts involving fraud, deceit or corruption.</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1.49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acts that cause or are intended to cause harm to persons.</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.99%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>606</td>
<td>100.00%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Source: SNAP, 2020. Produced by: Andrea Aguirre Salas, on the basis of the National Institute of Statistics and Censuses of Ecuador’s (INEC) national classification of crimes for statistical purposes. Cases prosecuted as femicide have been extracted from those classified as acts causing or with intent to cause death and grouped together with harmful acts of a sexual nature, which includes all forms of violence against women and acts of a sexual nature such as rape, and which may also have been perpetrated against young girls or boys.
These data force us to focus our research on at least two additional areas: that of the emasculation of Indigenous men, who thus express their anguish in acts of violence against women, and that of the return of those responsible for sexual violence against women, boys or girls to their communities of belonging upon release from prison, together with their additional prison baggage. Indeed, Rita Segato explained how Western concepts of masculinity manifest in socialized violence ("violentogénico") among men from Indigenous backgrounds, men who have historically come from...
a tradition in which the gender hierarchy was organized around a notion of complementarity. Trapped in processes of colonization and challenged by high-intensity modern/Western patriarchy, they perceive themselves as being inferior to white men but superior to Indigenous women, whose violated bodies mirror the unquestionable white male supremacy they seek to emulate. In this sense, the data we offer here is just another element of information on the sustained increase in violence against Indigenous women both in their family and community environments in the context of advanced capitalism.

Faced with violence against Indigenous women and children, we must re-emphasize the importance of expanding our research into the extensive impacts of the penal state, in this case in relation to men who return to their families and Indigenous communities of belonging bearing the violent baggage of prison, to women who bear the burden of reproductive work involving, among other things, family and community cohesion, support and care, often to the detriment of their own well-being.

And yet the data we have been analysing conceal the colour of the prison population in Latin America: the fact is the vast majority of inmates are of Indigenous and African origin, members of peoples marked by processes of racism, dispossession, uprooting and memory loss throughout their history. In what follows, we refer to two lines of research: historical and ancestral, both of which are necessary to trace the presence of Indigenous women in the country’s prisons today.

**Indigenous women in Ecuador’s prisons**

According to the 2008 Prison Census and Survey, of a total female prison population of 1,422 women, 54.6% self-identified as “mestizo” and 17.9% as “white”. According to the same source, 55.5% of the 12,110 male prisoners self-identified as “mestizo” and 19.1% as “white”. One fact is nevertheless clear to those of us who live in this country: the thousands of racialized faces crammed into Ecuador’s prisons bear the marks of Indigenous Peoples subjugated by centuries of colonization, dispossession and exploitation. They are the faces of daughters and sons expelled as outsiders to the anomie of urban marginality or rural territories disputed by extractivist capitalism and mafia businesses, criminalized, imprisoned in prison cities far from their social fabric and abandoned to the control of extortive mafias.
Historical perspective teaches us that, to be able to recognize women with Indigenous roots in Ecuador’s prisons, we need to study the economic history of this dependent country. An initial general reconstruction clearly demonstrates this need: the monopolization of productive lands in the central-northern highlands of the country, through a process of agrarian reform initiated in 1964 that provided Indigenous families with smallholdings insufficient for their reproduction, detached as they were from ties of personal dependence on the hacienda owners, together with the modernization of agrarian production consolidated at the beginning of the 1970s, resulted in rural unemployment and the mass migration of Indigenous people to Quito. The banana boom that began in the late 1940s and its crisis in the 1960s had a similar effect along the country’s coast, such that the marginalized urban population of the country’s main port, Guayaquil, also grew in an historically unprecedented manner. In this context, the developmentalist industrialization project aimed at import substitution materialized in a modest industrial apparatus, incapable of employing the labour force expelled from the countryside, even if this was given a boost from the mid-20th century on, particularly by the oil boom of 1972. Since 1982, with the foreign debt crisis and the fall in oil prices, and more intensively since 1994, Ecuador’s economic history has been characterized by neoliberal structural adjustment policies that have exacerbated processes of dispossession to the extent that they have now reached Indigenous Peoples and nationalities settled in territories that were once far removed from the national state and the (inter)national business sector.

Over the course of this period, the urban population grew: from 28.5% of the total national population in 1950 to 51% in 1990 and 62.8% in 2010. In cities like Quito, Indigenous migrants soon settled in neighbourhoods organized primarily by region of origin, and in the lively networks of the popular street economy, made up of the most diverse trades and businesses still known as “informal” today but many of which have now been classified as illegal. We are talking about a popular urban economy which, while lowering the cost of living in the city, offered roots and shared protection from the punitive action of the state, an economy in which women played a leading role in stabilizing businesses, organizing work in cooperation with children and young people, regulating horizontal conflicts and negotiating with the most senior state officials.

The 1980s and increasingly the 1990s were decades in which the popular street economy was colonized through the combined dynamics of illegal capital accumulation and the war against drug
trafficking. Some women workers, completely impoverished by neoliberalism, sought to insert themselves into spaces within the multimillion-dollar drug trafficking business in order to resist impoverishment and remain independent from the mafia businessmen, thus opting for illegal micro-trafficking of drugs. At the same time, the war on drugs became more intensely deployed against those who were precariously defending their right to live in the city from the mafia businessmen. The 1990s was thus a decade in which women, mothers, heads of households were massively imprisoned, apprehended in the setting of the popular street economy, subjugated by the continuum of civic, business, state and parastatal violence aimed at dismantling the social fabric of community consolidation.

This general context demonstrates the need for more research aimed at reconstructing the history of Indigenous Peoples, a history from which many of the women currently in prison were wrenched, so that we can weave together the threads of a history of racism, dispossession, forced migration and memory loss in the vicissitudes of urban life, but also a history of the struggle for the right to life and memory. At the same time, we therefore need to work on a genealogical reconstruction of the paths of each one of them and their ancestors, in order to understand Indigenous women’s strategic decisions and movements, thrown as they are into the world as outsiders.

Today, in 2021, the number of women in prison, torn from the fabric of their community and family, is at its highest point in the country’s history, as is the number of racialized male prisoners. The advance of multiple dispossession over the fabric of life and the “naturalized perception of the suffering and death of non-whites” can also be seen in the bodies of those in prison who are Indigenous or have Indigenous roots. Rescuing ourselves collectively from devastation and oblivion, reconstructing the memory of the peoples and nationalities from which we were wrenched, from which the women who are imprisoned today were torn, and to which we need to belong once more is, now, a matter of life or death.
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