



WHAT IT IS LIKE TO BE A FEMALE PRISONER IN BRAZIL?

When we take a look at the mass media, life in prison is being pictured like a good material for a movie. Not without a reason there have been made series about prison's routine - many of them are kept in a comedy tone, such as *Orange is the new black* or Spanish *Vis a vis*. But incarceration of women, and more importantly, why it is a completely different experience than being a male prisoner, is a far more complex topic.

Brazil has the third largest prison population in the world, after USA and China. With over 750 thousand prisoners, it is not a surprise that the system is struggling with overcrowded cells, unsanitary conditions and violence amongst the detainees. The scale of incarceration might be caused by the lack of alternative solutions and constant tightening up criminal liability. Brazil treats very seriously drug crimes, which are one of the most common reasons of being sentenced, next to the robbery. What is important, Brazil has relatively high percentage of incarcerated women, which was 6.9% in 2018. Between 2000 and 2014 the number of female prisoners has increased by 567%!

The situation of women in prison, specific at so many levels, is the subject of Drauzio Varella's book called *Prisioneiras*. The author, who voluntarily provides medical care for inmates in Brazil, describes daily struggles of women serving their time in Sao Paulo. As I said before, the situation of Brazilian penitentiary system leaves much to be desired. Prison in Sao Paulo is no different. There was a time when inmates were denied access to running hot water for two years (between 2015-2017). But poor

conditions of life are not the most worrying thing about female incarceration - in fact, the majority of prisons struggle with underfunding. It is the cultural background and gender bias that are essential to be aware of.

One of the first things that Varella said when he set foot in Sao Paulo prison was that he must forget everything that male prison experience has taught him. During his medical service he took the opportunity to speak with inmates about their lives, giving them safe space and nonjudgmental approach. Varella quickly found out about sad reality that women had to face. In Brazil, when a man is sentenced, whole family must cooperate. It means frequent visitations, providing food and money. Usually, the role goes to the woman. She is expected to stay loyal and devoted; any kind of betrayal is not tolerated and might lead to social ostracism or even death penalty (in unwritten code of community). Therefore, incarcerated partners often ask for favors behind the bars. Varella shows bright examples of women, whose husbands asked them to smuggle drugs to the prison under the threat of being killed by other inmates. The emotional blackmail and cultural expectations put women in a no-win situation. And if she gets caught, she gets a sentence. The husband stays out of trouble.

It would not be so shocking if the situation was the same the other way round. But it is not. Men are allowed to form new relationships and abandon former partners. So, when a woman goes to prison, everybody forgets about her. It probably has its core in cultural determinants in Brazil. Incarcerated woman brings shame to the family, because it means she does not meet the expectations of a housewife. Community would also see her as promiscuous since romantic relationships in female prison are common

regardless of the sexual identity. And lastly, it would mean she abandons her children, which is another extremely important issue. In Brazil, average age of having a child is low and teenage pregnancies are very common. Over 76% of girls drop out of school before they turn 17 years old because of multiple child births. Poverty, violence and dependence on a man make it hard to provide without bending the law.

Being a core of the family traumatize incarcerated women, who can only watch passively as their family is being torn apart. And after their release there is often nobody left to turn to, not to mention their job perspectives or financial situation. That is why most of them go back to old behavior, and eventually end up in prison again. This is a vicious circle, which proves that the incarceration system in Brazil does not rehabilitate. Moreover, many women actually have better life conditions in lockdown than on the outside. The prison provides basic medical care, four meals per day and, for many the most importantly, detox from crack which is a nightmare of Brazilian streets and which does not get into the prison.

Loneliness and abandonment by the family make incarcerated women find solidarity the most important value that keeps them alive. As Varella says, when you are incarcerated freedom is not the first thing in your mind - it is survival. Therefore, female prisoners find stability in each other, they form hierarchy and obey unwritten rules. Obviously, there are conflicts, but what Varella observes is - women in Sao Paulo prison are able to resolve stressful situations and understand each other emotions. All in all, their position gives them enough pain and in many cases sense of injustice.

It is important to have in mind that not all female criminals deserve their fate - often it is not their choice which way to choose, considering their life situation. That is why we should acknowledge our privilege and remain aware - of a silent existence of women who are forgotten.