

Women Serving Time for Homicide in Mexico City

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The following article provides a brief summary of the results of a comparative study between men and women serving time for homicide in Mexico City, with a particular focus on women inmates.²

The study of women prisoners was conducted in 1994 at the women's prison Centro Femenil de Readaptación Social, located in Tepepan, south off Mexico City. Before providing a detailed description of this milieu, we would like to offer some data to help place the problem in its proper context.

In 1994, Mexico was a country with almost 90 million inhabitants and a prison population of 91,788. Men comprised 96.4 percent of the total, with women accounting for the remaining 3.6 percent. In Mexico City, which boasts a population of more than 10 million inhabitants, the inmate population totaled 7,855 of which 95.3 percent were men and 4.7 percent women.³

The very limited proportion of women involved in crimes is by no means a particularly Mexican phenomenon as they rarely account for more than 15 percent of a country's prison population. This fact has been cited by specialists as evidence that informal means of control are much more effective and severe for women than they are for men (Smart, 1976; Zaffaroni, 1993; Larrauri, 1994).

Mexico has a murder rate as high as 19.7 per 100,000 inhabitants, which is far higher than that of most countries. However, Mexico's rate has remained relatively constant since 1970 while the U.S. rate, for example, has climbed from 4.5 to 9.5 per 100,000 inhabitants since 1960. In absolute terms, the United States registered 23,440 homicides in 1990 while the per annum average in Mexico in recent years is approximately 16,000 with half of the deaths involving premeditated murders and the other half consisting of involuntary manslaughter cases.⁴

On average, almost a fifth of inmates in Mexican prisons are serving time for homicide. The same proportion applies to Mexico City prisoners, where 931 men and 50 women were serving murder sentences with similar numbers of men and women being held while awaiting trial for the same crime.

Our sample was comprised of the 50 women prisoners in Mexico City convicted of homicide. We enjoyed full access to files regarding the prisoners and conducted in-depth interviews with all of the women in an effort to reconstruct their life stories.⁵ Delving into each woman's past offered a better

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³ In all cases, the figures contained in this study are derived from official sources such as the prison statistics provided by the Interior Ministry or the Federal District's General Direction of Prisons.

⁴ Wolfgang and Ferracuti, 1971:291-292, and "Murder. Special Report," *Newsweek*, 15-VIII-1994:8-16.

⁵ It is noteworthy that none of the women shirked from participating in the interviews even though they were told that their participation in the study was entirely voluntary and the effort to reconstruct their past proved very painful for most of the women. Many indicated that a great deal of time had passed since they had last had an opportunity to discuss or think about

understanding of each case history and made it possible to perceive some of the features shared by many of the women, an issue we will take up later in this article.

The study also included a review of the records of 400 men convicted of homicide, which was 43 percent of those serving time in Mexico City prisons for such a crime. We undertook this review in an effort to record the types of homicide most frequently committed by men and contrast those with trends among the women prisoners. We also hoped to determine whether differences existed in the way the system of justice dealt with men and women. In both cases we uncovered relevant information that had not been dealt with in previous studies (Ruíz Harrell, 1973; Flanet, 1985; Hernández Bringas, 1989; Rodríguez Manzanera, 1990; Islas, 1991; Osorio y Nieto 1992).

After reviewing the files, we decided to classify the homicides committed by our sample group of men in the following categories: 49 percent were committed in brawls, 28 percent were related to robbery, 8 percent involved the killing of a relative, and 11 percent were associated with a variety of circumstances not covered in the aforementioned categories.

The homicides committed by women, however, provided a sharp contrast to this breakdown, a difference that serves as the central focus of the present article. We discovered that in 76 percent of the women's cases, the homicide was directed against a relative and a mere 24 percent were committed against someone outside of the family circle. Another surprising discovery was that while men convicted of homicide bore an average sentence of 18.6 years, women were sentenced to an average of 23.3 years. This time differential is largely the same when the study is restricted to murders of relatives, with the average male sentence dropping slightly to 18 years and the similar figure for women climbing to 24 years. This implies that in homicide cases women draw a sentence that is 25 percent longer than that of their male counterparts, another fact that has been overlooked in other studies (Instituto de Investigaciones Jurídicas, 1983; Villanueva, 1989; Lima Malvido, 1991; Cuevas, 1992).

There is no doubt that these differences in the types of homicides committed and in the resulting sentences reflect the patterns of behavior, socialization, beliefs and values that differentiate men and women; a differentiation that was articulated in the life histories we collected. The gender bias we clearly and consistently observed on this level included the fact that society discriminates in its perception of acts of aggression depending on the gender of the person committing the act, reflecting the prevailing idea that such behavior is virtually an inevitable facet of male "nature," while aggression is seen as something that subverts a woman's "essence." In the same fashion, someone who is regarded a bad father is neither viewed as severely, nor is he allotted the same punishment as that meted out to someone deemed to be a bad mother.

These differences are manifest in other ways, such as the fact that most homicides committed by men occurred out doors while those of women are largely confined to the home, reflecting women's general confinement to the domestic realm while men enjoy greater access to the outside world.

After reviewing numerous case histories, it is equally clear that most of the murder's committed by men occurred during brawls with other young men, in which the specific motive is of little importance. What is in dispute is the desire to manifest the man's strength and superiority, and the need to dispel any related doubts. By contrast, in the case of women the homicide appears as the result of a series of violent episodes in which the woman is frequently the victim and at other times the perpetrator. And in the case of women, the motives appear more complex and difficult to decipher, since the crime only appears to subvert their "being" or "essence" as women.

what had happened to them, adding that during their respective trials no interest was shown in the life stories nor were they offered an opportunity to speak on their behalf or even to be heard.

We will now turn from these gender comparisons and delve directly into the 50 homicide cases registered by women.

Let us begin by taking up the 38 cases involving the deaths of family members, which, as we already pointed out, represent 76 percent of the total. This group of homicides can be classified as follows:

- Twenty-six cases involving the deaths of children, which account for 52 percent of the total. In 65 percent of these cases the woman killed her own offspring. The remaining 35 percent involved the death of the children of a spouse, a child who had been adopted or “given” to the woman, or a relative’s child (grandchildren, nephews, nieces, brothers or sisters) entrusted to the care of the woman in question.
- Eleven cases of homicide of a woman’s spouse, which represent 22 percent of the total.
- A single case of matricide, which accounted for 2 percent of the sample.

With regard to the first category, a total of 32 children were killed since 4 of the women serving time for homicide had killed all of their children. The gender breakdown of child victims was 44-percent boys and 56 percent girls. Seventy-five percent were five years of age or younger, 12.5 percent between six and 10 and the remaining 12.5 percent between 11 and 16.

Unfortunately, the murder of children is not an uncommon phenomena in Mexico. A recent study, which drew on the Health Ministry’s database, reported that 2,939 children below the age of four were killed during the decade of the eighties, an average of one youngster every two days (Híjar-Medina et al., 1994:529-532).

Ruíz Harrell revealed that 2,372 cases of intentional injuries against children under the age of 10 were reported in Mexico City in 1994 alone, while only 408 incidents led to criminal proceedings (*Reforma*, Nov. 21, 1994).

The preponderance of children among the list of the women’s victims is as significant as the contrast it poses in relation to the victims of murders committed by men. Within our sample, spouses were the targets of 49 percent of the cases of homicides committed by men against relatives while 21 percent of victims were their children or those of their spouse; another 21 percent were comprised of parents or grandparents; 6 percent consist of brothers or sisters; and 3 percent of other relatives.

The fact that most of the women’s victims were children paradoxically underscores the significance our culture places on the mother-child relationship. This relationship is loaded with all types of feelings and expectations, and its dissolution is so unimaginable that in many cases women attempt suicide after killing their children, as if the destruction of their offspring implied an end to their *raison d’être* (Rakovsky, 1974; Badinter, 1981; de Beauvoir, 1981; Basaglia, 1983; Lagarde, 1993).

We were able to distinguish between two categories of the women who took the lives of their children. The first group involved children who died after being subjected to extended abuse, negligence, and violence and in which the mother had previously suffered similar mistreatment, first at the hands of her parents and later from her spouse. We believe that 15 of the 26 child homicide cases in our sample group fit into this category.

The second group consists of five cases in which homicide resulted from a sudden and uncharacteristic impulse, with the woman experiencing a temporary loss of consciousness. In fact, the women reported that they did not recall the deed and the crime followed an extended buildup of nervous tension, often associated with a threat from her spouse to deny her access to the children.

Of the remaining six cases, four involved women who were regarded as not being criminally responsible for their crimes due to severe emotional disorders at the time of the crime,⁶ another involved infanticide (in other words, committed by the mother within 72 hours of giving birth) and the remaining case involved a suicide pact between the mother and four daughters between the ages of nine and 16, in which the mother and one daughter survived the poisoning.

In the 11 cases involving homicide against the spouse, the alleged motive was abuse, infidelity, and above all, constant humiliations that the women often tolerated over a period of years. However, there were two cases of indigenous women who apparently agreed to accept, or were coerced into accepting, responsibility for a crime committed by other relatives in an attempt to gain control of the spouse's farm plots. If in fact they were not responsible for the murders, then the proportion of cases in which the woman subjected her spouse to violence would decline. In any event, most of the women convicted of such crimes reported high rates of abuse at the hands of their respective spouses. Another significant piece of data is that almost a third of the husbands that were homicide victims were police officers.

It is also interesting to note that the only case of homicide directed against a parent was committed by a woman who suffered severe psychiatric disorders since childhood, thereby reinforcing the idea that a taboo exists regarding homicide against parents that does not extend to murders of children. This differs from the figures for men, which reveal that children and parents or grandparents each account for an even 21 percent of their homicide victims.

Of the 24 percent of cases in which women murdered non relatives, the breakdown is as follows:

- Four cases of homicide committed during a brawl and under the influence of alcohol, which represented 8 percent of the total. These cases almost always involved women who practiced prostitution, who were abandoned and practically lived on the streets.
- Four incidents of homicide committed during robberies in which the women served as accomplices for a gang comprised largely of men. These cases accounted for 8 percent of the sample.
- Two cases of homicide directed against neighbors, which represents 4 percent of the total.
- In one case - or 2 percent of the sample - the homicide victim was the lover of the woman's spouse.
- One incident - or 2 percent of cases - that involved political motives.

The cases cited above provide striking parallels on the level of motivations and the choice of victims to those of men convicted of murders not involving relatives. In other words, the contrasts are most striking on the level of family related homicides.

We will now provide some general data regarding the entire sample of 50 women prisoners, independently of the type of murder committed.⁷

- Fifty-six percent of the women were born in Mexico City while 42 percent were from other parts of Mexico and 2 percent were from Guatemala.
- The average age at the time the homicide was committed is 26. However, we also discovered that on average these women had left or been forced out of their homes at 16 years of age. The same

⁶ Mexican law stipulates that those who are determined to be not guilty of murder by reason of insanity should be interned in psychiatric facilities until they are fit to return to society. However, in practice, such individuals are routinely sent to prisons, kept in the same cells as others convicted of homicide and serve the same sentences as prisoners for whom insanity was not a mitigating factor.

⁷ The following breakdown was obtained both from prison records and the results of our own interviews.

year, most of the women also established their first amorous relationship and bore their first children.

- Seventy percent of the women had suffered varying degrees and forms of domestic violence, negligence, sexual abuse or abandonment at the hands of their families, 66 percent experienced the same abuse from their spouses and 60 percent were also abused by the police. A total of 34 percent of the women also committed homicide immediately after suffering severe episodes of violence at the hands of their spouses.
- While more than 40 percent of the men who committed homicides did so under the influence of alcohol or other substances, the similar figure for the women prisoners was a mere 12 percent and only 16 percent of the women had a history of substance abuse (mainly solvents and marijuana).
- Seventy-eight percent were from the lowest social strata, 16 percent were middle class and the remaining 6 percent were affluent. Of the first group, 26 percent were living in extreme poverty.
- Of the women sentenced, 12 percent were regarded by officials as not responsible for their crime due to psychological disorders while the remaining 88 percent were deemed capable of responding for their deeds.
- Most of the women were engaged in common-law marriages, frequently marked by violence and instability, or had been abandoned by their spouses and were left to assume responsibility for children from a range of previous amorous relationships. In fact, 80 percent of the women imprisoned for homicide were mothers with an average of 3 children. Meanwhile, 42 percent of those who murdered their children tried to achieve pregnancy immediately following their internment.
- Sixteen percent of the women attempted suicide before or after the homicide was committed.
- In terms of schooling, 22 percent of the women in our sample were illiterate, 26 percent had begun but failed to conclude their primary studies, while 22 percent of the women had completed grade school. A total of 10 percent graduated from secondary school and 20 percent had begun studies at a preparatory or technical school while a mere 2 percent had begun the first year of university studies.
- Before their imprisonment, the women were engaged in the following activities: 24 percent worked as domestics; 16 percent worked in the formal or informal retail sector; 14 percent were housewives; 12 percent secretaries or receptionists; 8 percent engaged in agriculture; another 8 percent prostitutes; 6 percent in the banking sector; 4 percent government employees; 2 percent teachers; 2 percent seamstresses; 2 percent industrial workers; and 2 percent construction workers.
- Their spouses were engaged in the following occupations: 23 percent were industrial workers; 17 percent police officers; 17 percent government or bank employees; 15 percent in retail; 13 percent construction workers; 12 percent mechanics; 4 percent *braceros*; 4 percent *campesinos*; and the remaining six percent is comprised of one student, a chauffeur and one who was unemployed.
- The women convicted of homicide were sentenced to an average of 23.3 years. In contrast to the male convicts, there are no cases of repeat homicide offenders among the women and a mere 4 percent had records of other criminal activity (theft, battery or crimes related to substance abuse.)
- The women were held responsible for a combined total of 57 homicide victims of whom 32 (56%) were their offspring or other children left in the respective woman's care; 11 (19%) were spouses; four (7%) were killed in brawls and were previously unknown to the woman; three (5%) were work mates; two were women perceived as rivals for the attentions of the woman's spouse; 2 were neighbors; two were business women who were killed during a holdup; and one was the woman's mother.
- The victims were killed in the following fashion: 35 percent were beaten or were pushed to their deaths; 26 percent were stabbed; 21 percent shot; 9 percent poisoned; and 9 percent strangled.

We will now offer a brief summary of some of the main conclusions we reached as a result of our study⁸:

1. Our study regarding the behavior of those convicted of homicide, which was conducted from a gender-based perspective, revealed issues that have been largely overlooked by other researchers.⁹ These include the longer sentences women tend to draw and the common features in the backgrounds and experiences of the women prisoners, which underscore the need to further delve into the study of homicide as a social issue and cultural phenomena.
2. One of the distinctive features we found in the case of men convicted of homicide was that the motives for murder appeared to consist of an extreme manifestation of rivalry and competition among peers. They also generally were based more on momentary outbreaks of violence than to premeditated deeds. Added to the fact that most of the homicides attributed to men were committed in public, outside the family milieu. This implies a pronounced objective and subjective presence of men in the world, their role in a universe of relations beyond the family setting, and a tendency to compete and to feel a need to achieve, maintain, preserve and impose a space based on physical force or the exercise of a superior force of arms. These factors speak of the unique position from which men, unlike women, are socialized and introduced into our culture from infancy and even before birth; i.e. the existing gender differences. In this way, men are constantly imbued with the need to resolve disputes in a violent fashion; to impose their will on others; to take advantage of the weak; to value and make attractive a position from which it is possible to abuse power; and to annihilate others in either a symbolic or literal manner.
3. By contrast, relatives, and particularly children, play a central role in the cases of homicide committed by women. This extreme, relative weight of family members reveals, though sometimes in a contradictory fashion, the privileged position our society accords maternity. When that privileged position is put in question, when the ambivalence that maternity implies is revealed, harsher sentences and punishment result, as if we hope that the phenomena can be confined, and believe that it is unrelated to us, that it neither belong to us nor offers us cause for further inquiry. The exemplary punishment both underscores the weight our society accords maternity and the tendency to ignore the accumulated violence suffered by women. The homicides committed by women are frequently the cumulative result of an extended process of torture, in which the woman sometimes serves as the subject and sometimes as a passive object of the violence. These are deaths directed at those whom the woman has loved too much, who occupy a primary place in her life, on whom she is radically dependent, or for whom she feels a silent or differed hatred. And these homicides, by canceling her *raison d'être*, negate her role as a social being, and impose on the a brutal, devastating rupture: the banishment of their social condition of being a woman. In summary, when the woman commits the act of homicide, she also ceases to exist. As a result, whereas when a man commits homicide, it is viewed as a reflection of a momentary expression of hatred that is compatible with his nature as a man, and which in some circles could lead to enhanced social recognition, for a woman such a deed subverts her identity, her female being, and leads to her destruction.

⁸ Readers should refer to the aforementioned study in order to obtain the full evidence on which we base these conclusions.

⁹ As is known, since the work of Stoller (1968) and Millet (1975), a gender focus has been employed to deal with social differentiations related to the sexes. In other words, it is suggested that gender is society's imaginary construct for dealing with differences between the sexes.

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