

MEXICO WARNS WOMEN: IF YOU LOVE HIM, DON'T TRAFFIC HIS DRUGS

More than half of women imprisoned in Mexico are convicted for drug-related crimes.

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GUADALAJARA, MEXICO – Just when it seemed the list of maxims about love couldn't get any longer, the Mexican state of Jalisco has added another: "Stop! Love can cost you dearly."

The words were plastered last year on posters at bus stations, in the airport, and outside men's prisons as part of a campaign to caution women against dating drug traffickers. Now, the Women's Institute of Jalisco wants to target female inmates themselves to help them avoid being used or cheated by male criminals.



MARGARITA CARDIEL: She helped design a program to help women avoid being unwitting accomplices.

At the same time, one of Mexico's few postpenitentiary programs is working with women who have finished their terms to urge them to break ties with criminal partners or, when that's not possible, to reach out to rehabilitate the partners.

The campaign comes at an important moment. Drug wars have left some 1,500 people dead nationwide this year, according to local media counts, double that of the year before. Women still represent a tiny fraction of the nation's perpetrators. But in 10 years, the number of women imprisoned in Mexico has tripled, and more than half of them are convicted for drug-related crimes, compared with just 15 percent of male criminals, says Elena Azaola, a researcher at the Center for Research and Advanced Studies in Social Anthropology in Mexico City.

In Jalisco, 260 women were in the state jail in 2001. That number has nearly doubled, to 499 today, with 70 percent of the women there for drug-related offenses.

Their motives are myriad, and cash plays a large role. But the Women's Institute of Jalisco discerned an overriding theme: Most of the women jailed for drug possession, sale, or transport were aiding the men in their lives - helping a partner or protecting a son or father.

That's why the institute based its campaign around love. "Their participation [in drug trafficking] is so tied to the sentimental," says Maria del Rocio Garcia Gaytan, president of the Women's Institute of Jalisco. "With sufficient information, I think women will make better decisions."

Here's the sentence you'll get

The posters contain basic information that experts say is unknown to many women who get involved in the drug trade. Taking drugs to partners in prison counts as trafficking or possession, it reads. Drug possession carries a sentence of five to 15 years. Trafficking can lock someone up for 10 to 25 years.

Carmen, who did not wish to use her real name so that her probation is not affected, got 16 years after the van she was riding in was pulled over in 1998. When cops ripped up the carpet in the back, they found 350 kilograms of marijuana; she was charged and jailed for transporting.

A US citizen born in Puerto Rico, she says she had no idea she was participating in a drug-trafficking ring. The man driving the car was a stranger who was giving her a ride back to the US, a plan set up by a friend back home in Chicago. She spent seven years at the Center for Feminine Readaptation south of Guadalajara, has a year-and-a-half of probation left, and says she just saw her youngest son for the first time in eight years. "Now I know I was used," she says. "They thought, with a woman in the car, they would not get stopped.... So many of the women I met in jail were used the same way."

Mexico, for decades a country of drug transporters, has slowly become one of consumers, too, says Ms. Azaola. That's created opportunities for small dealers. The evolution of narco-trafficking here has also made women more vulnerable, as men rely on them to elude police - as Carmen says was her case.

"Women don't have a significant role in drug trafficking or hold hierarchical positions," says Azaola, who applauds Jalisco's efforts. "They carry a small amount of drugs and never think they'll get 10 years. Many would not get involved if they knew."

Francisco Javier Anguiano, director of the state's postpenitentiary program, says the women he sees get involved because they see drug trafficking as a way of life, or because they are induced by men. Most often, he says, it is the latter.

Mr. Anguiano's program, for men and women, is a probation and rehabilitation regime that lasts some three years and includes therapy, social work, medical treatment, and job training.

For women pushed into the trade by "love," the program aims to break relationships with dealers, or influence boyfriends or husbands. "We ask, 'How much do you gain from [selling or transporting] drugs? And how much do you lose in terms of liberty, to be able to see your family?' "

Going beyond posters

The poster project of the Women's Institute of Jalisco was conceived by Margarita Cardiel, a sociologist with the group, who began working with female inmates seven years ago in college, and later volunteered with their children, setting up a volleyball team and attending functions. She has witnessed inmates being admitted and has helped those who are released carry their bags to the door.

She is focusing now on offering further training to psychologists and social workers, and to teach women inmates about human rights and violence. "Through these training programs, we want to teach them not to be the objects of narcotrafficking. It's the best way for them to realize they are victims," says Ms. Cardiel.

Other states have begun poster campaigns based on Jalisco's. Last month, Michoacan and Queretaro states solicited the posters, says Cardiel. Since they began, the number of women in prison has risen. But Cardiel has faith it's making a difference if even one woman rethinks. "This could be a national model," she says. "But not because of me, or us. It depends on the political will, and on the will of the country."

Some doubt the will is there, and say that economic realities may blind many women to the risks. "Many of them have no other option," says David Coronado, a sociologist at the University of Guadalajara. "They can't make it on what they earn."