

Women pay the highest price in the war on drugs

By Marcela Del Muro
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In the 11 years she has spent behind bars at the Cereso prison in La Pila, San Luis Potosí, María, 57, has seen countless women come and go. In recent years, she has noticed a growing number of arrests for drug-related health offences.

Women are imprisoned for using or carrying drugs, or even for simply being in the company of someone who does – most often cannabis or methamphetamine, known locally as *crystal* or *criko*.

‘You see the *criko* crowd come in, all skin and bones,’ says María, referring to the young women addicted to meth. ‘Here they eat, and when they are released a few months later, they look better. Then a while later, you see them come back again, skinny all over. They recover, then they’re out again.’

Over the past six years, women’s incarceration in Mexico has risen by 22%. Yet, according to the organization Elementa DDHH,

the illicit drug market remains untouched. In April 2025, the group reported that 1 913 women across the country are currently imprisoned for drug-related offences.

While María watches young female users cycle in and out of prison, her own defence team is preparing a report to prove the sexual and psychological torture she suffered at the hands of police during her first interrogation – and to establish her innocence in the murder she has been accused of.

At 19, La Chapis sells candy in downtown San Luis Potosí. She smokes cannabis regularly and occasionally uses meth. Since turning 18, she has been imprisoned twice. In April, she was released from Cereso after spending more than six months inside for possession of meth and small-scale dealing. It was her longest stint yet and, she insists, completely arbitrary.

‘I try not to carry anything on me because they’re always stopping us. That time, I was walking with a friend late at night.

The 'pigs' [police] started hassling us and found a pipe on him,' she explains. A small amount of meth was planted on La Chapis to incriminate her. She says she knows people who have had much larger amounts planted on them and ended up facing drug trafficking charges, with sentences ranging from five to 15 years.

According to the group Equis Justicia para las Mujeres, Mexico's punitive drug laws don't go after real criminals; they criminalize poverty and ignorance, disproportionately harming women.

Alejandra, whose name has been changed, was arrested in January 2025 after partying with friends who had meth on them. 'She was just in the wrong place with the wrong people. They charged her with drug crimes. She was supposed to be released in May, but on her way out, officers arrested her again. They told her she had another case pending – for aggravated robbery and express kidnapping,' her sister recounts.

Alejandra is now facing a new trial, even though the evidence points to a suspect with completely different physical characteristics.

Her sister insists that, on the day of the robbery and kidnapping, Alejandra was at a wedding with her boyfriend. However, photos, videos and witness testimony that could prove her innocence were not accepted as evidence.

Alejandra already served four months in prison for a drug offence she did not commit. Now she has been wrongfully arrested again and faces criminal prosecution for two serious crimes. The state is seeking a 70-year prison sentence.





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