

ALL AGAINST ALL. LA TABACALERA

Lorena, the murder, the denunciation

Lorena is a transsexual prostitute of almost fifty years of age who has become a political activist as a result of the situations she has experienced. She was the one who denounced the murder of Susana, one of her best friends. One ordinary night on the corner where she worked—at the junction of Guerrero and Puente de Alvarado avenues—a car pulled up to pick someone up. The driver was a private security guard who worked in the State of Mexico. For the girls, there was something suspicious about his imprudence and insistence, so several rejected him, including Lorena. However, Susana had not had a good working day and agreed to enter the vehicle. Soon, their worst suspicions were confirmed. Lorena heard Susana shouting her name and crying for help, and as she ran towards the vehicle she heard a couple of shots that—at point blank range since Susana was sitting crouched over her attacker—killed her. Despite everything, Lorena reacted quickly and began to record

everything on her cellphone. The reactions were immediate, from the police officers who ordered her to stop recording, to her colleagues who begged her not to cause problems (“don’t make a big story out of it”), in the knowledge that what they were witnessing was something unusual and that there could be reprisals, because in that space full of aggression and violence “nobody had ever recorded anything.”

“I don’t care!” Lorena responded categorically in response to the calls to an order that is always complicit, “if I have the evidence, I’m going to raise my voice with all the more reason, it’s already been too many years of violence.” With the help of the Center for the Support of Transgender Identities her recording reached the Internet, and despite the public attention it received (to date it has been viewed more than 330,000 times on YouTube), it was only a small step in the long march for justice that continues until this day. Something that seemed to be an open-and-shut case was complicated for reasons that are still difficult to explain today, and Susana’s alleged murderer—who had been detained in the car, beside the body and with the murder weapon—was set free and remains on the loose today.

In a gesture of protest against an act that was seen not only as discretionary but discriminatory by the authorities, transgender women decided to organize and take to the streets to demand recognition of the conditions of systematic violence in which they have to live and work.

They demanded the resolution of the case of Susana, which had become the focus of the movement, after the group carried Susana's coffin to the site of her murder. At the junction of Insurgentes and Puente de Alvarado avenues they briefly halted the traffic with the funerary cortege carrying the one who had been their friend and companion.

Puente de Alvarado, a space for trade in sex

According to a study published in 2015 by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights in Mexico (IACHR), between January 2013 and March 2014 at least 594 people from the LGBT community or who were perceived as such “were murdered in attacks apparently related to the perception of their sexual orientation or their identity and gender expression.” This number, the report adds, “includes 283 murders of gay men or men perceived as gay, and 282 murders of trans women or trans persons with a female gender expression” (CIDH Report, file 91). As part of its case review, the CIDH found a significant difference between the types of case. While the murders of gay men or those perceived as gay tended to occur in private spaces (such as the home) and with knives, in the case of trans women and people with a female gender expression, the tendency was to be killed “with firearms, and their bodies tend to be

found in the streets or other public spaces, and sometimes in situations related to sex work.”

The murder of Susana matches the representation given by the statistical data: a trans woman who loses her life in a violent manner with a firearm in the street. The intersection between public space, firearms and gender expressions constitute an unavoidable atmosphere of risk and violence for trans women like Lorena and Susana, which seems worthy of investigation in other spaces where prostitution is practiced both in Mexico City, in general, and in the borough of Cuauhtémoc, in particular.

The principal area where Lorena works is the Puente de Alvarado avenue, in the Tabacalera neighborhood, the hub of a zone of tolerance towards prostitution that extends over the adjacent blocks to the outskirts of the borough of Cuauhtémoc. It is a key point of the city, due to its proximity to other emblematic spaces such as the Historic Center, Plaza Garibaldi, or James Sullivan Street (another red light area), and even to popular neighborhoods such as Guerrero or Morelos which are known for their illegal activities and violence. In her testimony, Lorena has shown she is familiar with many of these spaces thanks to her continuous movement through the city, and it would be naive to imagine that this type of displacement does not include other actors or merchandise, especially related to the informal and illegal sector.

When Lorena explains how prostitution functions in the city, it is possible to observe a heavily regulated space, though not for all that free from disputes and tensions between the different actors (prostitutes, clients, police officials, local residents, civil associations).⁵ The principal practices of production of order are the responsibility of the prostitutes themselves, which clearly shows how a social network can also become a network for the exercise of power. The street corners that to the gaze of an ordinary passerby are completely free spaces that belong to all the city's inhabitants, are in reality managed by the hierarchy of prostitutes.

This authority is built up on the basis of time in the business. In other words, it is a legitimacy that is stipulated, almost always, in function of the length of time they have worked (which could easily be translated into the experience and knowledge that they have of the business). It can also be stipulated according to some other kind of reputation. In this way, given her current work and her past as inmate, Lorena was able to introduce herself as a strong woman, hard to control or extort.

The women with more experience, who hold authority, become “mamas” for the newcomers and usually offer them both guidance and

⁵ However, prostitution itself is considered an administrative offense, as its regulation can be seen as a form of pimping and it is well known that many of those involved are drug users.

protection in the business, as well as regulating the activities that take place in the corners. In this sense it seems to have a greater similarity with the hierarchical structure of the prison. It is a form of social capital, a network built on the satisfaction of specific needs, many of which are perfectly legal, for example: guaranteeing food, a place to stay or the clothing they need to ply their trade. These coexist with other activities that are not illegal; all these elements establish a scenario full of ambiguities. Therefore, the phenomenon has three aspects that are worth analyzing in detail:

a) Protection from clients. The prostitutes are continually keeping watch over each other to ensure their personal safety. More than once they have had to defend themselves from direct attacks that are driven by transphobia.

b) Protection from the authorities. The “mamas” have to negotiate with the police officers (as the most direct representatives of the state authority) and here too the key characteristic is ambiguity, since the officials who can help them by looking out for their security can also arrest them, attack them or seek to extort money from them on the basis that they are breaking the law.

c) Protection from other prostitutes. A single space brings together practices of solidarity between co-workers and predatory practices: in an activity that often involves the consumption of alcohol or

drugs, robberies of personal belongings or money are common and Lorena notes that they are frequently perpetrated by colleagues through violent practices such as gossip, quarrels and aggressions. After all, the prostitutes are competing for clientele and on more than one occasion they have come to blows to defend their source of income. Meanwhile, the exercise of authority and negotiation—both among the prostitutes and with the authorities—are separated by a thin line from pimping, which sometimes they cross.

Lorena as mediator: health, gender identity and non-discrimination

As well as her role as a “mama” in the prostitution scene, Lorena holds other positions as a mediator and a figure of authority that overlap with her work on the streets, as well as with her recent commitment to resolving the murder of Susana. It is worth observing these other networks that also involve struggles for human rights and that seek to protect the transgender population. These are positive uses of social capital that this investigation is interested in analyzing, though they could well receive institutional support and be replicated in other areas.

Lorena accumulated extensive bureaucratic experience in relation to changing gender identity. She must be one of the very first to emerge

triumphant from the institutional twists and turns to change her legal identity—and it seems no coincidence that she associates it with the experience she accumulated confronting the Kafkaesque Mexican criminal system to gain her freedom. Currently, Lorena offers information to other trans women who are in different states around Mexico (where the change is not yet legal) and who move to Mexico City to assert their right to self-determination. Social networks—the electronic version—play an interesting role in these exercises of cyber-activism that culminate in political practices of organization and mobilization.

The relationship that Lorena has developed with the formal authorities is quite interesting. An example of this is the link she has with Clínica Condesa, which is specialized in caring for people with HIV. She, as a carrier, is not only sensitized to the problems that accompany the disease, but also with the fact that retrovirals and, in general, the necessary medications are, precisely, a necessity. It's a question of survival. Consequently, the voluntary work that she undertakes at the clinic has been capitalized in favor of the clinic itself and, perhaps more importantly, with the female sex workers. Lorena literally places her social networks, knowledge, experience and legitimacy among her colleagues at the service of the clinic in order to distribute condoms or rapid HIV tests.

It is reasonable to acknowledge that it was because of her experience as a carrier of HIV and because of her fragile economic position that Lorena had to learn to work with state and civil associations in order to survive—and here the expression goes beyond economic aspects—allowing her access to antiretroviral drugs and condoms, which became essential for continuing to carry out her job, as well as tests to detect HIV. What at first was a set of practices for personal benefit would later become a service that could be provided to other colleagues and that over time helped to build up a position of legitimate authority inside and outside her own community.