



Soy Autora: Women, authors of their future

El Salvador is dubbed the “homicide capital of the world” and the deadliest country in Latin America for women and girls ¹. This violence is a reflection of generations of trauma deriving from the civil war and gangs: violence is cyclical, hurt begets hurt. Over three decades, expert Psychologist and ConTextos consultant James Garbarino has shown how trauma affects decision making and responses to perceived threats, creating a “war zone mentality” in children who grow up in areas plagued by violence. Traumatic experiences impair their cognitive and emotional development ². Children who have been victims of violence are more likely to engage in crime and antisocial behavior, developing beliefs that “violence is an appropriate means of settling conflict,” a mindset played out in homes and on the street as a survival mechanism in these “war zones.” ³ For women, this cyclical violence is especially grave: women are survivors of the highest levels of sexual, physical and psychological violence and they bear the greatest load of childcare. ⁴

We work with adults who carry the scars of childhood trauma and the children around them. Women in prison are some of the most marginalized and traumatized human beings in El Salvador. They give birth to and raise their children behind bars and some are guilty of crimes that were motivated by obtaining basic needs to care for their children in the first place. In the Granja Penitenciaria de Mujeres de Izalco (Prison Farm for Women in Izalco, GPMI) 184 children spend the first years of their lives, crucial to the children’s development, with women who suffer from unhealed trauma.

In the GPMI, the children are sent daily to the Child Development Center (CDC) where they are cared for by 35 childcare volunteer female inmates who are responsible for their physical well-being. However, they have not had training in early childhood stimulation, cognitive development, nor have been trained to support the other women, the mothers of these children, who do not have access to the CDC. In El Salvador, 80% of inmates have received less than a ninth grade level education and 7.2% have not received any education at all ⁵. They rely on “parenting” skills they inherit from their own upbringing or that they have observed from others. This is the same parenting that is failing Salvadoran youth who now turn to gangs or emigration to flee the violence.

To interrupt the cycle of violence, we need to work with the survivors to promote healing and social emotional skills and teach them strategies to stimulate positive development in their children. Additionally, we need to share these women’s stories with the general public in order to create awareness, empathy, and social progress.



These powerful women's stories--the impact of their published Soy Autor memoirs-- will open hearts and minds. Through our Soy Autor Program, we have seen how this occurs with the books most of which have been written by men. Soy Autor funding is received for violence prevention / rehabilitation which targets men. Our intervention at GPMI strengthens our work with women who are prey to violence and seeks to use their stories to build empathy and awareness about their plight.

We develop literacy-rich environments for incarcerated children and women serving as a tool for the mother's healing and for the children's development. In GPMI, our work will foster positive spaces for young children and women to share stories, grow and learn together. Our "Soy Autora" intervention at GPMI has three main goals:

- a. Develop a library space inside the Child Development Center of the prison**
- b. Train 15 incarcerated women to be Literacy Leaders**
- c. 24 incarcerated women publish their illustrated memoirs**

a. Develop a library space in Child Development Center (CDC) of women's prison

Output 1.1 The CDC of women's prison receives 500 new, high-quality books and library materials

500 books have been selected and bought to date, however, they have not been delivered to the Center. During the months of June, July and August of 2019, the newly inaugurated president of El Salvador executed an order of "extraordinary measures" to be carried out at prisons. These measures prohibited access to the prisons to any civil society organization, including access for family visits as well as phone calls. This situation brought about emotional conflict lead by frustration and anger towards the Security Institutions and the Presidency due to the fact that it prevented the inmates to have access to their family visits, preventing them from receiving the strong support their bonds mean to them. It is here, where organizations such as ConTextos have played a crucial role while giving voice to each of these stories as a cathartic process of self help.

During the months that ConTextos was not able to enter the Center, it was also difficult to carry out any effort to coordinate the delivery and placement of the books in the specific areas destined to the libraries. The adaptation the spaces had to go through didn't occur because we were not able to have access to the spaces.

Once the state of emergency was lifted, we renewed conversations with the authorities at the Center in order to select spaces where the program's remaining workshops were to be carried out. We decided to hold the classes for the "ordinary" interns at the CAIPI, in their sector and not at the Center, at the multipurpose room and not the library, where the workshops had taken place previously. The workshops for Caretakers or interns at the "partial liberty stage" would be held at the Center.



Moreover, we chose the spaces where the libraries were to be installed. It was decided that instead of one big library, they would be receiving 10 mini libraries (this is expanded on further when we refer to the corresponding outcome). Given that during the months of September and October the mini-libraries were not yet installed, the books were not delivered. We agreed with the prison's personnel that the books would be delivered at the end of January 2020. November and December are filled with year end activities and for them it was logistically more difficult to receive the books.

Output 1.2 The CDC establishes check out routines to promote book use

Given that the books and installation of libraries are not finalized, we have not initiated this process. However, the ConTextos team always takes books to the sessions, so that the inmates read them in their rooms

Output 1.3 Library of the CDC is completely established and active by the sixth month of implementation.

At the end of september 2019, ConTextos staff carried out a diagnostic visit in order to assess the space at the CDC located inside the Prison. The visit was conducted by the prison's Director, Sub-Director and Counselor, as well as the CDC's Director and the education coordinating team at the prison. The project was presented to the CDC's Director which meant we had to install a library and deliver its books, we were in charge of the training for young librarians and the Soy Autor Workshops.

During the visit, pertinent meetings were held with Child Development Center's personnel in order to optimize the intervention and not duplicate any efforts while working towards a common goal. Thus we established and agreed on a working relationship in order to work together. .

The possibility of establishing various spaces to hold books instead of a central one, was explored within both the CDC and the Houses (Cells) where the interns live with their children.

The conversation continued with the Director of the Child Development Center and the Prison Director during October and November. The decision was to establish 10 mini-libraries for boys and girls of different ages lodged in different areas of the establishment so they could have easy and immediate access to books . During the month of August/2019 the place was measured and the furniture started being constructed for each space at the end of October/2019.

b. Train 15 incarcerated women to be Literacy Leaders

Output 2.1: Revised literacy leader curricula meet needs and schedules of the CDC of women's prison

In order to achieve this goal teacher trainers from ConTextos, both male and female, have developed a new curriculum based on the one used for our Librarian Youth Leader's Program.



The training was to be carried out during the months of June, July and August, however, due to the extraordinary measures dictated by the Legislative Assembly of El Salvador., this had to be delayed.

Output 2.2: At least 15 women participate constantly in literacy leaders' workshops.

During the months of September and October we finalized the Creative Writing Program "Soy Autora". We expect the five sessions planned for the "Women Library Leaders" Workshops training will begin in January, February and finish in March of 2020.

After conversations with the Prison's Director, sub-director and social worker, we made the decision to train 15 additional women in the process, thus, there will be a total of 30 women trained of whom half belong to the "partial liberty stage" and the other fifteen will be interns. There will be a space provided in each cell where the women live with their sons and daughters. This will allow for the interns to be formed as took to our advice of them to become Library Leaders.

Output 2.3: 100% of the participants use literacy activities with children in the CDC

As the workshops with the Librarian Leaders have not begun yet (explained in output 2.2) , we cannot report on literacy activities with the boys and girls.

Output 2.4: 50% of literacy leaders become involved in library management.

As the workshops with the Librarian Leaders have not begun yet (explained in output 2.2) , we cannot report on library management.

c. 24 incarcerated women publish illustrated memoirs

Output 3.1 Revised Soy Autora curricula meets needs and schedule of CDC of women's prison

The adaptations and restructuring of the Curriculum for Women Librarian Leaders and Soy Autora, did not undergo significant changes in regards to activities as they are pertinent to the writing process; however, themes considered to be important to dialogue with the women were incorporated such as child rearing, bonding with children, sexual violence, the importance of reading in early childhood development and the relevance of providing safe, interactive and stimulating spaces for the children's development.

We worked on a proposal so that the training would address themes such as self-care and co-care, making it possible for the women to reconnect by expressing how they lived their processes and reflect on what they wanted for their future.

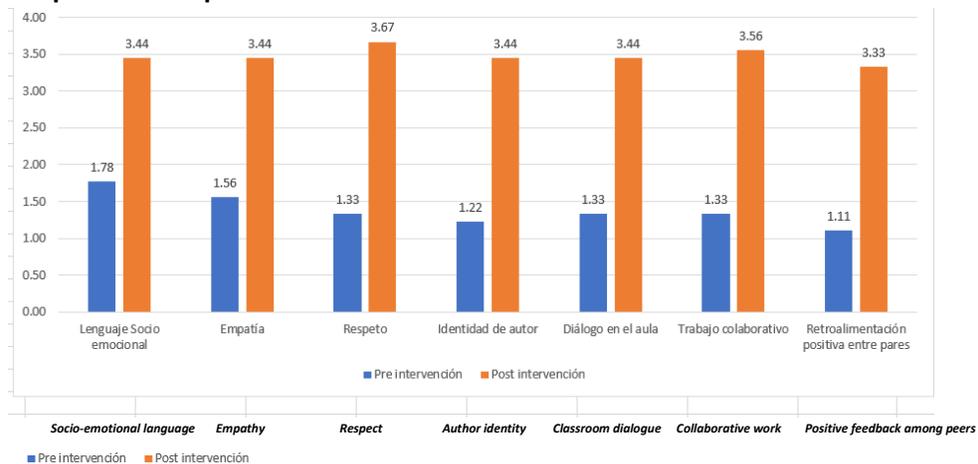
Output 3.2 90% of participating students increase literacy skills

100% of the participants improved their literacy skills such as social emotional language, empathy, respect, collaborative peer work, etc. The measurement of literacy abilities is done through a rubric of attitudinal progress. In order to assess the impact of the "Soy Autora" program, the rubric measures 7 relevant aspects: social emotional language, empathy, respect, identity as an author, dialogue, collaborative work and feedback from peers. Each one of these was measured individually,

for each of the women authors, on a scale from 1-4 which places them from an initial to a more advanced level of social abilities. Moreover, there is a total score generated for each of the aspects measured on a scale from 1 to 10 (from lowest to highest score) from which we obtain a total for each author. Therefore a median score is calculated in order to assess how much progress is made from the beginning of the intervention to its end.

The results show improvements from the base line to the final line for both the group of interns as well as for those who are on the partial liberty stage. Graph 1 shows the results of each aspect that is measured for the interns. Although we observe a similar pattern of improvement for all skills, these stand out: respect, positive feedback among peers and collaborative work. This is consistent with the qualitative observations made at the beginning of the intervention regarding the women authors. At the beginning they held very little trust and respect for each other. They were not able to see any possibility of building a support group among themselves where they could speak freely and with respect, give each other advice and recognize and voice their emotions calmly and with empathy.

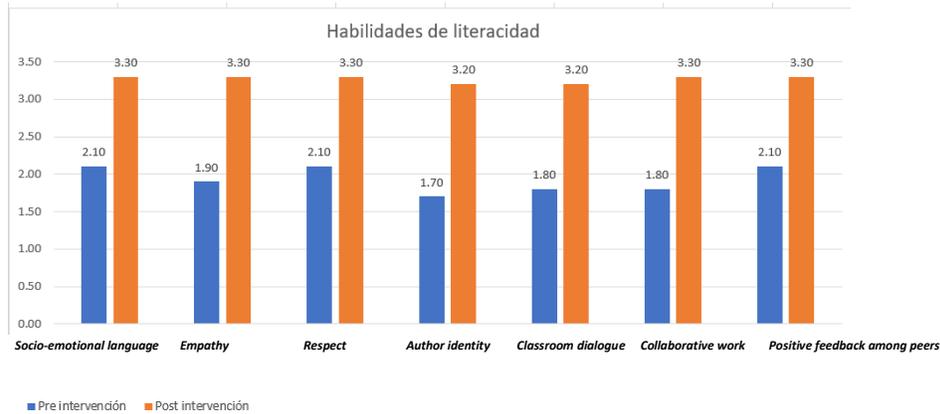
Graph 1. Development of social-emotional skills for intern women authors.



Source:Compilation based on results from rubric measuring social-emotional skills.

Women in the partial liberty stage, who takes care of the sons and daughters of the women interns, also show general improvement in their social emotional skills. Graph 2 shows major advances in empathy (from 1.90 pts. to 3.30), positive feedback among peers (from 1.11 to 3.33) as well as in collaborative work (from 1.80 to 3.30) This is noticeable at a qualitative level because they project themselves as a cohesive group. There is evidence at the end of the process they worked collaboratively in order to finish their memoirs while exchanging different opinions, helping illustrate each other's books, etc.

Graph 2. Development of social-emotional skills for women in the partial liberty stage/care-takers.



Source:Compilation based on results from rubric measuring social-emotional skills.

An interesting aspect that complements the quantitative information showing the results of the rubric is what the stories written by the women show us how they have internalized the writing process they have experienced. By writing their personal story, not only have they been able to recognize and name feelings and emotions but also recognize and understand those of their peers. Most of them see themselves as strong women, they recognize that they have had the support of other women as mentors in their lives. Moreover, they see themselves as mothers and the impact this has had on them as women. They definitely see themselves as mothers who want and have the right to tell their stories both inside and outside of Prison.

Ana Ester, for example, is an author who is absolutely alone in life. Neither family nor friends have ever visited her while in prison. However, even though she never imagined she would be writing or becoming an author, she now feels motivated to write her story in her memoir. The following is an excerpt from a conversation between Ana Ester and a ConTextos staff member:

“Do you feel like an author?”

No! How can you believe that!

But what about everything you’ve done here? All of this process you have been through and the illustrations you have been working on, what is all this?

Mmmmm,maybe, maybe I am the author of my own life.



Can you tell me a little bit about what you wrote and what motivated you to write this particular story?

"Well I am "russian", meaning I am alone, no one comes to see me or to bring me anything. So, I was pregnant and worried about having a cesarean section and that no one would take care of me and that no one would bring me anything to make me feel better after it. I had a lot of fear then, I did not want to feel alone, but it came to pass that another intern offered to help me, we were not friends, we only knew each other from being inside here."

Women like Ana Ester have the need to write about their loneliness, about confronting their fears and how they have lived through it all. Ana Ester doesn't seem to complain but instead she seems thankful, while voicing and naming those moments and people who are part of her life inside.

During this process, women have also developed the skill of recognizing their emotions without fear of judgement. They recognize the emotions they have experienced without categorizing them as good or bad, but by simply letting them be, as the results of those situations they have lived throughout their lives:

I almost died when I gave birth to the baby, I almost died and the baby was taken away from me..."

Do you feel like an author?

Yes, now I do, but it has been difficult for me you know?

Can you tell me more about what you wrote? Why has it been difficult to write?

Well, I did not want to have babies, but once I got pregnant, I was very happy to feel it inside me, I began to anxiously wait for the baby. The birth was very painful, I almost died while giving birth but he was born very healthy, very pretty. .

When the baby was 6 months old, he came down with a heavy fever and we took him to the hospital, we were there for a few days and then he died. At the beginning no one explained anything to me, they didn't want to. Afterward, I found out what had happened. They had given him a very high dose of adrenaline, they made a mistake, the nurse who administered it made a mistake, they shouldn't have given him anything and the baby's heart stopped.

What does it mean to take revenge?

I wanted to kill her, I wanted them to give me her name so I could go look for her at the hospital... But my mom, who has always been there for me, supporting me and given me good advice, she ripped the paper that had been given to us at the hospital, and there in that paper was that nurse's name.

Is your book about that?

Yes, it tells the story of my other baby and about my other son and how difficult it is for me to be in here without them. I want to name my book "My pain and my strength"

Why do you want to name it that?

Because I believe my first son is and will be my pain, but then my other son comes to cure me from it and to give me more strength than ever.



Output 3.3 24 memoirs available online; in print

34 books were completed by 34 authors, three of whom have been freed and our team helped to finish the illustrations in their books. Presently, they are being digitized and designed in order to be uploaded online and sent out to be printed. They will be ready in mid-January and our publishing event, to which the authors families are invited will be held at the end of January.

Output 3.4 At least 24 women actively participate in Soy Autor Workshops

Since the beginning of our conversations with the Prison Director and the director of the C.D.C., we proposed to ideally work with the following two groups: a group of caretakers who permanently work with the children at the C.D.C. (they belong to the partial liberty stage) and the second group, the mothers who attend the C.D.C. A total of 19 women started the process in the former group; a total of 14 women started the process in the latter group with a total of 34 women authors. There were 31 women who finished the process inside de Prison and 3 were placed in liberty during the Soy Autora process.

During the first class, both groups of women expressed that: “ we are very nervous because we don’t know how this whole book writing is all about” This phrase sums up the state they were in when they started the classes, they were nervous, timid, not willing to share or open up to the rest. However, during the second or third sessions, it was visible that they understood the benefit these writing and social emotional work spaces would bring to them. An example of this is what one of the interns expressed about one of her peers:

“I’m going to say something I have never told anyone and I want to take the opportunity since Chayito is here, Rosario (a group peer), thank you for encouraging us with your smile and way of being, I want to tell you that one day when I had fist arrived here and felt very distraught and without knowing it, you did something for me that made me feel supported and now I thank you, that day I wanted to die because I couldn’t stand being in this place, all of a sudden you said ‘alright everyone, let’s say a prayer, and this gave me much comfort”.

During the following sessions, they started working in the different phases of writing without any problems. First, they did the “The seeds of writing” exercise, were they are able to visualize and give shape to small ideas, events, themes about which they would like to write. This is the first step in order to develop their writing. Many of them coincided with a couple of themes about which they wanted to write their stories: the experience of arriving at the Prison and the experience of being mothers. The following sessions were taken to plan the text: brainstorming of ideas, selecting, justifying the audience to who the text will be directed and making a first draft that they could share with their peers. Normally, during these classes we end the session with a space called the “author’s chair”, where the women could share their advances with others, make comments and questions. This practice fosters feedback among peers and collaborative work.



As classes progressed the participants developed a higher level of fluency and assertiveness when making comments to their peers, they participated with a very positive attitude when giving their feedback. Their interventions were focused on the fact that the objective was to help the story of their peers grow as authors.

As some of the participants take books and advance in their writing in their cells, the effect of the Soy Autor classes are having an impact outside of the space and time of class, in the case of the interns; or to their rooms, in case of those who belong to the partial liberty stage. One of our ConTextos Teacher Trainers had this to say:

Yamileth ha presentado este día el cuaderno de una de sus compañeras de sector que no participa en el programa y está escribiendo de su propia historia . Y Yamileth le comenta a la formadora:

Yamileth has presented today a peer's notebook from a sector that is not participating in the program and who is writing her own story. And Yamileth makes the following comment:

"You know she has been motivated to write because she sees us with it and we also lend her books that we take to her so she can read them"

This reflects that the Soy Autora classes have a multiplying effect and that the work of literacy covers a large amount of people who benefit from it, from the participants, to their cell mates or roommates, thus permeating throughout the community. We consider this to be an important element since the new authors are acquiring skills that surpass time and physical boundaries in which the Soy Autora sessions take place: Soy Autora's reach has an impact on the relations among the rest of the women and helps them build a stronger community.