

# On the pink corridor

*How trans women in Honduras are helping their imprisoned sisters. Frauke Decoodt reports from Tegucigalpa.*

**B**rithany and Nicolle live in Honduras, one of the worst places to be trans women – at least 111 transgender people have been killed since 2009. But the two have something else in common. They both spent time in a prison containing some 7,000 male inmates. Listening to their stories of how they negotiated their lives in prison and on the outside, it became evident that the threat of violence never recedes.

## Surviving the streets

I first met Nicolle in 2018, not long after her release from prison, at the offices of Arcoiris, an organization defending LGBTQI+ rights. Today, she looks different, with her hair in braids, in high heels and make-up. She now speaks in a hoarse whisper, because last November she was stabbed in the throat. Other trans women I met at Arcoiris have since been killed, like Bessy in July 2019, or have fled, like Paola, who escaped to Europe in January 2020 after an assassination attempt. Killed or attacked because they are activists denouncing crimes against their community, or for engaging in sex work.

When I first met Nicolle, she swore she would never do sex work but now necessity has forced her into it. 'I hate it!' she says. 'Sometimes I earn close to nothing, but I need to pay rent and buy food.' She made better money before going to prison, selling drugs for a street gang. Gangs often coerce trans women to work for them. Nicolle soon got arrested

for possession of marijuana. She was beaten while being driven around by the police for several hours, later sentenced and sent to Tamara Penitentiary for three years. She was 24 years old.

Nicolle is not an exception. Honduras is a conservative Christian country where many consider *machismo* a virtue. This explains the constant discrimination and violence the LGBTQI+ community faces. Many trans people cannot find 'normal' work and are rejected by their families. Crime and sex work become the only options left for many trans women, with prison sometimes the next step. 'There are so many things in this trans life that started with transphobia and homophobia,' sighs Nicolle.

But it is not every trans person's story. Brithany has the support of a loving family and chose sex work voluntarily. 'I tried it out of curiosity,' she says. 'I placed an announcement on the internet.' While she didn't do much sex work, the experience determined her life. 'This curiosity is what got me locked up. My underage neighbour also did some sex work. She asked me if I could help her with placing an announcement. Ignorant of the consequences, I did, and got sentenced to 10 years.'

## Prison economics

Five years later, Brithany is 28 and out on parole. She is required to return to prison at weekends.

We meet at Arcoiris. She looks like the girl next door, dressed plainly with

minimal make-up. She is convinced that she can get me inside the penitentiary to observe life on the LGBTQI+ corridor. The director has done her that favour before. Nicolle wants to come along to bring some basic necessities for the girls there. Both Brithany and Nicolle stress how much such visits from Arcoiris meant to them while they were inside. 'It made us feel like somebody cared. It broke the monotony,' Nicolle explains. Since her release from prison, she has only managed to go four times.

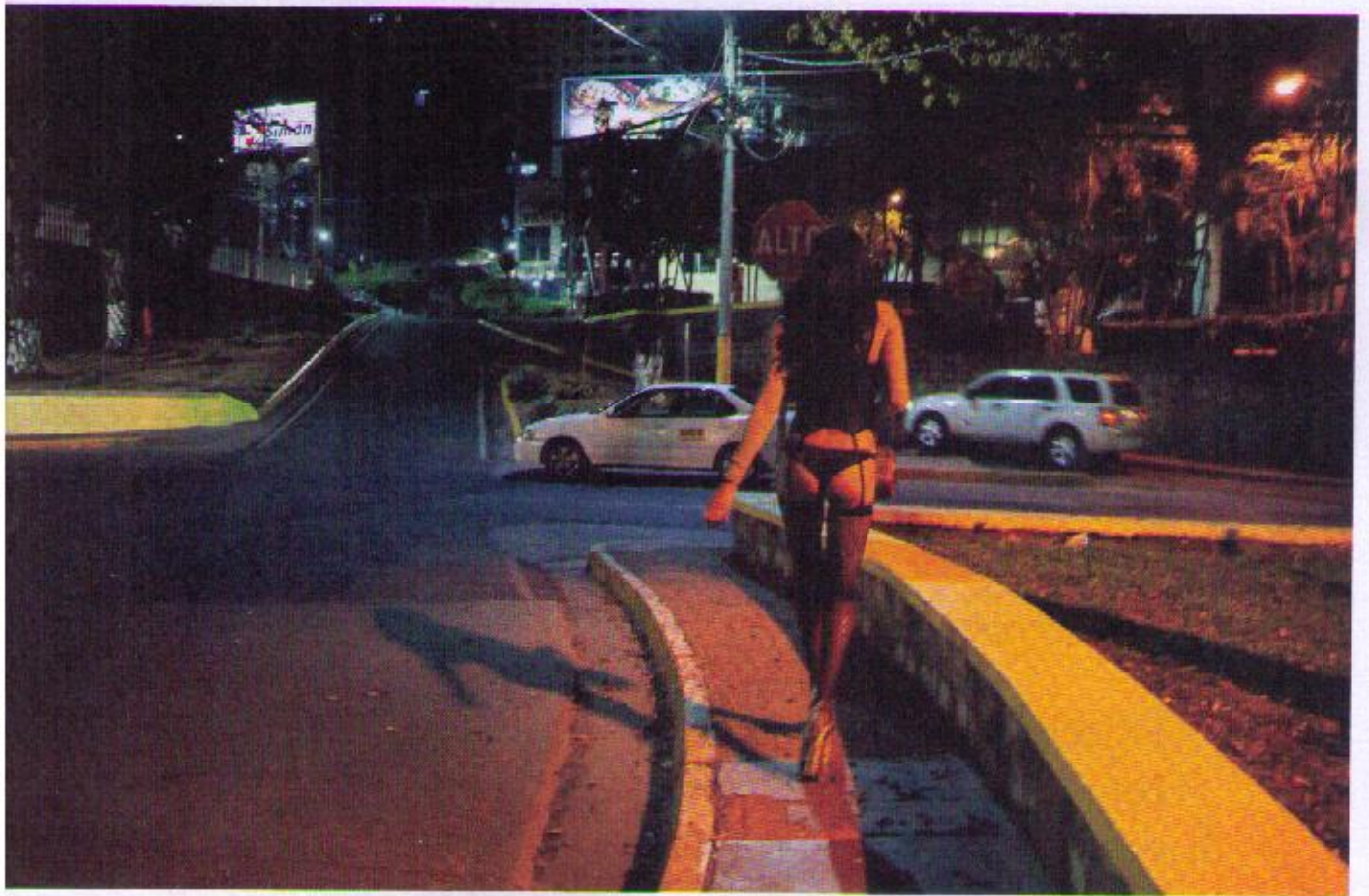
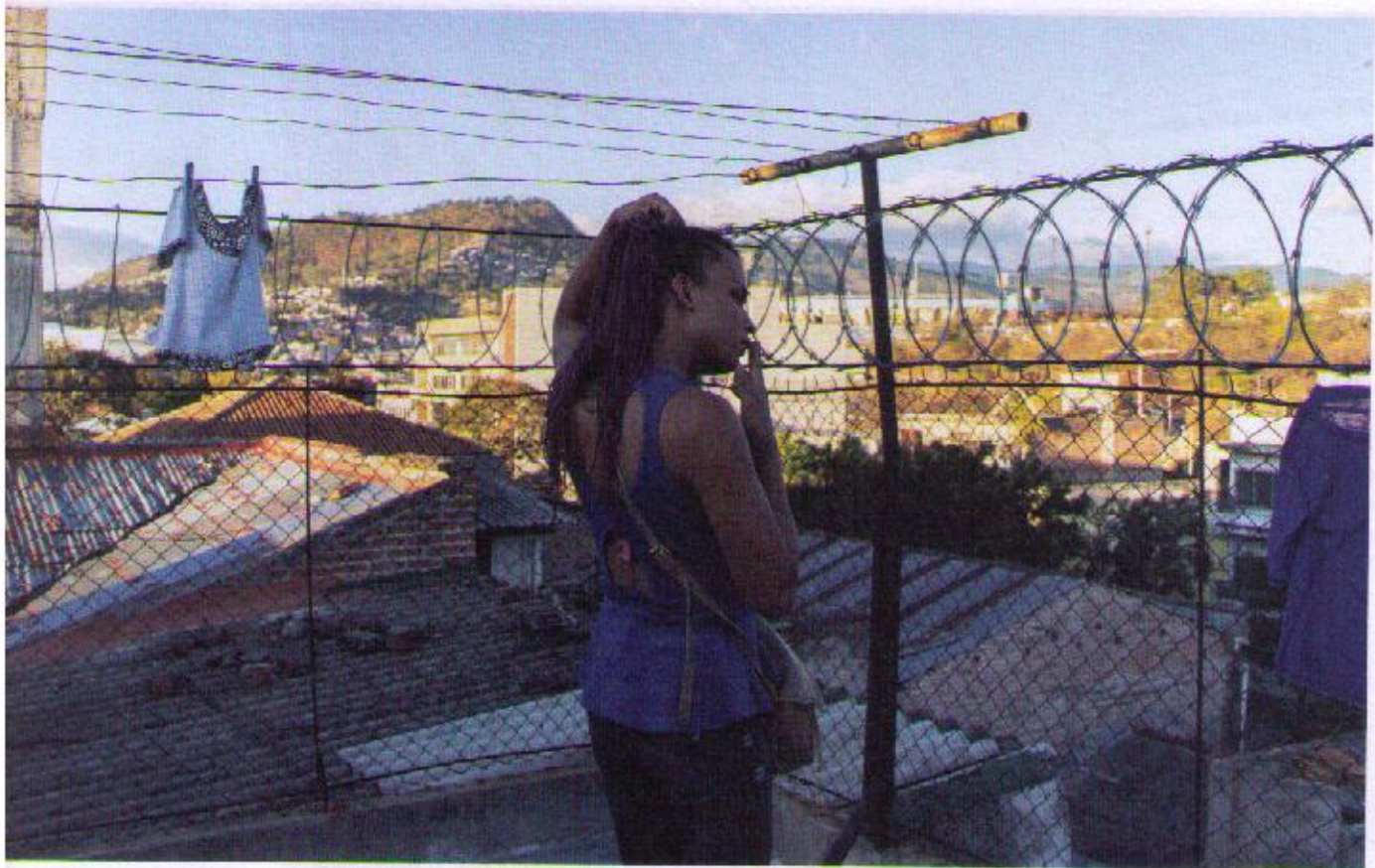
A few days later we stand in front of the penitentiary gates with three garbage bags full of supplies: items like toothpaste, toilet paper, soap, condoms, beans and rice. Apart from basic and disgusting prison meals, 'everything costs money inside,' says Nicolle. 'Many trans women don't have families that visit them so they do sex work [inside prison] to make some money. They get paid less than on the streets.' Three years into her jail term Brithany started doing some sex work. Nicolle chose a boyfriend who helped her out. 'Several of us got HIV [in jail],' says Nicolle. 'But you have to be really sick to be taken to the health service.' Unsurprisingly, the health service doesn't provide

*Right top: Nicolle takes a break on the terrace of the Arcoiris office.*

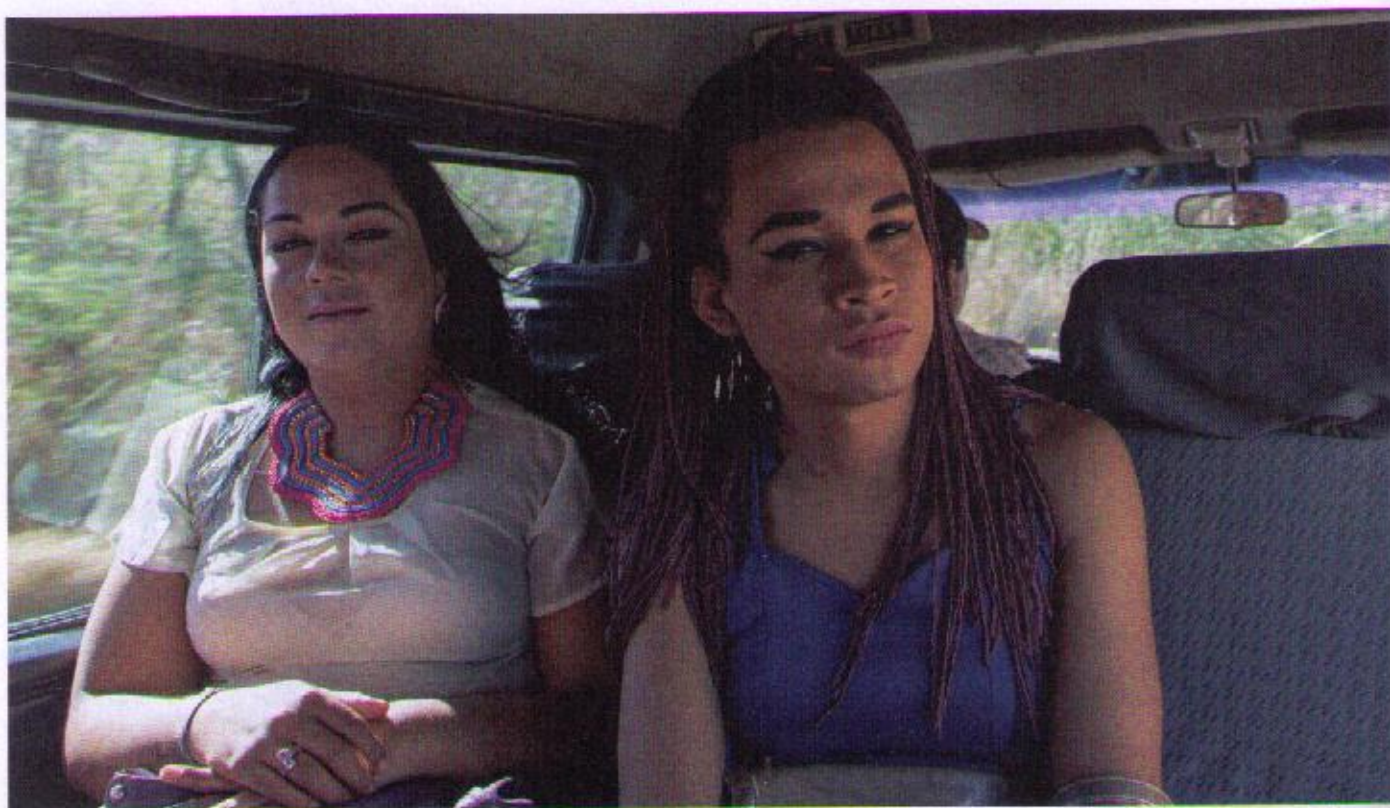
*Right bottom: A trans sex worker takes to the mean streets of Tegucigalpa.*

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hormone treatments either. 'Somebody inside sells it to us,' Brithany clarifies.

### Identity - erased and re-affirmed

It's a lengthy wait at the entrance gates with our bin bags full of stuff. Prison guards and heavily armed military police look disdainfully at Brithany and Nicolle. Nobody gets in as the director is in a meeting, maybe about the following day's declaration that will stop all visits due to Covid-19.

After two hours and an extended security check, we get in. Both Nicolle and Brithany remember being terrified when they first set foot inside Tamara Penitentiary - Nicolle started her jail term in December 2014, seven months before Brithany. They were taken to the LGBTQI- corridor with both inmates and guards shouting abuse at them. The corridor is about 1.5 metres wide and 15 metres long, lined with small cells that sleep two in a bunk bed, something of

a privilege in a prison accommodating around 7,000 inmates in a space intended for 1,700. During her time Brithany had the corridor painted pink, hung up a rainbow flag, and lobbied for a television. The pink corridor is in a block called La Isla (The Island) with corridors for prisoners with mental and physical disabilities, for chronically sick inmates, and for 'the gays', a label to which all diversity in the LGBTQI+ corridor is reduced.

On the girls' first day in La Isla their hair was cut off. Other ways of erasing their identity included not being allowed to wear women's clothes on visiting days and having to take showers alongside men. What pains the girls even more is that it's prisoners who make these rules, that it was another trans woman who cut their hair. She was the LGBTQI+ corridor's co-ordinator. 'She enjoyed humiliating us,' Nicolle remembers. 'She once beat someone so badly, they moved her to a maximum security facility.' Nicolle,

*Brithany and Nicolle en route to Tamara Penitentiary.*

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and then Brithany, became the next co-ordinators.

### Twenty against thousands

Guards rarely venture inside Honduran prisons, leaving prisoners to sort themselves out. In practice this means the gangs are in control. These gangs co-opt the co-ordinators of every aisle, block and building, who ensure the numerous written and unwritten rules are respected. The power of the co-ordinators is indisputable; they check fights and riots which nonetheless often occur. Last year, 57 inmates died during prison riots in Honduras. LGBTQI+ inmates feel especially vulnerable. 'During a riot anybody can come and kill you,' Nicolle explains. 'Imagine the constant state of

**When Nicolle became co-ordinator, she told residents of her corridor to keep their heads down. 'If one of us makes problems, all of us pay'**



fear we feel, 20 of us against thousands of inmates.' When Nicolle became co-ordinator, she told residents of her corridor to keep their heads down. 'If one of us makes problems, all of us pay.'

This attitude explains why none of the women in the 'pink aisle' mention any complaints about the prison to me. They talk in general about the lack of freedom, resources and visits, and their hopes of not making the same mistakes again. They say nothing about the discrimination and violence they suffer. I'm reminded of Nicolle's words: 'In prison, no-one talks freely.' One message the girls often repeat stands out though: 'We're all prisoners here. If we respect, we get respect.'

That golden rule was also mentioned by the lead co-ordinator when he took me on a tour of the prison. 'If they behave, we look after them, and we punish those that abuse them.' Fear, and the need to coexist in an overcrowded jail, makes inmates obey; bothering the LGBTQI+ prisoners would cause problems. The need to maintain this delicate coexistence leaves trans women some room for negotiation. As co-ordinator, I was able to get them to

let us grow our hair, wear more feminine clothes and get hormone treatment,' Nicolle proudly recalls. But like peace, rules are fragile inside. Problems arose after Brithany left. Two cis-male co-ordinators took charge of the pink corridor and things took a turn for the worse.

### Impact of the Covid-19 curfew

It's three in the afternoon, time to go. Soon the guards will lock the buildings. We still have two hours on buses, back to the streets of Tegucigalpa. 'It's crazy to say, but outside we often feel more vulnerable,' Nicolle asserts. 'Even though in prison we're at the mercy of the gangs, they also somehow support and protect us.'

Nicolle's lack of confidence in the State to protect LGBTQI+ inmates is based on experience. The State is often a perpetrator of discrimination and violence against the LGBTQI+ community. Reporting abuses is considered useless and even dangerous in a country where 95 per cent of the murders of LGBTQI+ people remain unsolved – usually uninvestigated and with the culprits at large.

The Covid-19 emergency brings additional pressures. Although there has been

a clampdown on visits, there has been a major outbreak in Tamara. Several prisoners have died, hundreds are infected but healthcare is precarious.

'I am very worried about the girls inside,' says Nicolle. 'It's impossible to know how they are.'

But she is also worried about herself. Like so many others she has been unable to go out to work since 16 March due to the Covid-19 curfew and she is struggling. One trans woman who tried to go out was killed. Brithany, on the other hand, is relatively happy. She enjoys being with her family and making plans for the future. 'I lost five years of my life [in prison]. I want to study, maybe set up a beauty salon.' Both women, however, share one dream: setting up a support network for imprisoned trans persons. 'I know what it feels like,' says Brithany. 'The need for love, family and resources. I will not let them down.' ●

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