



In 2014, Costa Rica's Public Ministry implemented an administrative change to the drug law to shorten the sentences of women arrested for carrying drugs into prisons. The change aims to reduce overcrowded prisons while offering a second chance to low-level offenders.

"J", who wishes to remain anonymous, is one of these women. She is learning firsthand that a criminal record makes life harder on the outside.



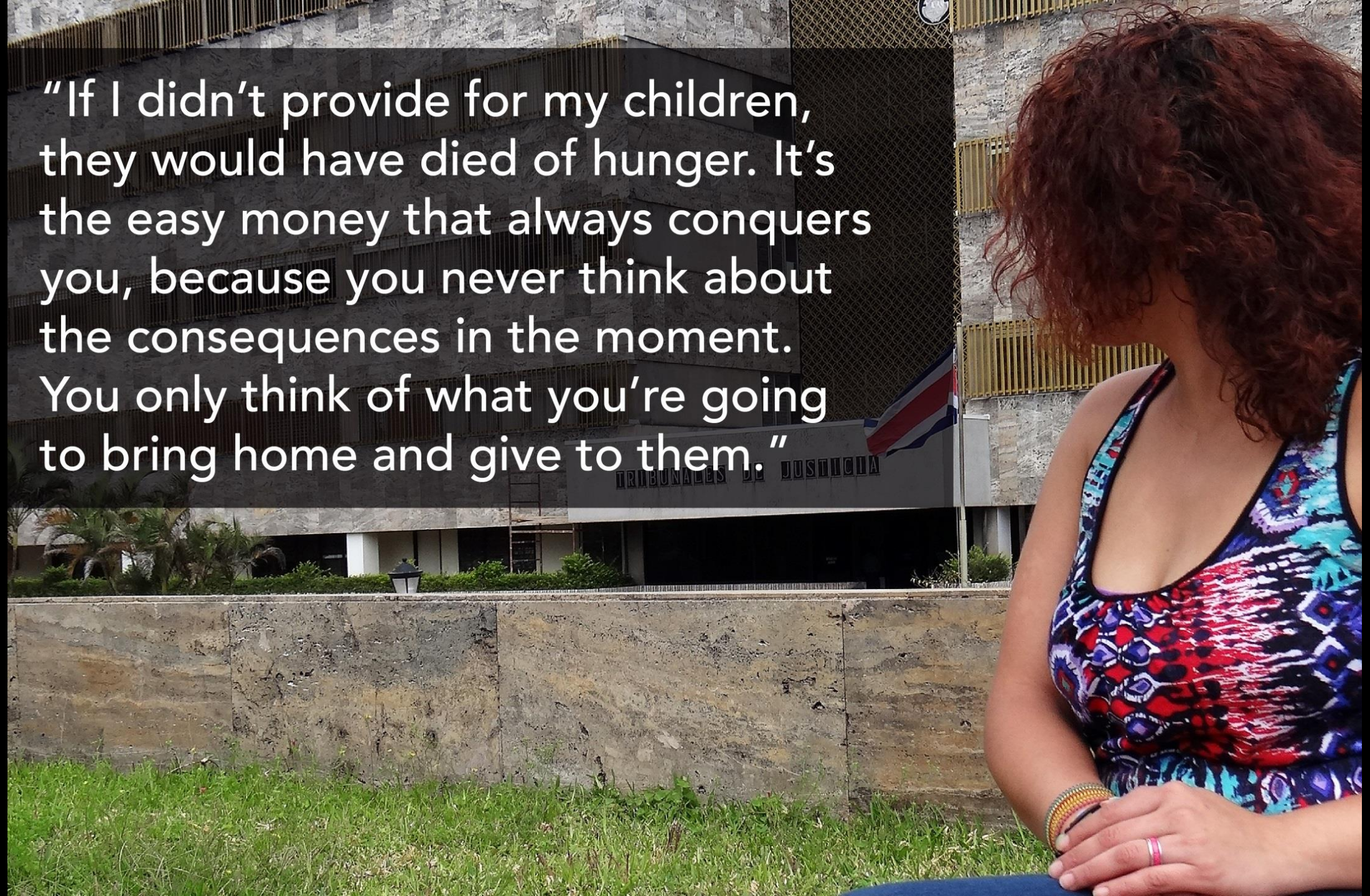
LIFE AFTER PRISON

Sentence: 5 years and 4 months for attempting to bring drugs into a prison. Released after 4 months.

J, 28, is a single mother of six. To feed her children, she agreed to bring drugs into a prison. It seemed like easy money. She says that at the last minute she gave the drugs to the guards in an attempt to come clean.


It was too late. She was arrested and charged.

"If I didn't provide for my children, they would have died of hunger. It's the easy money that always conquers you, because you never think about the consequences in the moment. You only think of what you're going to bring home and give to them."



She waited a long time—two years—for her trial.
When it finally happened, she was only given one
day's notice before she had to appear in court.

After her conviction, J couldn't bear to tell her children she was sent to prison. When she called home and they asked where she'd gone, she told them she was working.

A woman with curly hair is shown from the chest up, wearing a vibrant tank top with a geometric pattern in red, blue, and white. She is positioned on the left side of the frame. The background features a textured stone wall and a building with vertical siding and a flag. A semi-transparent dark box on the right contains a quote in white text.

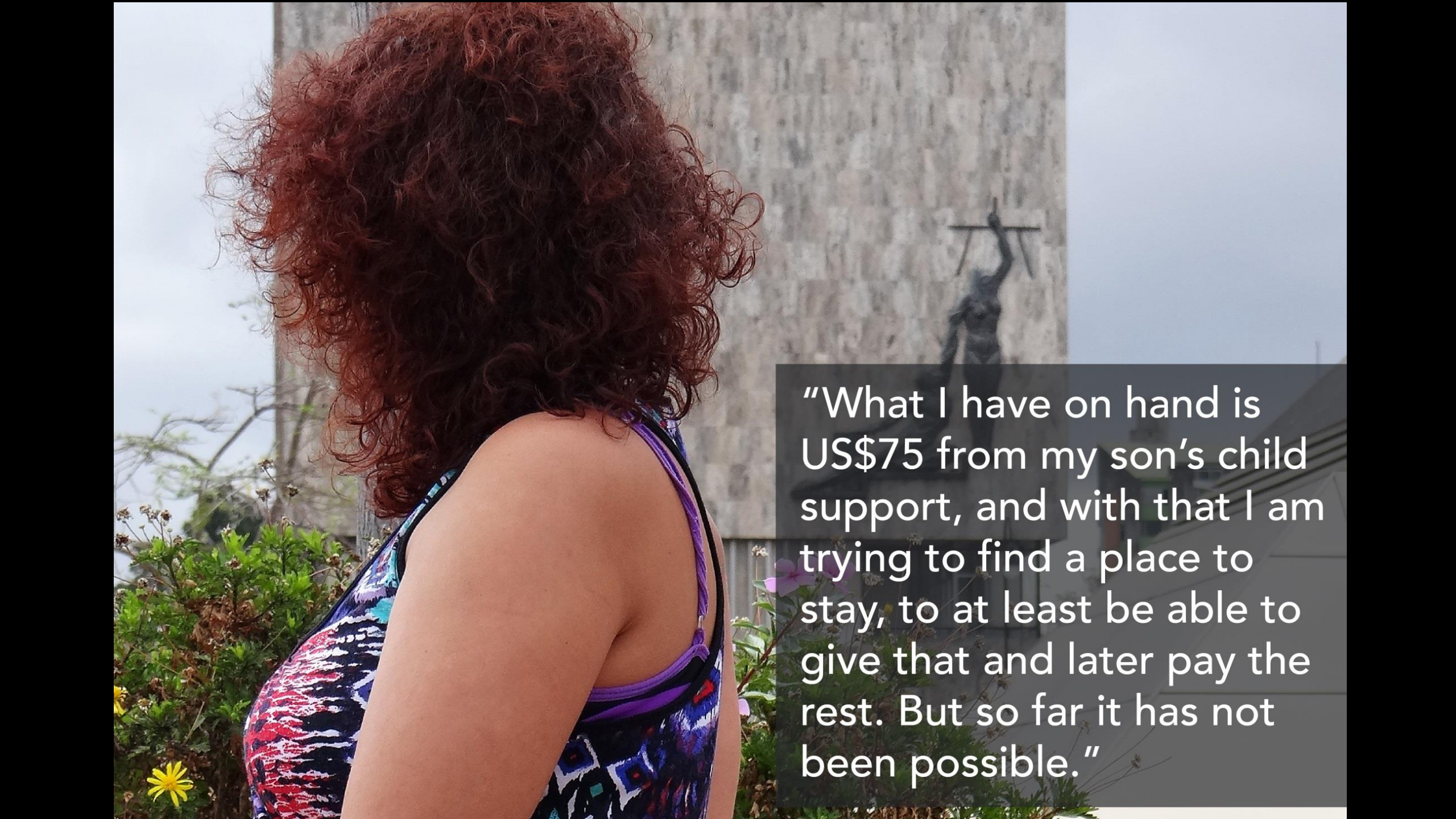
"I cried for a month, day and night, for my children. I was going to give up, because I couldn't bear to hear them on the phone crying and saying 'Mama, when do you get off work?' and to have to swallow my tears and say 'I have a lot of work, my love. Soon.'"

She benefited from Costa Rica's sentencing reform and was released after four months in prison. When she was reunited with her family, her youngest child didn't recognize her.

“When I got off the bus, it was hard to see their little eyes full of tears. My daughter, who is now three, said to me, ‘That’s not mama, that’s not mama,’ because she had gone four months without seeing me. And she just kept looking at me, and I said to her, ‘yes, it’s me, it’s me.’”



Now J is in a dire situation, without family support, a home, or a job. She was recently kicked out of her house. Her criminal record makes getting a job nearly impossible. For now, she relies on child support from the father of one of her sons to support her six children.

A woman with voluminous, curly red hair is shown in profile, looking towards the right. She is wearing a colorful, patterned halter-neck top. In the background, there is a large, light-colored stone wall and a statue of a person holding a cross. The scene is outdoors with some greenery and a yellow flower visible in the lower left.

"What I have on hand is US\$75 from my son's child support, and with that I am trying to find a place to stay, to at least be able to give that and later pay the rest. But so far it has not been possible."

Her offense will continue to stain
her record for the next ten years.



"The criminal record talks."

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Producer and Photographer
Jessamine Bartley-Matthews

Editorial Assistance
Kathy Gille, Kristel Muciño, and Coletta Youngers

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