



Drug trafficking organizations often take advantage of women's poverty and need to provide for their families, inducing women to carry illegal drugs across international borders. Drug "couriers" put their lives in serious danger and end up behind bars while major drug traffickers walk free.

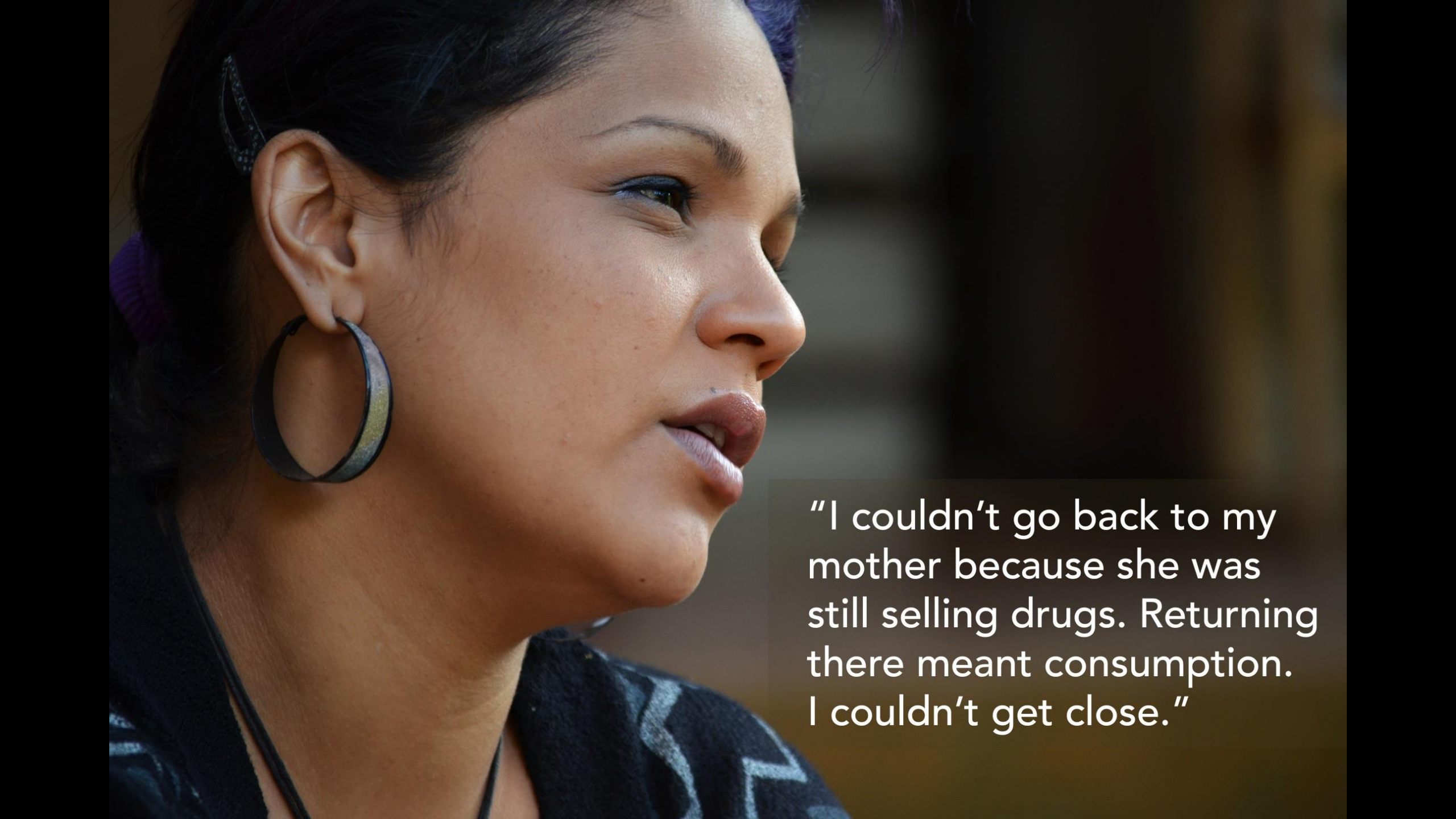


CAUGHT IN A VICIOUS CYCLE

Current sentence: 6 years,
6 months for selling drugs.

The daughter of a drug user and a sex worker, Johanna and her five siblings were exposed to drug trafficking at a young age. By 13, she was cleaning houses in exchange for rice and sugar for the family. Drugs were everywhere, especially at home, and she began using them.

At 14, her mother sent her away to school to keep her away from that environment and help her get clean.




"I couldn't go back to my mother because she was still selling drugs. Returning there meant consumption. I couldn't get close."


She moved to the coast, where she met foreigners who offered her a more exciting lifestyle. Her new friends paid her small sums to travel, carrying goods within Costa Rica and to neighboring countries.

Then, her mother was sent to prison, and things got hard for her siblings. She agreed to carry a suitcase full of drugs to England via Venezuela.

But things didn't go as she expected.



"When I got to the apartment where the man was, I had my suitcase, and my understanding was that my bag would be changed. When he said to me, 'Lie here, this is your room,' I thought I was going to rest."


A woman with short, dark hair dyed purple sits at a dark, textured table. She is wearing a black shawl with a white geometric pattern over a dark top. She has a tattoo on her left upper arm and is wearing large hoop earrings and a necklace. Her hands are clasped together on the table, and she has a worried or distressed expression on her face. A handgun is lying on the table near her hands. The background is blurred, showing some greenery and a building.

"No. He said to me 'Loosen your clothes, mami, so you feel more comfortable.' That's when I realized the situation was heading in another direction, and I began to worry."

Johanna was given a bucket containing 84 latex-wrapped cocaine packets and a tube of toothpaste and told to swallow them all.


She began to panic. When she tried to refuse, the man threatened her family.

There was no turning back.

A close-up, profile shot of a woman with dark hair pulled back. She is looking upwards and to the right with a thoughtful or somber expression. Her hand is raised towards her mouth, with her fingers slightly curled. She is wearing large, dark, circular hoop earrings and a dark-colored top with a light-colored geometric pattern. The background is blurred, suggesting an indoor setting with soft lighting.

"I began to pray and think about my family. It was very hard for me, because the first packets I swallowed I vomited. I vomited many times until I learned how to do it. My throat was bleeding and swollen. It was very hard."


When she wasn't able to swallow all of the cocaine, she was forced to have sex with the man and carry the remaining packets vaginally.

A woman with short, vibrant purple hair is shown in a close-up, looking down with a somber expression. She is wearing a black cardigan with a white and grey geometric pattern over a dark top. A necklace with a colorful, circular pendant hangs around her neck. A tattoo is visible on her left shoulder. In the foreground, a small, dark, rectangular object lies on a grey, textured surface. The background is blurred, showing what appears to be an outdoor setting with some structures.

“They brought me the package—very large—and it was very difficult for me, and very humiliating, too...I had no choice but to prostitute myself.”

By the time Johanna was detained during a layover in Venezuela, one day and four hours after swallowing the drugs, her hands were purple and her heart rate was dangerously high.


They took her to the emergency room, where they discovered that some of the capsules had burst inside her stomach.



"I was imprisoned in Venezuela.
I had the good fortune to be
caught there, thank God, and
for that I'm not dead."

After serving her sentence in Venezuela, Johanna returned to Costa Rica. She fell in love with a man with ties to traffickers and fell back into the drug trade.

She is currently serving a six-year sentence for selling marijuana.

A close-up, profile shot of a woman with dark hair, looking upwards and to the right. She is wearing a large hoop earring and a patterned shawl. A semi-transparent dark box on the right side of the image contains a quote in white text.

"We believed we could have it all quickly, but we ended up with nothing."

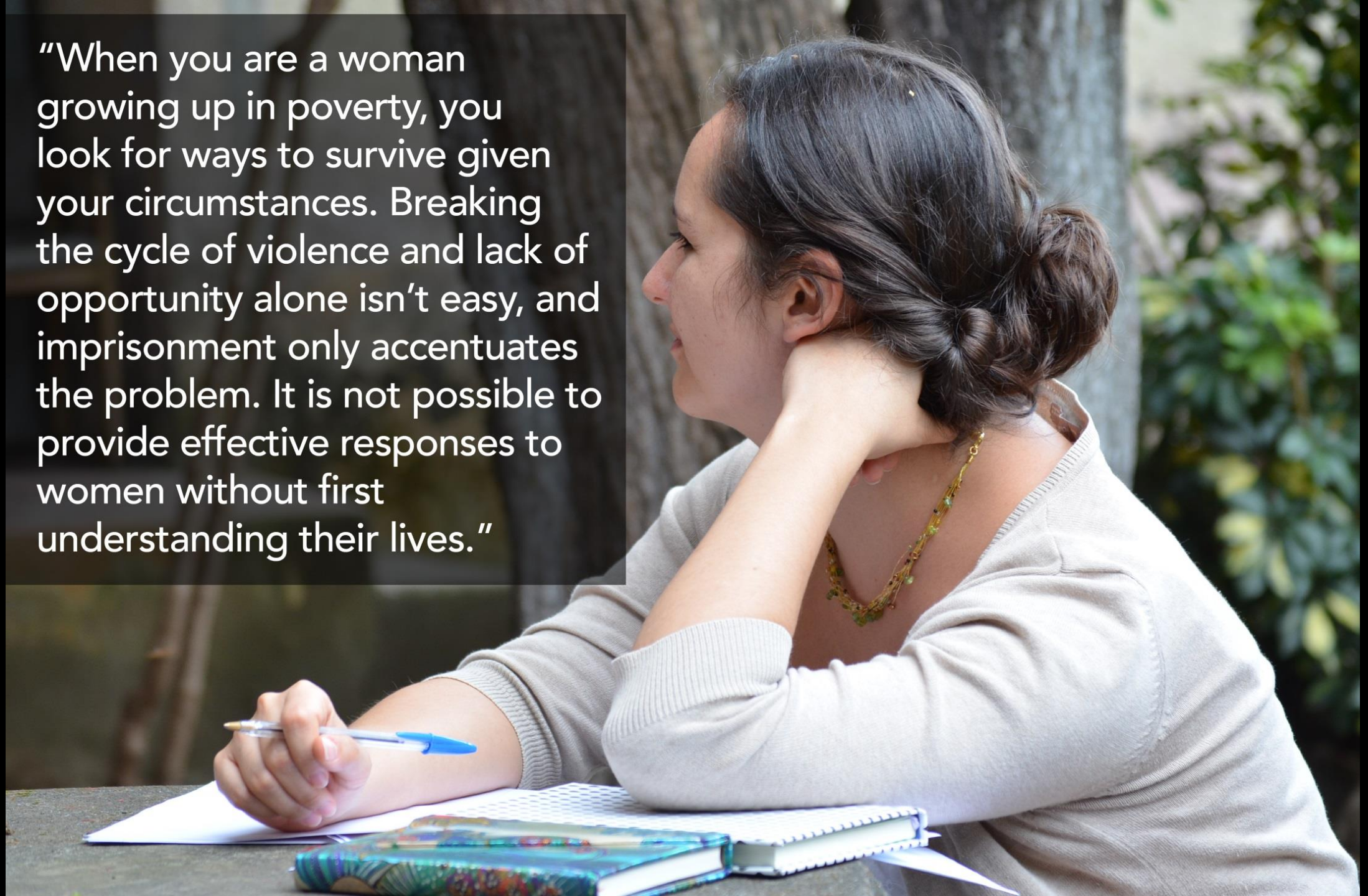
CERTIFICADO DE PARTICIPACIÓN

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This time, Johanna wants to do things differently. She has taken over 15 preparatory courses while in prison, and hopes to eventually open her own beauty salon when her sentence is up.

Demalui Amiguetti is the president of the Costa Rican Association for the Study and Intervention in Drugs (ACEID). She works on projects related to women's and children's human rights, commercial sexual exploitation, and development. She says that stories like Johanna's are all too common.

"When you are a woman growing up in poverty, you look for ways to survive given your circumstances. Breaking the cycle of violence and lack of opportunity alone isn't easy, and imprisonment only accentuates the problem. It is not possible to provide effective responses to women without first understanding their lives."



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