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CHIME THROUGH THE YEARS

## “FAR FROM HEAVEN” BY STEPHANIE LAMORRE

*CHIME FOR CHANGE Through the Years: The Female Fabric is a series curated by CHIME Managing Editor Mariane Pearl featuring stories from the CHIME journalism platform archives by women around the world.*



It might look stupid or insane or desperate for the most understanding of us, like a negation of the gift of life itself. We might say that they are destroying their lives for no reason, that they are wrong and we are right. That they chose to be in a gang, because of the guns, because they can steal, because they can attack or insult and express their ire. **In 2015, there were an estimated one million gang members in the United-States,**

including between 60 000 to 80 000 women. Women are twice as guilty of violence because of their gender. Because they could have, they should have, aspired to motherhood and a husband to serve.

We don't see the raw existential pain or think about the insane energy it takes to meet daily gangs' demands. In fact, what do we really know about losing? What do we really know about the void, the pain of surviving?

Their world is one of broken families, violent neighbourhoods and chaotic childhoods.

The women I met all entered the gangs very young, about 12 to 13 years old. They joined because of the easy cash, because they fell in love, because their family has been involved in gang life all along, and because life goes on, one of thefts, drug dealing and constant mourning, year in, year out. **That life usually ends in prison, or early death. The gang they once considered family became the hell to escape.** They want to flee, for their children, they want out. Or they don't. For some, it remains the gang above all. "I don't know if tomorrow I will be alive" said one of the women, Rosa, and they accept this as a rule. Run or die. **They defend their territory, their community as in a country at war: the same violence, the same feelings of anger and injustice. But we are not in a country officially at war, we are in the United States of America. Gang members create their territories to have a geographical, social, and racial identity. Because integration is only a word behind which races do not mix. and genders even less.** I chose to follow eleven women in their day to day, for several weeks. They are young, dynamic, and could be lawyers or doctors if they had been given the chance to study. But they live in East Los Angeles or South Central L.A. The hood as they say, synonymous with widespread unemployment, urban decay and street crime. 18 percent of the families living in South Central have incomes below the poverty line, about twice that of the country at large. I chose to live with them and to film not only their gangsters' everyday life but also their hopes and dreams. We talk about the problems and their solutions. Film their future in a world in decay and look beyond appearance to share the reality of these women striving to exist in the very system that tries so hard to crush them.

