

Women and Drug Trafficking – Women Empowerment in an Illicit Business?

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The article tackles the issue of female roles in drug trafficking industry in Mexico. Additionally, it presents some famous women drug dealers through history, as well as the most common representation of a woman involved in drug trafficking in some media and in narco culture. The used methodology requires an interdisciplinary approach, since it includes literature overview, a brief discourse analysis of selected online media and a brief analysis of statistical data on the femicide rate in Mexico and its relationship with rising drug trafficking violence.

Keywords: *women, empowerment, drug trafficking, female role, femicide.*

Drug trafficking industry is not a new phenomenon across the globe. It is an *old occupation* that involves different stakeholders, from small smugglers and weed and coca leaves growers to serious entrepreneurs and government officials and forces. Similar to most other legal and common *industries*, drug trafficking is related to other illicit business, such as arms and human trafficking, extortion or money laundering. Additionally, in its most extreme forms, it provokes most vicious forms of violence such as torture, kidnapping and homicide. This particular topic of drug smuggling has been broadly investigated in last three or so decades, from different perspectives and through the eyes of sociologists, political scientists, anthropologists and linguists. What especially contributes to drug trafficking to be a widely known phenomenon is its media coverage and the rising *narco culture* in Latin America and the Caribbean. This business, surprisingly easily woven into everyday life, is considered to be a male dominant world. Taking that into consideration, the purpose of this article is to investigate the role of women in drug trafficking, with focus on Mexico and U.S. border, and eventually to raise the question of a possible bad women empowerment.

Firstly, the rising violence in Mexico, and in the whole Latin America and the U.S. border, generates more complex and violent situations for women. According to Pierre Salama (2008) and his study on violence in Latin America, a homicide rate is one of the factors that can be measured and therefore taken crucial in order to see how the violence has increased in Mexico. Statistically speaking, and taking official data into account (it is widely known that there might be an enormous discrepancy between official data and a real situation in the context of illicit drug trade), the figure shows femicide rate in Mexico in 2018. On the graph, only those territories with more than 100 femicides are shown. It can be noticed that many of the territories presented in the graph are those where drug related violence is known to be present, such as Chihuahua, Baja California, Jalisco, Guanajuato, Mexico and Guerrero. Although this number is incomparably higher for men, the number of homicide of women in these areas cannot be neglected.

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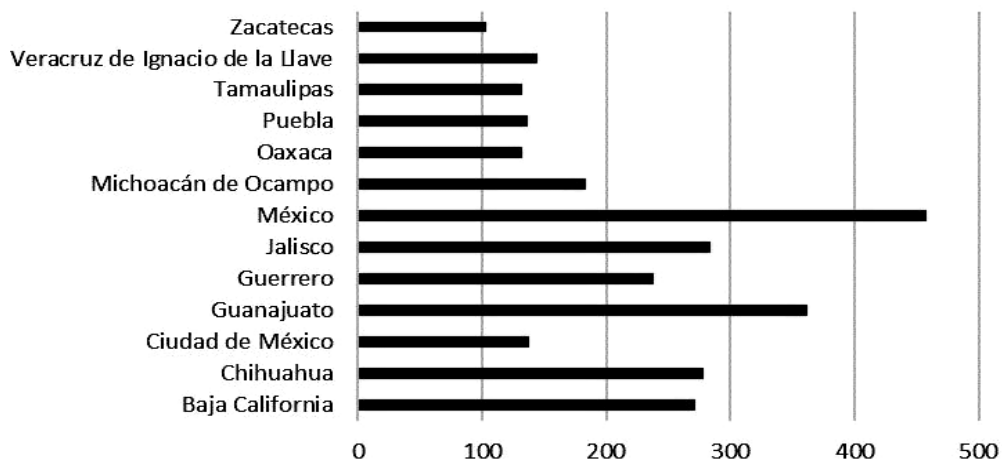


Fig. Femicide rate in Mexico in 2018

Source: URL: <https://www.inegi.org.mx/>.

The topic of female roles in illicit business is not completely new, and although there are not as many articles and books on this topic as there are on those related to men and male dominance in this trade, the topic is not completely neglected. According to the UN report (UNODC 2018), the drug trafficking organizations across the world are mainly led by men and the role of women is ‘relatively insignificant’ (World Drug Report 2018). Women are expected to fulfill the role of mothers, housekeepers and wives. However, this report stresses that in Latin America women play a more active role in drug trafficking industry. These more active roles may be the result of new family roles and economic need that has been reconfiguring lately. Therefore, involvement of more women in drug trafficking may be beneficial for the business since they are less likely to be suspected for criminal activities, and they are inclined to accept less money than men for some jobs (*Ibid.*).

Anderson and Kavanaugh (2018) point out that there are two models of ‘drug marketing.’ The first one is a so-called business model, and within this model women are often involved in drug trafficking in its bottom lines. The second one is an independent model, and women are supposed to be more present in independent markets. These authors also cite Fleetwood (2015) who stresses two important observations: first one is that women still get involved into drug trafficking through their relationships with men, and the second one is that they may have an important role and pass their business on to their daughters (Anderson and Kavanaugh 2018). These statements about women in drug trafficking are the most common; either they are present in the market through their relationship with men or they may have a more active role; however, this is more typical of those who work independently than of those who are a part of an organization.

It is not surprising that with the expansion of illicit markets and the rising relationship between demand and offer, the number of women in drug trafficking also increases. There are different reasons why women decide (or it may not even be consensual) to get involved. For example, according to the UN report (UNODC 2018), in Latin America women with a history of sexual and physical violence and lower level of education tend to more often become part of this illicit network. Also, Carrillo Hernández (2012) adds numerous

reasons why women immerse into drug trafficking: unemployment, social exclusion, inequality, *etc.* There is an important factor to be taken into account, and that is a 'moral' one that justifies a woman in drug trafficking if it is the only way to provide for her family (*Ibid.*). In this sense, there is sometimes no that much difference between a decision of a man and that of a woman regarding their reason to join drug trafficking and trade. Although, when it comes to men, they are more likely to get involved into drug trafficking due to fascination with luxury life and women, than for the family matters, as it is more common for women. This is strongly related with traditional female and male role in a society. Since it is traditionally expected from men to bring *food and money to the table*, their fascination with drug trafficking comes from fast and easy money and social status that can be easily bought in modern societies, as well as an easier access to beautiful women, as they are one of the most known trophies that accompany a drug lord or even a smaller smuggler or *sicario*.

According to the literature on female roles in drug trafficking, there has been made a certain classification of these roles. It is quite clear that narco world is a man's world. A man is a *capo* or a boss who has his own hitmen and informants (Jiménez Valdez 2014). On the other hand, a woman is a subordinate subject, mostly for fun, sex, showing off or closing the deal between partners (*Ibid.*). An important thing is stated by the UN report (UNODC 2018), according to which women are a more vulnerable group in drug trafficking. 'They may have stronger feelings of responsibility for their family, can be exploited easily by organized crime groups as a result of institutionalized sexism...'

One of the most common adjectives attributed to women in this industry is what Valenzuela Arce calls a 'trophy woman' (*mujer trofeo*). She is a symbol of social power and richness (Jiménez Valdez 2014). Moreover, Mata (2012) adds a category called simple narco woman (*mujer del narco*), where she includes wives, daughters and other female relatives in the family (Jiménez Valdez 2014). Of course, there is also an emerging woman drug lord (*mujer capo*), although her presence is not that strong among male drug lords. A number of scholars stress *mulas* as one of the roles women play in drug trafficking (Carrillo Hernández 2012). These women are almost at the bottom of drug trafficking chain, and they transport drugs from point A to point B, mostly inside their bodies. Carrillo Hernandez adds that they might even not know what exactly they are transporting, what amount and price, they just know how much money they are going to receive for that action. Among all these types, Jimenez Valdez (2014) also includes 'buchonas'. This name refers to those women who use their beauty and their relationship with men to enter this world. There are some additional roles that do not specifically fall into a category, but these other roles women can play are in public relations, certain decor at parties, they can be interchangeable if a deal is to be closed (*Ibid.*). As it can be seen, almost none of these roles puts a woman in a leading position and not even close to it. Their roles are mostly based on what makes them women *by male dominant tradition*, with focus on their body, beauty and family affairs.

Although the role of a female drug lord is not as common as that of a male drug lord, there are certainly women who held the title of a narco boss in drug trafficking history. It is often believed that this emerging figure of a female narco leader is one of a recent history; however, there is evidence about women who participated in drug trafficking industry and building empires in the 1920s. This section will offer a historical overview of the most famous and notorious female drug dealers in Mexican history.

Some researchers, like Franco Díaz (2015), note that in the 1920s women accounted for almost 60 per cent of trafficking between Mexico and the United States. Some of the most famous female drug traffickers she mentions (as well as other authors such as Carey) are: Felisa Velásquez (The Queen of Marihuana), Lola la Chata and Ignacia La Nacha, active in the 1930s and early 1940s (*Ibid.*) Lola la Chata was a drug lord herself, who, according to Elaine Carey, set foot on scene at the times when women were pictured as victims of drug trafficking. She was not a victim, but an ‘opportunist’ who became famous, rich and respected. She added something new in what is considered to be feminine and domain of female power. She was working as a mule in La Merced from where she went to the city of Juárez, and gave birth to two daughters. Firstly, during the 1920s, she was not under the radar; however, in the 1930s she became visible in some documents in Mexico and the United States. Elaine Carey (2009) notes that women like la Chata make deviation in a male dominant history, and they change the way women are perceived as victims and lured into drug trafficking, but she used two options that women could use in this world: her family and sexual relations. She was caught and put in jail seven times between 1934 and 1945 (Carey and Cisneros Guzmán 2011). In the 1960s, Margarita Caro Lopez played an active role in the links with marihuana smuggling, and in the 1980s it was Alicia Félix Zazueta, a cousin of Miguel Ángel Félix Gallardo (Franco Díaz 2015). Franco Díaz emphasizes that the female role has been declining from leadership activities to trophy roles, especially after the 2006 reorganization in dealing with drug trafficking (war on drugs) where they were sent back to their well-known ‘subordination’ roles (*Ibid.*). Apart from different scholars investigating the topic of female leaders of drug cartels, even the UN report (UNODC 2018) mentions some of the females in leading positions. Among them is Enedina Arellano Félix, a supposed leader of the Tijuana cartel since 2008. Furthermore, there is a widely common figure of Sandra Ávila Beltrán, known as ‘Queen of Pacific’, arrested in 2007, then Griselda Blanco, known as ‘La Madrina’, who is believed to have been trafficking cocaine between 1975 and the 2000s.

Some of these traffickers were widely known, for example, Sandra Ávila Beltrán, but it is interesting to note that female drug leaders were not rare cases in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. They were able to create empires and smuggle different drugs in the same way their male partners did, and this gave them the same commodities, money and comfort as it did to men. However, as one can see even if the female role in drug trafficking is more visible and present nowadays, it is rarely a leading role, and quite more often a subordinate one, that might not even give women an option of a free choice. The circumstances that usually drive women to choose an illicit drug business may not be that easily perceived as a choice. Although we cannot foresee that the same might happen with men who get involved into drug trafficking, they are still less vulnerable than women in such situation. The study shows that there is an increasing number of women in prisons due to crimes against health. According to the UN report (UNODC 2018), from 2010 to 2014, it is estimated that 35 per cent of women are in prison due to illicit drug trade business worldwide, and the number of women in prisons has doubled across Latin America since 2000. More easily caught, more vulnerable and ‘less’ important, females in drug trafficking are often seen as consumable goods.

Women in Media and Narco Culture

The media that produce enormous impact on how women are perceived in drug trafficking are tabloids and narco culture. Jiménez Váldez (2014) notes that a typical female image, that has become a symbol, includes a super skinny woman, however, with certain attributes such as breast size, big lips and dark long hair. This is a narco woman, but she is also a symbol of desire, not only for men, but also for young females who dream of becoming like them one day. She is someone's aspiration with perfect hair, teeth and most expensive clothes. Her glorification is not based on her merits, nor her contributions, opinions anything of the kind, but on her looks, clothes and a possibility to obtain a rich narco husband.

Narco culture is a space where many stereotypes about women originate, especially if we take a closer look at some movies or narcotelenovelas. There are three important dimensions to show a female role related to drug trafficking on a screen: action chick (*Queen of South*, Rosario Tijeras), woman reduced to her biological body (Mercader 2012) (most common element that is present in almost every movie or TV show) or an obedient woman (*Narcos*).

Palaversich in her work *Heroes of our time: the figure of the drug-trafficker in Colombian narcotelenovelas* (2016) notes that the main female characters in soap operas such as *Rosario Tijeras* and *El Capo* are the Hollywood image of action chicks, that is, the *femme fatale*, beautiful, but dangerous. Although Palaversich investigates the narcotelenovelas in Colombia, this definition can be used in the analysis of Mexican female heroes, such as Teresa Mendoza in *Queen of South*, because she is a Hollywood Charlie's angel. The representation of women as action chicks can be somehow problematic, since on the one hand, the romanticized image of a beautiful and dangerous woman is nothing new in cinematography and the reception of the public is quite predictable. On the other hand, it is an open question whether presenting women drug traffickers as action chicks might be negative women empowerment or the only way to empower women in the world that is dominated by men, with the traditionally understood masculine characteristics, is to give them the characteristics of an action chick as a female version of a drug lord action man? On the other hand, we have two completely opposite categories to the action chick: the woman reduced to her biological body and the obedient woman, an image a lot closer to those roles women represent today in drug trafficking. According to Pannetier-Leboeuf (2017), drug traffickers share a common vision of the moral acceptability of instrumentalization of the female body for their activities.

It is interesting to mention that in narcotelenovelas, in which women play the leading part (they are not many), the sexual value is added to the action chick value. In other cases, such as *Narcos* (crime drama television series), for example, the woman plays a sporadic role and, consequently, her character is an instrumentalized body. This example of *Narcos*, a Hollywood production that came to have greater international popularity than any other series of the world on drug trafficking, has a problem in its representation of women. In this series we do not find action chicks (although there are sporadic roles of women who are not shown as obedient or reduced to their biological body, the role of the journalist Carolina Álvarez, from season three, for example, even the character of Maritza, with some changes in later *Narcos Mexico*). Women are the romanticized image of drug trafficking: narco wives, narco mothers, narco lovers, completely deprived of their own identity, and their being and bodies exist in relation to the drug trafficker.

If we focus on some tabloids headlines and descriptions of women connected with drug trafficking, the emphasis is mostly on their beauty and how dangerous they are (the action chick value added for sensationalist reasons). The phrases that can be read (almost always accompanied with appropriate pictures of their beauty) are: they are beautiful and dangerous (*son bellas y peligrosas*), women use their beauty (*las mujeres utilizan su belleza*) (LaPrensa 2015). If we read Infobae (2019), we may find some Instagram photos and title 'Powerful and enigmatic: the most beautiful narco women' (*Poderosas y enigmáticas: las mujeres mas bellas del narco*). The same article about Sandra Avila Beltran concludes about the size of her breast and it is mentioned that she was intelligent; however, the power of her looks cannot be neglected. The same article mentions another female, related to drug trafficking, Ana Marie Ladezma, known as the sexiest drug trafficker in the world, as proclaimed by *Playboy* magazine. Thanks to her appearance, it was easy for her to move through high society (there is also a racial insinuation due to her blonde hair and relatively pale skin tone). Additionally, the article paints Claudia Berenice Ochoa Félix as *Kim Kardashian of the organized crime*, and regarding Emma Coronel (El Chapo's wife), there are tutorials on YouTube about how to look like her.

Another *Infobae* (2020) article, in comparison to the previous one, does not objectify women, as it explains an emerging role of a female smuggler, who sells drugs in small amounts, and they are known under the street name as *las tiradoras*. Additionally, the blog *Talking Drugs* (Menguzzato 2015) emphasizes that the media often neglects the important role women may play in drug trafficking due to overwhelming machismo and the subordinate position of a woman (as we have presented it here through tabloids and narco culture). And eventually, *Blasting News España* (Bermeo 2016) published an opinion article on what lies behind the pretty faces of narco girls. There is a specific paragraph in this article that can be a whole life story of a woman in drug trafficking. The paragraph is originally in Spanish.

Let's try to be empathetic and put ourselves in the shoes of a young woman who has life before her; however, poverty and hunger have broken most of her dreams, let's also consider that perhaps because of her characteristic beauty she has never had to fight for anything... One can assume that in order to get out of poverty, she would do *anything*. At a certain moment, a powerful and rich man who realizes her peculiar beauty and the fact that he can 'show her off' to his enemies, offers her everything she has dreamed of, of course, without telling her what she might risk. It is then that the game begins.

This final comment, as well as all the previous ones, mainly reduces women to their beauty, their bodies and the role of a victim or an easy prey for a drug lord. As it was stated before, the female role in drug trafficking may vary, from mules to trophies, and even to drug lords; however, pop culture and especially media coverage focus on the *physical* aspect. By doing so, their value is unfairly reduced. If we focus on the most frequently used words, those would be: beautiful, dangerous, Kardashian, Playboy, powerful man, and poverty.

Conclusion

The struggle for equality is particularly difficult in drug trafficking. Women in this industry tend to be more vulnerable, deprived of their rights and used and abused. In this article we have brought attention to recent femicide rate in Mexico, and how it might be connect-

ed with drug trafficking industry and the rising violence. Additionally, the female role in this industry has been presented, together with famous drug dealers in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Moreover, we have emphasized that narco culture and tabloids in showing women mostly reduce to their bodies with strong focus on sexual value they have to offer.

The female role is yet to be more investigated in social sciences and especially cultural studies. In the era of women empowerment, we have to ask ourselves what are the consequences of empowerment in illicit drug trade. On the other hand, the vulnerability of women, their presence in jails, and the increasing number of femicides show that this issue needs to be tackled not just on a wider scale but more carefully. For future researches, it may be important to examine in detail the relationship between femicide and drug trafficking, and the question of problematic women empowerment in illicit drug trade. Besides, the impact of tabloids and narco culture (shows, movies, and corridos) on women and their perception of drug trafficking is yet to be studied.

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