



Understanding Women's Involvement in Drug Trade: The Stories of Gabi and Sonia

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Abstract: The War on Drugs has been largely ineffective in Latin America and has led to a range of unintended consequences such as mass incarceration, corruption, political destabilization, and violence. In recent years, there has been an increasing concern for the high incarceration rate of Latin American women as a consequence of harsh drug policies. Women involved in drug trafficking are usually involved in the riskiest jobs of the operation and are thus more likely to be caught. This has caused the incarceration rates for women to rise significantly and disproportionately to those for men. This dramatic increase makes it clear that there is an urgent need for research on female criminality, a subject sparsely mentioned in the academic world. To add to the research on female criminality, this paper aims to answer why women in Mexico participate in drug trade by exploring the stories of two women who were previously involved in drug trade in Mexico. The results reveal that motherhood, poverty, and abuse are the prominent factors in Mexican women's engagement in drug trade. This paper emphasises the urgent need for more research on female criminality as it is becoming a growing concern.

Keywords: War on Drugs, Drug Policies, Mass Incarceration, Female Criminality, Motherhood, Poverty, Abuse

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Introduction

On the 18th of June in 1971, President Nixon announced drug abuse to be America's public enemy number one when he declared a War on Drugs claiming that the drug problem in the US would ruin the country if it was not defeated. However, the American president only put a name on a process that had already been going on for decades in the US, namely the strict prohibition of illicit drugs (Frydl 2013, 1). However, after Nixon's declaration, the process dramatically progressed as the American government enforced massive increases in prison sentences for drug users and dealers with an aim to stop the use, distribution, and trade of illicit drugs. However, the US' proclaimed War on Drugs became infamous for being a huge policy failure that had opposite effects than intended (Bagley 1988, 189–190). While the US government tried to reduce the supply of drugs, they simply could not reduce the demand. While, generally, high demand and low supply generate a higher price, the illicit drug market is not price-set, as users are willing to buy drugs at almost any price. Thus, the price increasement ended up only

encouraging the production, and drug traffickers would merely find new supply routes as old ones were destroyed by the US government. Moreover, several problems associated with drug use today, were in fact caused by the War on Drugs such as the creation of more potent drugs which were made to transport more drugs to make more profit (Werb et al., 2013, 3–7). In the end, the War on Drugs is estimated to have cost the US 1 trillion dollars, yet drug addiction rates have remained the same and the US incarceration rates are now the highest in the world (Betsy 2018).

The War on Drugs did not only have dramatic consequences for the US, but also for Central and South America, where the majority of drugs trafficked to the US has its origin (Lee 1985, 142). For Latin America, the War on Drugs has only made worse what was already a severe issue, namely drug cartels, which have been tormenting the region for decades. The strict drug policies have led to mass incarceration, corruption, political destabilization, and an increase in violence. Moreover, the War on Drugs has been highly deadly for the region. In Mexico, for example, it has been estimated that 164 000 people were murdered in the period between 2007 and 2014. In addition, the Mexican government estimated that as of mid-2020 around 73 000 people had gone missing or disappeared in Mexico since 2007 (Beittel 2020).

An especially curious consequence of the War on Drugs in Latin America are the high incarceration rates for women. The female prison population in Latin America has dramatically increased, going from 40 000 female inmates to more than 74 000 in the five-year period between 2006 and 2011 (Youngers 2014). While women make up only six percent of Latin America's prison population, the number has risen significantly and disproportionately compared to men (Giacomello 2013, 9). Most of the cases are non-violent drug-related offences such as trafficking, where the women are used as "drug mules" doing the highly risky job of transporting small amounts of illicit drugs across the US border. Despite women committing low-level crimes, they are more likely to be caught than those in a higher position in the drug-trafficking network, and thus the incarceration rates for women are increasing. Furthermore, the harsh drug policies do not make proper distinctions between personal use versus trafficking; violent versus non-violent offences; types of drugs, and the accused's rank in the drug-trafficking networks (IDPC n.d.). The trend of rising incarceration rates for women and female participation in drug trade is seen to be dramatic and makes it clear that there is a need for more research regarding female criminality, a subject which has been sparsely discoursed in the academic world. The high incarceration rates have severe consequences for those women as well as their left-behind families, which typically consist of young children or elders. Furthermore, women being driven into drug trade raises social concerns. Ultimately, women's participation in drug trade displays how one of the most vulnerable groups in society is persistently marginalised and disadvantaged. Thus, studying the topic is important for acquiring knowledge about leading causes and other factors to be able to eventually tackle the problem.

This research paper aims to explain why these women end up participating in drug trade by specifically looking at Mexico as a case study. The research question is as follows: why do women in Mexico engage in drug trade? In order to answer this question, a deductive approach is taken by examining previous scholars' theories and comparing them to empirical data. A qualitative, small 'N' method will be used by looking into the case study of two women currently imprisoned in Mexico for drug offences. The women were interviewed in 2020 by Giacomello (2020) and were used to gather information on why and how these women ended up participating in drug trade.

The paper begins by building an academic framework with a short theoretical analysis. Then, the social and cultural context, as well as the historical background, will be added for a deeper understanding of the social climate in Mexico. This is followed by an empirical analysis in

which the stories of the two women are presented, including a short discussion of the findings. Lastly, a conclusion is reached connecting the theoretical and empirical observations.

Theoretical Analysis

When reviewing previous academic research, it becomes apparent that there is a prominent absence of research on female criminality. As men have historically dominated the prison population, most academic research on criminality either focuses solely on men or does simply not distinguish between the genders (Chesney-Lind and Pasko 2013, 1). While women only made up 6.8.% of the global prison population in 2017, the numbers of female offenders are rising disproportionately to those for men, and not only in Latin America, but on all continents (Walmsley 2017, 2–15). Furthermore, the number of women imprisoned for drug offences is also rising in Latin America, and today about 70% of the incarcerated women are serving time for drug-related offences (The New Humanitarian 2014). Despite the increasing number of female offenders, our knowledge on female criminality is limited which makes it difficult to develop a proper understanding of the correlation between women and crime. In this literature review, the limited academic research regarding female criminality is presented to develop an understanding of women's engagement in drug trade.

The Liberation Thesis

A theory which has been continuously recited in articles regarding female criminality is Freda Adler's (1975) 'liberation thesis'. Adler's (1975) book *Sisters in Crime: The Rise of the New Female Criminal* gained a lot of attention for being the first to consider gender as an aspect in criminal activity. Written at the time of the women's liberation movement, Adler (1975) argued that engaging in criminal activity is empowering rather than victimising women. She theorises that as women become more liberated in society, they gain access to new opportunities in the legitimate sphere of society, but also in the illegitimate sphere. Adler (1975) ultimately argued that the gender gap in crime is explained by the gender's unequal access to criminal opportunities. The liberation thesis thus implies that women engage in crime for the same reason as men but that women simply do not have the same social freedom to choose to engage in crime. This theory also suggests that women choose to engage in crime, rather than being coerced or impelled to do so. Adler's (1975) liberation thesis differs greatly from other assertions regarding female criminality which often paints the woman as the victim. She thus received great attention for her work, and while the liberation theory became heavily critiqued, her book became the starting point of the study on female criminality. Giordano (1978) is one of the critiques of Alders (1975) book. While Giordano (1978) agreed with the connection between female liberation and female criminality, she believed it to be an oversimplification to propose a direct link between the two. Giordano (1978) argues that Adler's theory implies a degree of politicization and commitment from the offender, which is something she believes Adler cannot adhere. She contends that shifting gender roles is important, but she argued that empirical work at the time showed that the liberation of women is multidimensional and not as straightforward as argued by Adler (Giordano 1978, 127). Instead, Giordano (1978) argues that women are recipients of societal changes and that they themselves are not solely responsible for the increase in crime. Ting (2021) provides a new viewpoint on the debate as he argues the increasing amount of female crime is a consequence of both the liberation of women as well as it reflects structural oppression against women. In his article, Ting (2021) describes a 'mismatched liberation', meaning an unequal level of liberty between men and women. He

argues that this ‘mismatched liberation’ leads women to have high aspirations while lacking the instruments to accomplish them. leaving the women with feelings of strain that lead them to commit crimes (Ting 2021, 576). As a heavily contested theory, the liberation thesis stands central in the study of female criminality, as it continues to engage in debates decades after being published.

The Economic Marginalization Hypothesis

The liberation theory is complimented by the economic marginalization hypothesis, as women’s unequal access to opportunities is often reflected in female poverty and economic inequality between genders. This hypothesis states that women who experience economic marginalization are more prone to commit non-violent crimes, such as drug trade, as a way of earning money to achieve financial stability. Heimer (2000) provided two main reasons for why this hypothesis explains how the gender gap in crime is narrowing with an increasing number of women being incarcerated.

Firstly, she stated that women account for more crime when economic inequality between women and men increases, as she argues that gender discrimination causes women to feel frustrated with society, which leads them to commit crimes (Heimer 2000, 446). This connects to Ting’s (2021) beforementioned assertion of the liberalization theory, in which he recognises that gender inequality causes an increase in female crime. Additionally, Reynolds (2008) contributes to this theory, stating that not only gender discrimination, but also race discrimination is an important factor. She argues that poor women of colour become victims of structural marginalisation which leads them to commit crimes (Reynolds 2008, 72–75).

Heimer’s (2000) second reason resonates with socialist and feminist theoretical justification, which traces the economic marginalization back to the family wage of the 19th century where men engaged in paid labour while women engaged in domestic labour. When women then moved into the labour market, their labour was undervalued, and they were therefore paid less than men. This feminization of poverty gives women incentive to engage in crimes, such as drug trade, to earn money. In one of her many articles regarding female criminality, Giacomello and Youngers (2020), concluded that women incarcerated for drug offences typically come from poverty or extreme poverty. Nevertheless, they also argued that other factors such as lack of education, low income, and minimal access to social benefits to be important influences as well for women incarcerated for drug offences. They determine that the imprisoned women typically come from the most disadvantaged parts of society.

Giacomello and Youngers (2020) further add to the economic marginalisation theory by adding the women’s role as a mother to be an additional reason for why these women desperately require money and choose to engage in crime to acquire it. In their research, Giacomello and Youngers (2020) found that most of the incarcerated women, are typically mothers. They state that the women are usually the primary or even only caretakers of small children or other people who depend on care, such as elders or people with disabilities (Giacomello and Youngers 2020, 107). Giacomello and Youngers (2020) concluded that the responsibility of being a caretaker makes it more likely for those women to engage in drug trade as they are willing to sacrifice themselves in order to take care of their children and elders (Giacomello and Youngers 2020, 107). Ultimately, Heimer (2008), Reynolds (2008) and Giacomello and Youngers (2020) all deem poverty to be an important, if not the main motivation behind women’s engagement in drug trade.

Domestic Violence and Abuse

Giacomello and Youngers (2020) also present domestic violence and abuse as one of the primary causes of female crime. They emphasise how violence experienced during childhood as well as violence in close relationships, such as with family members or partners, affects those women. They especially emphasise domestic and sexual violence, as they find that women engaged in drug trade often are brought into it by their male partners (Giacomello and Youngers 2020, 108). The male partners often turn to coercion when forcing their female partners into drug trade and Giacomello and Youngers (2020) describe how consent and coercion become interchangeable under the umbrella of 'romantic love'. In addition, Giacomello and Youngers (2020) found gender stereotypes to influence the power dynamic between the men and women in these relationships. The women are believed to be inferior to men, which leads to men to exploit their female partners. The domestic abuse hypothesis has been supported by several studies. Moe (2004), who conducted a small-scale study of 19 female victims of domestic abuse, found that 53% of them had engaged in criminal behaviour. The crimes committed were mostly nonviolent and petty, such as drug and alcohol-related offenses, theft, and low-level fraud. Furthermore, she established three key motives for these women's engagement in crime: a) to cope with the domestic abuse, b) to please their abuser, and c) to gain financial stability after leaving the relationship (Moe 2004, 123–124). In another study on abuse and female crime, Siegel and Williams (2003) focus specifically on child sexual abuse. Through a study of 411 female participants, they find that women who had experienced sexual abuse as children were more likely to engage in crime as an adult (Siegel and Williams 2003, 84–85). These findings confirm domestic violence and abuse against women are significant factors in female criminality.

Contextualisation

To study female criminality in Mexico, one must first put the topic into context by studying the social environment in Mexico. To narrow this down slightly, this section focuses on two aspects. First, the cultural background of women's roles in society. Here, Mexican gender norms and their effects on Mexican society will be explained. Then, some historical background on the role of women in drug-related crime. Together, this paints a picture of what role women have in Mexican society which subsequently seem seems to transfer into their role in drug trade.

Cultural Background

All the three theories found in previous academic work show how gender plays a significant role in women's participation in crime and drug trade. They all indicate women's position in society, how women are less liberated, economically marginalised, undervalued, and inferior compared to men. Therefore, the role of women in Mexico must be clarified to fully understand women's involvement in drug trade. To examine this, persistent cultural norms such as machismo and the subsequent marianismo will be explored.

The notion of 'machismo' has generated prevailing sexist attitudes amongst the Mexican population for decades. Machismo is by Gilmore 1987 as «a masculine display complex

involving culturally sanctioned demonstrations of hypermasculinity both in the sense of erotic and physical aggressiveness» (Gilmore 1987, 130). Essentially, it can be described as exaggerated pride in masculinity and involves hypermasculinity with old-fashioned beliefs that it is the man's responsibility to provide, protect and defend his family. The man is seen as powerful and he uses his power to establish dominance over women, as well as over other men. While machismo can have positive connotations such as being a 'family man' and taking care of your family, it is often negatively viewed as it is typically associated with hyper-masculinity, male superiority, aggressiveness, emotional insensitivity, womanising, sexism, and misogyny. It not only sets unrealistic expectations for men but it also paints a picture of helpless women dependent on men to provide and protect.

This notion of machismo is generated through a hierarchical family structure in which men are at the top. This creates an environment in which men feel entitled to exercise their power and control over their family, especially the women, and often through violence. This desire to assert their power over women extends beyond the family level and into the societal level (Pick, Contreras and Barker-Aquilar 2006, 265–266). Because of this, both physical and psychological acts of violence against women are a commonly accepted practise in Mexico (Pick, Contreras and Barker-Aquilar 2006, 261). The machismo culture also raises girls and boys very differently in regard to their expression of feelings and emotions. While it is acceptable for women to show their feelings, men cannot show any signs of emotion without being portrayed as weak. Raising girls and boys differently based on social norms and not their individual needs makes it difficult for the genders to peacefully coexist as they have been given two completely different tools of expression (Pick, Contreras and Barker 2006, 266–267).

Aggressive traditional machismo is found to be more prominent amongst younger, less-educated men. These less-educated men are commonly found in the rural areas of Mexico where daughters are traditionally sold for marriage, resulting in the husbands feeling a sense of ownership over their wives. These rural areas have been severely affected by a growing number of femicides: a phenomenon that describes how women and girls are murdered because of their gender. The Guardian reported that Mexico had over a thousand cases of femicide in 2021 alone and that this country is considered to be in the middle of a gender violence crisis (Phillips and Perlmutter 2022). Femicide is often referred to as a 'cultural crime' with the machismo culture commonly being blamed for the phenomenon.

The machismo culture is often regarded as a tradition which results in discrimination and violence against women often being tolerated and accepted (Pick, Contreras and Barker 2006, 266). While there is a legal framework in place in Mexico to protect women from male violence, there have not been seen any actual improvements in the lives of the women (Pick, Contreras and Barker-Aquilar 2006, 261–262).

Machismo has not only generated expectations for how men should behave, but for women as well. Latin American women are expected to live up to the notion of 'marianismo'. In this view, Virgin Maria is seen as a role model for women. Women are expected to present themselves as a woman and a mother in a conservative way.

These belief systems regarding how men and women should behave have had clear harmful effects on Mexican society. The men feeling a sense of entitlement and even ownership over the women have resulted in discrimination against women being a commonly tolerated practise. Femicide, domestic violence and sexual abuse have become a regular occurrence, and there are few signs of improvement. The cultural norms in Mexico have restricted women's freedoms, creating a mentality in which women have minimal control over their lives (Pick, Contreras and Barker 2006, 266). The ideas and theories found in the theoretical analysis showed a common belief that women are inferior to men, which is strongly reflected in the notion of machismo. This proves that machismo is an important concept in understanding the place of women in society.

Historical Perspective

Historically, Mexican drug trade has been a male-dominated activity, however, in recent times, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of women involved in drug trade (Correa-Cabrera 2011; Campbell 2008, 233). In addition, there has been an increased focus on these women in the media. Nevertheless, this recent increase in female drug trade activity and media attention does not mean that there has been an absence of female involvement in drug trade in previous decades. Although female participation in drug trade has been scarcely documented, it is known that since the 1920s, women have played a vital role in drug trade and even had senior or leading roles (Fleetwood and Leban 2022, 3). As women started entering more and more male-dominated professions, their participation in the highly profitable drug trafficking business naturally increased as well. While there have been cases of powerful female drug traffickers in Mexico such as the infamous Ignacia “La Nacha” Jasso who formed the first Mexican drug cartel, most of the women involved have low-ranking positions in the drug trade organization. Typically, women have been used as drug mules to transport drugs from Mexico to the US. US customs and border officials estimated that 60% of illicit drugs transported from Mexico to the US in the 1920s were brought by female drug mules (Duhaime 2021). This is a highly risky job, which is why women often end up with it as they are not as likely to be suspected of drug trafficking thus creating a better chance for the drugs to make it over the border. However, it poses a high level of risk for the women involved. Not only does transporting drugs make women likely to be caught and imprisoned, but the way the drugs are transported is sometimes extremely dangerous for the women. To pass security, women are sometimes forced to swallow small capsules that contain drugs, which turns into a deadly affair if the drug mules are not able to pass the border in time before the capsule disintegrates (COHA). In sum, women have always been involved in Mexican drug trade and even had high-ranking positions, but the majority of women involved remains in low-ranking positions that are highly risky, such as the transporting of illicit drugs.

Empirical analysis

Collecting empirical data on women engaged in drug trade in Mexico is on many levels a challenging task. As mentioned earlier, there is a distinctive lack of research on female criminality. While one could find statistics on how women are imprisoned, the data does not go further than that. In addition, the illicit drug business is such a cautious and dangerous business that it becomes very difficult to gather a full picture. Thus, when researching why women in Mexico engage in drug trade, there is a limited number of women who have been able to tell their stories.

In this research report, the stories of two women, Gaby and Sonia, will be explored. They are two low-ranking drug mules currently serving time for their drug offences in the female prison centre in Oaxaca, Mexico. The stories of both Gaby and Sonia were captured through interviews executed by Giacomello (2020) during her fieldwork in Mexican prisons. Giacomello (2020) spent over a decade researching incarcerated women for drug offences, and mostly in Latin America. Through personal and professional contacts acquired through the years as a researcher, Giacomello (2020) was given access to interview these women. During the interviews Giacomello (2020) asked them about their criminal activities with the goal of

analysing the impacts of drug policies on women from a gender perspective (Giacomello 2020, 206). For this research report, the stories of how the two women became involved in drug trade will be the most important.

Gaby

Gabriela ‘Gaby’ Cruz grew up in poverty in a rural area of Oaxaca, Mexico. Her participation in drug trafficking began when she was only 12 years old. She was recruited by a man who held a high-ranking position in drug trafficking from her village. During her childhood, she experienced sexual violence and child labour exploitation. When she was only 15 years old, Gaby was raped by a man from her village which resulted in the birth of her first child, a daughter. As an adult, she became involved in transporting marijuana, this time again because of a man with whom she had fallen in love. She became pregnant with her second child, but the father left her without any means to take care of her children. Her second child, a son, was born with physical and brain paralysis and needed medical help. To pay for this, Gaby continued the risky job of smuggling marijuana. The Mexican state did not provide any help for Gaby to take care of her children. Gaby was the sole caretaker of her children when the family was separated once Gaby was caught smuggling marijuana and sentenced to 10 years in prison. She had no prior offences (Giacomello 2020, 207-224).

Sonia

Sonia was a victim of domestic violence. She became involved in drug trafficking because of her abusive husband. Her husband had acquired a debt, sending the family into an economic emergency. To pay off his debt, he started working as a drug mule transporting cocaine from Guatemala to Mexico. He eventually asked Sonia to travel with him to pay off the debt faster. Sonia did not want to put her family at risk and refused at first. However, in the end, Sonia agreed to help her husband smuggle cocaine as she told the interviewer that she was taught that women must obey their husbands and endure the violence. Sonia simply wished to take care of her youngest son, who was seen to be her responsibility. Thus, Sonia travelled with her two-year-old son and her husband with cocaine taped to her legs under her skirt. They took the bus across the border until one day when they were caught by the federal police. During pre-trial detention, Sonia’s lawyer convinced her to plead guilty so that her husband could be freed and be with their child. Sonia’s husband was released, while she was sentenced to five years of prison for possession of cocaine (Giacomello 2020, 213–225).

Observations

The stories of Gaby and Sonia share many similar traits. They were brought into drug trade through a man who was already in it himself. Gaby was very young when she first became involved and there was a clear lack of power-balance between the young Gaby and the older, powerful man who recruited her. The second time Gaby was recruited, it was by a man she loved. Similarly, Sonia believed it was her duty as a wife to obey her husbands’ demand. These women were both victims of abuse. Furthermore, both women had two children who they were

expected to be the sole caretakers for. Both Gaby and Sonia were also in financial trouble. Gaby needed money to pay for medical help for her son, while Sonia was in debt because of her husband's actions. The women were both in severe need of money to take care of their children and ultimately turned to drug trade as a means of providing this money.

Concluding Remarks

This research report aimed to understand why women in Mexico engage in drugs. In the theoretical analysis, three theories regarding female criminality were explored: the liberation thesis, the economic marginalization hypothesis, and theories regarding the significance of violence and domestic abuse. The liberation thesis developed by Adler (1975) states that women engage in criminal activity for the same reason as men but that they do not have the same social freedom as men to do so. The economic marginalization hypothesis argues that poverty is the main motivations behind female criminality, stating that women who are economically marginalised are more likely to commit non-violent crimes such as drug trade as a means of ensuring financial stability. Lastly, violence and domestic abuse are a common factor found in research about female criminality as there are findings that show that women who were victims of sexual abuse as children were more likely to engage in crime adults. Violence and domestic abuse are especially important factors when discussing women's engagement in drug trade, as women are often recruited by their male partners or family members.

In the contextualisation both cultural and historical backgrounds were discussed. In the cultural background, the gender norms of machismo and marianismo were discussed as important influences on the view on both men's and women's role in society. These gender norms encourage men to take on strong leading roles, while women are expected to be in total submission to their husband, stripping them from their personal freedom. The historical background found that women have always been engaged in drug trade with both high-ranking and low-ranking roles, with the low-ranking ones, such as drug mules, remaining the most common to this day.

Finally, in the empirical analysis, the stories of two women, Gaby and Sonia, were told. These women are currently serving time in a Mexican female prison centre for trafficking illicit drugs. The two women displayed several of the theories discussed in the theoretical analysis. While the heavily contested liberation thesis did not really have any relevance, the other theories were highly relevant to the cases of Gaby and Sonia. As found in the economic marginalization hypothesis, these women were in desperate need of money. Both women were disadvantaged with the heavy responsibility of taking care of their young children, an aspect which Giacomello and Youngers (2020) considered to be an extremely influential factor to why women choose to engage in drug trade as they are willing to sacrifice themselves to ensure the survival of their children. This thesis also mentions the lack of access to social benefits, something Gaby experienced when she suffered abuse as a child, and when she needed medical help for her young son. Violence and domestic abuse were also both part of Gaby and Sonia's stories. Gaby had experienced abuse ever since she was a child and Sonia was a victim of domestic abuse. Especially Gaby's story corresponds to this theory, as she was coerced into drug trade by her husband whom she was abused by.

The stories of Gaby and Sonia show that poverty and abuse are prominent factors in why women in Mexico choose to engage in drug trade. The most influential factor, however, appears to be motherhood. The task and responsibility of taking care of their children seemed to be an

extremely influential factor as to why Gaby and Sonia turned to drug trade as a means of providing for their children.

It is evident that women are disproportionately affected by the drug policies of the War on Drugs. Above all, this research report has emphasised the urgent need for more research regarding female criminality and engagement in drug trade.

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