

Women and the Changing Structure of Drug Trafficking in Mexico

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Daniel Aguilar/Reuters

INTRODUCTION

The role of women in drug trafficking in Mexico has undergone a substantial change: they have gone from a place of leadership to being trophies. As we know, patriarchal ideology has existed in Mexican society for centuries, but it has not always manifested in the same way. Different practices have made the masculine predominate, and in the context of what is today known as machismo, women are considered inferior, submissive beings to be treated as objects—objects of value, but objects in the last analysis—in any space of social interaction.

So, it comes as no surprise that the history of drug trafficking in Mexico situates men as the main actors in its eco-

nommic development, without recognizing the role women have played, and, what is more, without questioning their changing role in these activities.

Today, we can situate women in spaces that a few years ago were considered exclusive to “the stronger sex.” Strictly speaking, however, they have been present in every stage of history, occupying places that were not supposed to correspond to their profile and recognized functions.

Over time, they have consolidated their inclusion in practically all spheres of work and society, including the world of crime in all its variety, in this case, drug trafficking, where their participation has been very significant.

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a simplification. To look more deeply at their trajectory in drug trafficking, I will briefly and very generally review the twentieth century and the early years of this century. I will underline the cases of some women members of these networks, focusing particularly on those we know were leaders, without forgetting that there most certainly are innumerable additional undocumented cases.

KNOWN ORIGINS

Drug trafficking in Mexico has its visible origins in the first third of the twentieth century, disseminated through a series of stories, customs, and plots played out by both state and societal actors. As Valdés Castellanos writes in his book *Historia del narcotráfico en México: Apuntes para entender el crimen organizado y la violencia* (History of Drug Trafficking in Mexico: Notes for Understanding Organized Crime and Violence), it is important to take into consideration different factors: we have to understand that this is a very lucrative business, the product of supply and demand, the policies of Mexico and the United States, and the double standard that plagues the institutions of the security and justice systems.¹

Some authors think that in the first decades of the twentieth century, women’s participation began to increase in Mexican drug trafficking. It is often believed that women have only recently entered Mexican drug trafficking. However, as stated at the beginning of the article, women’s presence has been documented as early as the first decades of the 1900s and has undergone changes since 1980.

In 1920, women were the perfect traffickers and were very useful in smuggling goods because it was unlikely that they would be searched. Customs agents on the Mexicali-Calexico border calculated that they were responsible for approximately 60 percent of the flow of drugs between the two countries.² In the 1930s, the cities that had been used as ports for bootleggers were turned into places of transit for the drug trade, particularly heroin and marihuana. In

that context, women became the visible contrabandists, even in places as far away from the main cultivation and production centers as Mexico City and Cholula, Puebla. Thus, we have one of the first women drug traffickers from Central Mexico, Felisa Velázquez, whom the press called “the queen of marihuana.” She owned marihuana fields in Cholula and it is believed that she participated in distributing marihuana in Mexico City.³ Another famous female trafficker was María Dolores Estévez, “Lola, la chata” (or “Snub-nosed Lola”), who in 1937 was dubbed “the most active drug trafficker” when she used a network of women as local drug dealers to supply Mexico City’s most inveterate addicts. It is also known that she lived in a luxurious mansion in the Lomas de Chapultepec neighborhood,⁴ and that, as a little girl, she sold pork rinds on the streets of the Merced central market neighborhood until she began selling morphine and marihuana at the age of 13. She was arrested at least seven times until she was sentenced to 11 years and 6 months in jail after President Manuel Ávila Camacho issued a decree in 1945,⁵ since from the beginning of that decade, the Mexican government could no longer deny the problem of transnational contraband from inside its borders.

WHERE EVERYTHING BEGINS AND CHANGES

At the end of the 1930s and in the early 1940s, thanks to increased agricultural production in the Culiacán Valley, trafficking began to become a profitable business that in a short time would become industrial and international. This meant the cultivation of marihuana and opium poppies began to flourish. Many women played leading roles in this, taking control of drug production, distribution, and commercialization.

In mountain areas, women were in charge of both planting and harvesting, making their role essential and giving them a real possibility of countering their precarious living conditions. The story of one woman in particular in this period stands out: Ignacia “La Nacha” Jasso, who used a mediator to avoid arrest. Working in northern Mexico, but the native of another state, it is said that she operated in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, and was for quite a long time the head of an important network of drug traffickers along the El Paso-Ciudad Juárez border.⁶ She took control of those cities and the network in 1931 when her husband Pablo “El Pablote” González died after a clash between drug traffickers.⁷ In 1943, she was arrested and sent to the Islas Marías prison, leaving her

partner Consuelo Sánchez in charge. Consuelo was responsible for the merchandise from there to the Tijuana-California border and, together with Ignacia Jasso's daughters, managed the business while La Nacha served her sentence.⁸

In the 1960s, Margarita Caro López, born in Badiraguato, Sinaloa, was linked to organized crime when 763 kilograms of marihuana were found stored in her home.⁹ Another case was that of Manuela Caro, who, together with Gil Caro and Rafael Fonseca, was involved in the family business of producing, distributing, and commercializing opium gum.¹⁰ Manuela was in charge of making the heroin; for that, she purchased distilled water and mixed it with the gum, lime, sodium chloride, and ammonia.¹¹ In later decades, women's roles morphed as both the Mexican and U.S. governments changed their policies, establishing "strategies" to fight a business now considered illegal.

In the 1980s, a series of rifts occurred, like the one between the Tijuana and the Sinaloa cartels; this gave rise to a new hierarchy in the world of organized crime. Alicia Félix Zazueta, the cousin of Miguel Ángel Félix Gallardo, was the person who made the organization's most important decisions, while Enedina Arellano Félix was the front for important money-laundering operations.¹²

WOMEN IN THE NARCO CULTURE

It is no coincidence that women began to be a kind of inspiration and figures representative of transnational drug trafficking. That is how the first *corrido* songs came about, like *Camelia la Tejana* (Camelia the Texan) and *Pollitas de cuenta* (Heavy-Duty Chicks), where passion, death, and transgression come together. But all of this changed radically when the country was divided up in the 1980s and 1990s. Big drug trafficking began to change its values and its leading figures. Enormous ground was lost regarding traditional ethics and respect inside their organizations at the same time that they began a series of practices and internal agreements among the members of each cartel in which vengeance and death, always present but limited by certain rules, began to cleave to the usage of the new era.

Since the end of the last century, what has been called "narco culture" has exalted the lifestyle of one part of the population, distinguished by profligacy, corruption, impunity, drugs, arms, and an increasing tendency to see women as trophies, not actors or colleagues. Among other things, the

narco culture has promoted the construction of a hegemonic masculine figure with the return of preeminence of the kingpin or chief. It has become a kind of misogynous cult, where women have gone from being leaders, producers, and distributors to being "decorative objects for exhibition."¹³ Women have gone into drug trafficking for very diverse reasons: some have been forced or were interested in a profitable business, others have been in it to solve different economic needs and deprivations, while still others have been seeking a life of luxury.

In this context, they are often pressured to comply with certain stereotypes of beauty to be able to be fully developed "items for exhibition" that serve as escorts and on occasion are exchanged to close a deal or pact. However, the reconfiguration of Mexican drug trafficking starting in 2006 has "adjusted" the trend to exclude women from economic activities, moving from leadership to subordination, and many of them have increasingly been used as "drug mules," fronts for money laundering, and even in execution squads and kidnapping, among others.¹⁴ Before the Felipe Calderón administration, the main reason women were jailed in connection with trafficking was for robbery, but today the statistics have changed and women are mostly charged with crimes against public health.¹⁵ The states with the highest number of women jailed for drug trafficking-related offenses are Baja California, Jalisco, Mexico City's Federal District, Guanajuato, Nuevo León, and Durango.¹⁶

When we say women are inextricably linked to drug trafficking, implicitly this refers to the definition of gender identities that, to a certain extent, define the culture that we today call narco culture. In addition, we must recognize that while women in drug trafficking resort to their beauty to move through that world, this is thanks to a subordinate position and a generalized context of violence. That is, their participation is still essential, but their status inside the organizations has been turned upside down.

The fragmentation and reconfiguration of the cartels in the current drug war context molds relations between men

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and women. This has had an impact on their spaces for participation. In this sense, the questions we have to ask ourselves are no longer how women went from being producers and leaders to being objects for exhibition for the men in the drug trafficking world, but rather, how women participate and fit into the masculinized spaces. And, what is more, it would be interesting to know what power means to these women and how much they share in it in this industry.

CONCLUSION

To understand the role women have played in Mexican drug trafficking, it is important to point out that it is not enough to resort to theory or official documents. Rather, a large part of the information can only be obtained directly.

In general, women have held different positions inside Mexico's drug trafficking rings, often consolidating themselves in the organizational structures of the different groups as *de facto* leaders or Machiavellian strategists. Others have simply been treated as "objects" to be shown off to other criminal organizations.

Generally speaking, women's history has always been marked by subordination; however, as we have seen, some have occupied central spaces and positions inside this kind of economy. However, this article does not have the intent of suggesting that gender roles determined by an ideal of masculinity or femininity exist or should exist, but rather only that in Mexico, like in most countries, conceptions exist that correspond directly to the currently dominant ideal of masculinity and femininity. Therefore, women's role has evolved drastically, not only in how it manifests or is characterized, but even how it is documented.

For that reason, I want to recall Judith Butler's proposal about the construction of gender identity, which she conceived of as a piece of theater that individuals play out in order to fit into the roles defined for their sex. This means that we are always doing things that convince others that we are acting as either men or women.

With this understanding, the role that women played during the entire last century and today in the history of drug trafficking in Mexico has been unique. They have gone from playing roles of commanders and decision-makers to carrying out tasks that are increasingly foreign to that due to the reconfiguration of their role in drug trafficking. For that reason, we must decipher the new signifiers for them and their bodies in this milieu, as well as the reasons behind the increasing violence they are being subjected to. **MM**

NOTES

¹ Guillermo Valdés Castellanos, *Historia del narcotráfico en México: Apuntes para entender el crimen organizado y la violencia* (Mexico City: Aguilar, 2013).

² Elaine Carey, "Mujeres de armas doradas: el narcotráfico en Norteamérica (1900-1970)," in Jorge Trujillo, ed., *La encrucijada: historia, marginalidad y delito en América Latina y los Estados Unidos de Norteamérica (siglos XIX y XX)* (Mexico City: Universidad de Guadalajara/CUCSH, 2010), pp. 379-403.

³ Valdés Castellanos, op. cit., p. 51.

⁴ Ibid., pp. 50-51.

⁵ Luis A. Astorga, *El siglo de las drogas* (Mexico City: Plaza y Valdés, 2003), pp. 165-168.

⁶ Carey, op. cit., p. 397.

⁷ Juan Carlos Ramírez-Pimienta, *Cantar a los narcos. Voces y versos del narcocorrido* (Mexico City: Planeta, 2011), p. 53.

⁸ Carey, op. cit., pp. 381-400.

⁹ Valdés Castellanos, op. cit., p. 115.

¹⁰ Opium gum is extracted from the opium poppy by women because it is "delicate" job, considered practically artisanal.

¹¹ Despite the fact that this section mentions women working in the opium trade beginning in the 1960s, the cultivation, processing, and commercialization of marijuana and opium derivatives began in Sinaloa at least as early as the first third of the twentieth century, as mentioned at the beginning of the text, if not before. They flourished with the agreements between the Mexican and U.S. governments during the Korean War. Those who worked with opium-gum derivatives were called "gomeros" (gummers), and by extension, so were all the drug traffickers. For more about historical and political aspects of this business, see the work by Luis Astorga, referenced in this article. [Editor's Note.]

¹² Jesús Belmont Vázquez, "Una estirpe matriarcal," *Proceso*, Special Edition "Los rostros del narco" part 1 (February 2001), p. 48.

¹³ Marcela Turati, *Fuego cruzado. Las víctimas atrapadas en la guerra del narco* (Mexico City: Grijalbo, 2011).

¹⁴ Arturo Santamaría Gómez, *Las jefas del narco: el ascenso de las mujeres en el crimen organizado* (Mexico City: Grijalbo, 2012).

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 44.

¹⁶ Dulce Ramos, "BC es el estado con más mujeres presas por narco," *La crónica*, October 21, 2010, <http://www.lacronica.com/EdicionImpresa/ejemplaresanteriores/BusquedaEjemplares.asp?numnota=705595&fecha=21/10/2010>.