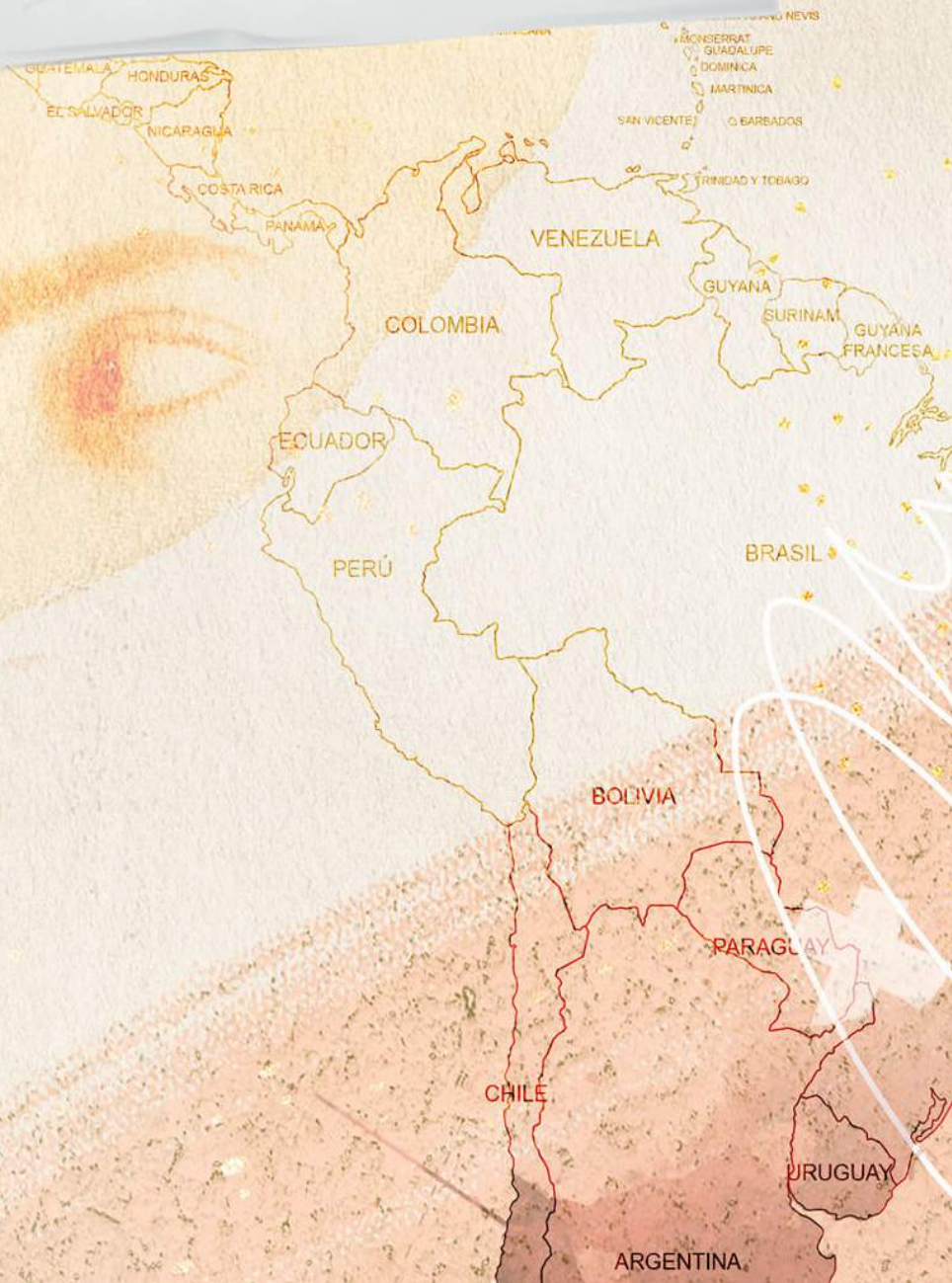


WOMEN WOMEN

AND ORGANIZED CRIME IN LATIN AMERICA: BEYOND VICTIMS AND VICTIMIZERS



Women and Organized Crime in Latin America:
beyond victims or victimizers

Written by the Colombian Observatory of Organized Crime

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary	4
Introduction.....	5
1. Gender and Organized Crime	8
<i>Socio-Economic Needs</i>	10
<i>Family Ties</i>	11
<i>Narcoculture and Emotional-Sexual Relationships</i>	12
2. Roles of Women in Organized Crime	14
<i>Drug Trafficking</i>	14
<i>Migrant Smuggling</i>	17
<i>Human Trafficking</i>	18
<i>Case Study 1 - Human Smuggling in Colombia: Between Victims</i> <i>and Victimizers</i>	21
3. Female Criminal Leadership and Differing Use of Violence	26
<i>Case Study 2: Women in Gangs in El Salvador</i>	31
4. Conclusions	35
5. Recommendations.....	36
6. Annex 1: Number of women in prison in Latin America.....	39

Executive Summary

In Latin America, the participation of women in organized crime has been in the shadow of academic and public policy debate due to the male dominance in the different criminal economies and the tendency to see criminal activities as a “man’s activity”. However, a more detailed analysis of drug trafficking, human trafficking, and migrant smuggling, based on the application of a gender lens, allows the appreciation of the different roles that women play.

After examining a series of documents, data and information collected through fieldwork, this investigation by the InSight Crime and Universidad del Rosario’s Colombian Observatory of Organized Crime, increases the complexity of female roles inside organized crime and questions the tendency to present women only as victims, or in some cases, as victimizers.

From cooks and coca harvesters to owners of their drug empires or trafficking and smuggling networks, women operate in a versatile manner and move in a broad spectrum of roles, challenging the existent division of labor based on gender while at the same time coexisting with criminal organizations that continue to impose a patriarchal system.

Through the description of these roles, the development of two case studies – one regarding women and gangs in El Salvador, and another tackling human trafficking and migrant smuggling in the Colombia-Venezuela border town of Cúcuta- and the construction of profiles of some of the greatest protagonists of organized crime in recent times, the investigation takes the shape of a woman.

The document also analyses the use of violence by women, a characteristic that is usually attributed to men and masculine behavior. However, violence is a tool often used by women in some organized crime structures.

Based on this, as well as the examination of the main factors that push women to organized crime activities, a series of public policy recommendations are set forth for governments and local authorities. These are aimed at understanding a phenomenon that, aside from being under-analyzed, is continuously growing.

Introduction

Organized crime¹ is one of the main problems facing Latin America. Among its disruptive effects, the high levels of violence seen across the region are especially alarming.² Rising indicators of violence in most Latin American countries, including homicides, rapes and robberies, are closely related to the increase in various organized crime activities.³ Since the 1990s, the opening-up of economies, in combination with institutional weakness and social factors such as poverty and inequality, have favored the growth of transnational criminal activities, including drug trafficking, arms trafficking, human trafficking and migrant smuggling,⁴ making Latin America the region with the fastest growing criminal dynamics in the world.⁵

While women's participation in organized crime has been relatively low as compared to that of men, it has recently been growing and diversifying.⁶ A brief look at Latin America's prison situation shows a net increase in female inmates for acts associated to organized crime, especially for drug trafficking, the crime for which most women are incarcerated.⁷ In the last decade (2009-2019), the total number of female prisoners across Latin America increased by 52 percent, more than double the region's prison population growth rate.⁸ Yet women remain in the minority in terms of total prison population, ranging between 4.5 and 10 percent depending on the country.⁹ However, in certain countries seeing intense criminal activity such as Colombia and Mexico, the increase in female prisoners has been exponential. In Colombia, the National Penitentiary and Prison Institute (Instituto Nacional Penitenciario y Carcelario – INPEC), reports that the female prison population has grown by 484 percent over the

1 According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), transnational organized crime refers to virtually all profit-motivated serious criminal activities with international implications. Albanese adds to this definition saying that the rational continuation of these profit-seeking activities is achieved through the use of force, monopoly control and/or the corruption of public officials. See UNODC "Transnational Organized Crime", n.d., <https://www.unodc.org/ropan/en/organized-crime.html>, and Albanese, Jay. *Organized Crime in Our Times*. 6th Edition. Routledge, 2014. doi:10.4324/9781315721460, p. 4.

2 Juan Carlos Gachúz, Mohamed Badine El Yattoui, and Claudia Barona Castañeda, "Presentación Del Monográfico. Crimen Organizado y Narcotráfico En América Latina: Implicaciones En Seguridad," *Revista de Estudios En Seguridad Internacional* 5, no. 1 (2019): p. 5, <http://www.seguridadinternacional.es/resi/index.php/revista/article/view/109/187>.

3 Carolina Sampó, "Una Primera Aproximación Al Crimen Organizado En América Latina: Definiciones, Manifestaciones y Algunas Consecuencias," in *El Crimen Organizado En América Latina Manifestaciones, Facilitadores y Reacciones*, ed. Instituto Universitario General Gutiérrez Mellado, 2017, p. 23.

4 Valeska Troncoso and Cristián Garay Vera, "Crimen Organizado En Latinoamérica: Historia y Transformaciones," in *El Crimen Organizado En América Latina Manifestaciones, Facilitadores y Reacciones*, ed. Instituto Universitario General Gutiérrez Mellado, 2017, p. 53.

5 Luis Guillermo Solís and Francisco Rojas Aravena, eds., *Crimen Organizado En América Latina y El Caribe*, 2008, p. 11–12, <https://biblio.flacsoandes.edu.ec/libros/digital/42584.pdf>.

6 Alexis Aronowitz, Gerda Theuermann, and Elena Tyurykanova, "Analysing the Business Model of Trafficking in Human Beings to Better Prevent the Crime," 2010, <https://www.osce.org/secretariat/69028?download=true>.

7 Ana Safranoff and Antonella Tiravassi, "Mujeres En Contextos de Encierro En América Latina: Características y Factores de Riesgo Asociados a Determinados Comportamientos Delictivos," 2018, <https://doi.org/10.18235/0001113>; Gretchen Cloutier, "Latin America's Female Prisoner Problem: How the War on Drugs, Feminization of Poverty, and Female Liberation Contribute to Mass Incarceration of Women," *Clocks and Clouds*, 2016, <http://www.inquiriesjournal.com/a?id=1563>.

8 Nathalie Alvarado and Viviana Vélez-Grajales, "Dentro de Las Prisiones de América Latina y El Caribe: Una Primera Mirada Al Otro Lado de Las Rejas" (Washington, D.C., September 2019), p. 13, <https://doi.org/10.18235/0001858>.

9 World Prison Brief, "World Prison Brief Data," n.d., <https://www.prisonstudies.org/world-prison-brief-data>.

past 30 years. In Mexico, figures from National Institute of Statistics and Geography (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía – INEGI) show a 56 percent growth just between 2010 and 2015.¹⁰

Despite this trend, the roles women play in criminal structures continues to be underrepresented in studies and public policies about violence and organized crime in Latin America.¹¹ Due to the scarcity of information and data, investigations into this topic are limited although they have increased in the last decade.¹² The relative invisibility of women in debates about organized crime stems from the general perception that they are appendices to male criminals, usually partners or purveyors of sex. Stereotypes of women as being dependent and weak reinforce in turn the notion that they are incapable of making independent decisions regarding their participation in illegal activities.

By ignoring the active role women can play in criminal structures, it is impossible to gain a complete picture of organized crime. To fill this gap, this report charts the participation of women in three of Latin America's main criminal economies: drug trafficking, human trafficking and migrant smuggling. An exhaustive review of articles, news reports and books on women and organized crime in the region shows that -- in the three illicit economies indicated -- women exercise multiple roles, fluctuating between the condition of victims and trophies on one side and active criminal protagonists on the other.

Gender constitutes a highly useful analytical lens through which to look at the distinct roles women play in organized crime groups. Especially, when considering the socially constructed meanings and behaviors enforced on men and women alike, which are used to divide their social positions and establish a hierarchy based on male dominance, and female inferiority and submissiveness.

This will allow for the development of public policies that are more sensitive to the different roles played within criminal economies. Instead of being considered exclusively as victims or accomplices subordinate to male figures, this report aims

10 National Penitentiary and Prison Institute (INPEC), "Informe Estadístico Población Reclusa a Cargo Del INPEC," 2019, http://www.inpec.gov.co/web/guest/estadisticas/informes-y-boletines/-/document_library/6SjHVBGriPOM/view_file/898890?_com_liferay_document_library_web_portlet_DLPortlet_INSTANCE_6SjHVBGriPOM_redirect=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.inpec.gov.co%2Fweb%2Fguest%2Festadisti; National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI), "Estadísticas Sobre El Sistema Penitenciario Estatal En México," 2016, http://www.cdeunodc.inegi.org.mx/unodc/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/en_numeros2.pdf%09.

11 Jana Arsovska and Felia Allum, "Introduction: Women and Transnational Organized Crime," *Trends in Organized Crime* p. 17, no. 1–2 (2014): 17, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12117-014-9223-y>.

12 Sue Enfield, "Gender and Serious and Organised Crime," 2019; Lilian Ovalle Marroquin and Corina Giacomello, "La Mujer En El 'Narcomundo'. Construcciones Tradicionales y Alternativas Del Sujeto Femenino," *Revista de Estudios de Género: La Ventana* 3, no. 24 (2006): 297–319; Laura Ordóñez Vargas, "Mujeres Encarceladas: Proceso de Encarcelamiento En La Penitenciaría Femenina de Brasilia," *Universitas Humanística*, no. 61 (2006): 183–99; Corina Giacomello, "Mujeres, Delitos de Drogas y Sistemas Penitenciarios En América Latina," 2013, https://www.unodc.org/documents/congress/background-information/NGO/IDPC/IDPC-Briefing-Paper_Women-in-Latin-America_SPANISH.pdf; Jennifer Fleetwood, "Mafias, Markets, Mules: Gender Stereotypes in Discourses About Drug Trafficking," *Sociology Compass* 9, no. 11 (2015): 962–76, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12323>; Felia Allum and Irene Marchi, "Analyzing the Role of Women in Italian Mafias: The Case of the Neapolitan Camorra," *Qualitative Sociology (Qualitative Sociology)*, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11133-018-9389-8>.

to show that women can, and do, act of their own accord in a criminal environment. Women are also involved in violence, clashing with the traditional vision of the roles they have in criminal groups.¹³

The document explores the roles of women in organized crime in Latin America across four sections. As part of its design, an extensive bibliography was constructed, consisting of academic texts, official reports, non-governmental organizations and press reports. At the same time, institutional databases from different countries across the region were reviewed, allowing for the confirmation that Colombia and Mexico present a significant statistical advance regarding women in organized crime to the rest of the region. In building the case studies included in the report, field trips and interviews were conducted in El Salvador and Colombia.

In the first section, the gender perspective is introduced as an analytical lens for the study of organized crime. Beyond showing the impact that gender has on the varied ways women and men involve themselves in criminal activities, it shows how gender stereotypes associated to organized crime help to hide the roles women play therein. The second section characterizes the roles played by women in the three selected criminal economies - drug trafficking, human trafficking and migrant smuggling - in order to highlight the range of participation of women in each. This includes a case study about human trafficking in Colombia providing context to the roles of women presented.

In the third section, profiles of specific women and their role in criminal economies allows us to show how women have largely gone unnoticed in most of the existing literature on organized crime, as well as their specific uses of violence. The second case study, which examines the involvement of women in youth gangs in El Salvador, complements the analysis by focusing on the violent behavior of these young women. The exercise described seeks to debunk two assumptions about women and organized crime: that they only exercise subordinate roles and, by extension, that they commit violent acts only when due to male manipulation and control or due to some emotional extreme.

Finally, in the last section, some conclusions are offered and a set of public policy recommendations are formulated based on the analysis performed.

13 Caron E. Gentry and Laura Sjoberg, *Beyond Mothers, Monsters, Whores: Thinking about Women's Violence in Global Politics* (Zed Books, 2015), p. 3.

Gender and Organized Crime

As stated previously, from the gender perspective, the social behaviors of men and women are not natural or biological but socially constructed. In addition to establishing the characteristics that each person must possess and the roles they must play, gender orders these hierarchically based on a presumption of male superiority and female inferiority.¹⁴ This results in the constitution of gender arrangements: “some formal, such as constitutions, laws, decrees, resolutions; others informal, such as cultural conventions, customs and daily practices that regulate relations between men and women.”¹⁵

Gender arrangements are manifested in all manners of social activity. Organized crime is no exception. This means that, as happens in legal areas, gender also determines the way in which women get involved, act and interact with other actors in specific illegal or criminal contexts. Frequently, this implies the subordination of women in spaces controlled by men. In this regard, Ovalle and Giacomello point out -- referring to drug trafficking -- that “gender relations are built on a set of attitudes and behaviors that discriminate and marginalize women because of their sex. This is empirically observed in the limited roles and functions that are assigned to women within drug trafficking networks.”¹⁶

Studies on organized crime in Latin America and the world have focused mainly on the forms of action and victimization caused by male-led criminal groups. This has implied that research on crime presents the problem as a problem of men,¹⁷ which tends to ignore or minimize the perspectives and participation of women. A second consequence is that analyses on the role of women in organized crime focus on their roles as victims or passive collaborators; or on their relationships – as lovers or relatives – of male gang members.

Their entrance into organized crime is primarily the result of socio-economic motivations derived from poverty and precarious living conditions, the existence of family relationships within criminal groups and, finally, sentimental or sexual relationships with male leaders of criminal organizations.

14 Cristina Molina Petit, “Género y Poder Desde Sus Metáforas. Apuntes Para Una Topografía Del Patriarcado,” in *Del Sexo Al Género: Los Equívocos de Un Concepto*, ed. Silvia Tubert, 2003, 123–60; Virginia Sapiro, “Theorizing Gender in Political Psychology Research,” in *Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology*, ed. David O. Sears, Leonie Huddy, and Robert Jervis (Oxford University Press, 2003), 601–634; Alice H. Eagly et al., “Gender Stereotypes Have Changed: A Cross-Temporal Meta-Analysis of U.S. Public Opinion Polls From 1946 to 2018,” *American Psychologist*, 2019, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000494>

15 National Center for Historical Memory, *Género y Memoria Histórica. Balance de La Contribución Del CNMH Al Esclarecimiento Histórico*. (Bogotá, 2018), p. 62.

16 Ovalle Marroquin and Giacomello, “La Mujer En El ‘Narcomundo’. Construcciones Tradicionales y Alternativas Del Sujeto Femenino,” p. 301.

17 Mariana Noemí Sánchez, “La Mujer En La Teoría Criminológica,” *La Ventana*, 2004, p. 241.

Basic Gender Glossary

1. Gender Arrangements

"The rules of the game, some formal – constitutions, laws, decrees and resolutions -- and others informal -- cultural conventions, customs and everyday practices -- that regulate the relationship between men and women,^[1] and that, often implicate the subordination of women."

[1] Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, Género y memoria histórica. Balance de la contribución del CNMH al esclarecimiento histórico. (Bogotá, 2018)

2. Feminism

Theoretical, analytical and intellectual movement that seeks to break with previously acquired and replicated conceptions. Feminism does not consist of claiming that women are less violent than men, or that the judgement of women is better than that of men. It's not about affirming that the world would be better if women ran it. On the contrary, it is about analyzing the manifestations of gender in global politics.^[2]

[2]Caron E. Gentry y Laura Sjoberg, BEYOND MOTHERS, MONSTERS, WHORES THINKING ABOUT WOMEN'S VIOLENCE IN GLOBAL POLITICS, The British Journal of Psychiatry, vol. 111, 2015, <https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.111.479.1009-a>

3. Gender

The social construction of that which is considered feminine and masculine, giving more weight to the social and symbolic over the biological in the explanation of the differences between men and women.^[3] It also represents the behaviors and the conditions that society and culture impose as masculine or feminine behaviors,^[4] which are inscribed under gender arrangements.

[3] Luz Gabriela Arango et al., «Género e Identidad. Ensayos sobre lo femenino y lo masculino», accedido 12 de agosto de 2019, <http://www.bdigital.unal.edu.co/1384/2/01PREL01.pdf>

[4] Mariana Noemí Sánchez, «La mujer en la teoría criminológica», La Ventana, 2004

4. Patriarchy

Can be understood as the unconscious structure that dictates affection and distributes values among characters in a social context. Given this, it acts as a norm and a self-reproducing project that is sensitive to power relationships.^[5]

[5] Rita Laura Segato, La guerra contra las mujeres, 2003.

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Socio-Economic Needs

Socio-economic needs in Latin America are driving women (and men) to become involved in criminal activities. As happens in other regions of the Global South, a high percentage of Latin America's impoverished are women.¹⁸ This "feminization" of poverty is correlated with a lack of access to education and employment, factors which partly explain why certain women may turn to organized crime as a way to boost their income.¹⁹ In effect, most female prisoners in Latin America are not only poor, but they are without professional qualifications or work experience to access better work opportunities.²⁰

In line with this problem, these women are often the main breadwinners in their homes but face earning lower salaries on average than men.²¹ Most women in prison are single mothers and generally the sole provider for their children. A 2018 study by Safranoff and Tiravassi for the Inter-American Development Bank across eight Latin American countries²² found that 87 percent of female prisoners had children, a slightly higher percentage than male prisoners.²³

To summarize, the combination of poverty, inequality and few opportunities is an unsurprising factor towards women turning to illegality. While it is not the purpose of this report, it is important to note that the socio-economic pressure women face to commit illegal acts translates into many female prisoners facing real difficulties to access appropriate legal counsel.

18 Giacomello, "Mujeres, Delitos de Drogas y Sistemas Penitenciarios En América Latina," p. 2.

19 Cloutier, "Latin America's Female Prisoner Problem: How the War on Drugs, Feminization of Poverty, and Female Liberation Contribute to Mass Incarceration of Women"; Giacomello, "Mujeres, Delitos de Drogas y Sistemas Penitenciarios En América Latina."

20 Safranoff and Tiravassi, "Mujeres En Contextos de Encierro En América Latina: Características y Factores de Riesgo Asociados a Determinados Comportamientos Delictivos," p. 9.

21 Cloutier, "Latin America's Female Prisoner Problem: How the War on Drugs, Feminization of Poverty, and Female Liberation Contribute to Mass Incarceration of Women."

22 Argentina, Chile, Brazil, El Salvador, Mexico, Peru, Costa Rica and Honduras.

23 Safranoff and Tiravassi, "Mujeres En Contextos de Encierro En América Latina: Características y Factores de Riesgo Asociados a Determinados Comportamientos Delictivos," p. 17.

Family Ties

Family ties also explain how women become involved with organized crime activities.²⁴ To illustrate this, a recent report by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and Colombia's Justice Ministry found that 53.4 percent of women interviewed inside Colombian prisons between 2018 and 2019 had at least one relative also in prison, usually their romantic partners (38 percent), brothers (20 percent) or other relatives (42 percent).²⁵ These statistics suggest that an important number of women entering organized crime do so as the partners, mothers, daughters and sisters of male gang members, which reiterates and reinforces their subordinate role in the criminal world.

Riquelme and Barriga²⁶ point out that the entry of women into criminal organizations is often linked to their appropriation of knowledge regarding criminal activities carried out by people close to them, creating bonds of trust and loyalty that are highly valued by the members of criminal organizations. Hübschle, Allum and Marchi²⁷ agree that women often end up in leadership or decision-making positions when one of their family members – especially spouses who lead criminal structures – are jailed or killed, leaving a hole to be filled. This scenario, which will be explored in Section Three of this report, is one of the most complex in terms of gender arrangements within organized crime, since the rise of women to leading positions clashes with a predominantly patriarchal structure.

24 Safranoff and Tiravassi, "Mujeres En Contextos de Encierro En América Latina: Características y Factores de Riesgo Asociados a Determinados Comportamientos Delictivos"; Ovalle Marroquin and Giacomello, "La Mujer En El 'Narcomundo'. Construcciones Tradicionales y Alternativas Del Sujeto Femenino."

25 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, "Caracterización de Condiciones Socioeconómicas de Mujeres Relacionadas Con Problemas de Drogas," 2019, p. 17, https://www.unodc.org/documents/colombia/2019/Octubre/Estudio_Las_mujeres_Privadas_de_la_Libertad_por_Delitos_de_Drogas.pdf.

26 Gustavo Riquelme Ortiz and Omar Barriga, "Madres Narcotraficantes: Las Motivaciones de Ingreso Al Narcomundo En Mujeres Internas En El Centro Penitenciario Femenino de Chillán, Chile," *Revista Punto Género* 0, no. 5 (2015): 42–58, <https://doi.org/10.5354/0719-0417.2015.37663>.

27 Annette Hübschle, "Of Bogus Hunters, Queenpins and Mules: The Varied Roles of Women in Transnational Organized Crime in Southern Africa," *Trends in Organized Crime* 17, no. 1–2 (2014): 31–51, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12117-013-9202-8>; Allum and Marchi, "Analyzing the Role of Women in Italian Mafias: The Case of the Neapolitan Camorra."

Narcoculture and Emotional-Sexual Relationships

Drug trafficking groups often involve social interactions that reinforce the stereotype of male superiority and feminine inferiority and objectification²⁸. The aesthetic and cultural representations of the “narco” exalt the drug trafficker lifestyle, combining the exercise of violence and the open display of wealth.

Narcoculture also idealizes certain images of feminine beauty. Usually involving “body transformation as a guarantee of...adjustment and group membership,”²⁹ women can become “objects” or “trophies” that men use to exhibit the power and success derived from their criminal activities. Thus, in those communities where organized crime has reached certain level of social acceptance and where “easy money” constitutes an enviable lifestyle, the criteria by which women are judged become crucial parts of how women participate in criminal activities.³⁰

If the position of female subordination resulting from these depictions of gender roles implies the risk of women becoming victims,³¹ the conscious decision taken by some women to enter the world of drug trafficking as an opportunity for social ascent should not be underestimated. The third section of this report includes documented cases of specific women who made use of the social rules and beauty standards imposed by narcoculture to attain important positions within criminal organizations. Consequently, over the years the image of the “trophy” woman that accompanies the drug dealer has evolved towards that of female “bosses.” These are women who managed to impose themselves in a predominantly masculine world, without losing the stereotypical “feminine” attributes that allowed them to be linked as companions or wives in the first place. Frequently, this transition is made through the acquisition of technical, financial or administrative skills, as well as the formation of family relationships with leading men in criminal organizations.

Studies of female criminology are increasingly studying women as agents acting of their own will, even in ways that deviate from socially acceptable norms which view women as maternal, pure, passive and docile.³² As will be outlined in the rest of this

28 Carolina Villatoro, “Aspectos Socioculturales e Imágenes Del Narcotráfico,” *Imagonautas* 3, no. 1 (2012): 56–75; Ovalle Marroquin and Giacomello, “La Mujer En El ‘Narcomundo’. Construcciones Tradicionales y Alternativas Del Sujeto Femenino”; Itzelín R. Mata-Navarro, “El Cuerpo de La Mujer Vinculada Al Narcotráfico Como Narración de Sus Relaciones Sociales,” 2013, <http://rei.iteso.mx/handle/11117/2596>; Günther Maihold and Rosa María Sauter de Maihold, “Capos, Reinas y Santos - La Narcocultura En México,” *IMex. México Interdisciplinario. Interdisciplinary Mexico Año 2 No.* (2012): 64–96.

29 José Alonso Andrade Salazar, Brigitte Dineya Peña, and Mateo Parra Giraldo, “Narcoestética En Colombia: Entre La Vanidad y El Delito. Una Aproximación Compleja,” *Drugs and Addictive Behavior* 2, no. 1 (January 1, 2017): p. 38, <https://doi.org/10.21501/24631779.2261>; See also Aldona Bialowas Pobutsky, “In Bed with a Narco: Pablo Escobar and Wilber Varela through the Lens of Colombian ‘Trophy Women,’” *Hispanofila* 180, (2017): p. 56, <https://doi.org/10.1353/hsf.2017.0036>.

30 Ainhoa Vásquez Mejías, “De Muñecas a Dueñas. La Aparente Inversión de Roles de Género En Las Narcoseries de Telemundo,” *Culturales* 4, no. 2 (2016): 209–30, http://www.scielo.org.mx/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1870-11912016000200209.

31 Ibid.

32 Amanda Burgess-Proctor, “Intersections of Race, Class, Gender, and Crime: Future Directions for Feminist Criminology,” *Feminist Criminology* 1, no. 1 (2006): 27–47, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1177/1557085105282899>.

report, the numerous cases of women with agency in criminal groups complicates gender roles in these scenarios, since they subvert traditionally assigned roles for women and men. Essentially, what this shows is that the participation of women in organized crime groups does not respond only or exclusively to their supposed submissiveness to men. On the contrary, it is the result of socio-economic needs that result from patriarchal power relations, social aspirations, skillsets and expertise, among others. Therefore, institutional efforts which insist on viewing the role of women purely as subordinates cannot see the full scope of the situation.

As will be discussed in this report, numerous cases of women in leadership roles have complicated the vision of how gender roles are assigned in criminal scenarios.

Roles of Women in Organized Crime

This section will discuss the main roles that women play in drug trafficking, human trafficking and migrant smuggling with a view to identifying the full spectrum of female criminal activity in these economies, from subordinate to leadership roles. While, as has been discussed, gender regulates a hierarchical difference in traditional male and female roles, women have taken on a wide range of roles within criminal economies, including positions of power, which tend to go unnoticed among stories of women as “victims” or “passive participants.”

Drug Trafficking

During the past 30 years, drug trafficking, especially the international cocaine trade, has relied on thousands of people working at different stages of production, transportation and sales.³³ In most cases, the division of labor between men and women show inequalities of power derived from gender arrangements. However, there are important exceptions that merit exploration.

For clarity, it might be better to divide the cocaine trade into its three principal components: production, international transport and retail, and look at the role of women in each link of the chain.

Day Laborers and Coca Pickers

In general women in the countryside, especially at harvest time, have been employed as day laborers. Usually, the coca pickers are men, while women perform domestic service tasks, although some do work as coca pickers as well. According to Colombia's Ideas for Peace Foundation (Fundación Ideas para la Paz – FIP),³⁴ the women involved work as day laborers or coca pickers and then must carry out domestic tasks at home, implying a double workday.

Cooks

When the coca undergoes chemical processing in laboratories, women are brought in to cook for the workers, since most of these facilities are located in remote areas. The

³³ Jennifer Fleetwood and Nayeli Urquiza Haas, “Gendering the Agenda: Women Drug Mules in Resolution 52/1 of the Commission of Narcotic Drugs at the United Nations,” *Drugs and Alcohol Today* 11, no. 4 (2011): 194–203, <https://doi.org/10.1108/17459261111194134>.

³⁴ Irina Cuesta, Genica Mazzoldi Diaz, and Aura Maria Duran, “Mujeres y la economía cocalera en el Putumayo: roles, prácticas y riesgos,” 2017, p. 23, <http://www.ideaspaz.org/publications/posts/1608>.

women who work as cooks in large laboratories controlled by armed groups receive better pay, but are also subject to rules of conduct and face the risks associated with this trade, either when working in the facilities or travelling there.

Farmers

Female coca growers, for the most part, tend a family plot. They are also involved in the harvesting of coca leaves and even the production of cocaine paste. These women participate in the cultivation of coca, oversee the harvest, and work on the initial processing of the cocaine base. In some cases, they are the ones who sell the cocaine base. At the time of harvest, they may also be responsible for coordinating the work of the pickers, preparing food and paying them their wages. Women farmers are usually in charge of hiring pickers and making proper economic arrangements.³⁵

Drug Mules

These women transport drugs, making them the most vulnerable link within the drug trafficking chain. Griselda Blanco, “The Godmother of Cocaine,” was a major figure in launching the idea of using “mules” to transport marijuana and cocaine to the US market and constantly used this method to traffic drugs.

Women who serve as “drug mules” or are involved micro-trafficking often take on these, low-paid, dangerous jobs because of their need for money, their addiction to drugs, or their relationship with a partner or family member who is involved in drug trafficking.³⁶

Eyes and Ears/Falcons

Women also often serve as lookouts, also known as falcons, who report on the movement of people, rival gang members and police.³⁷ Women are particularly useful in this role because they are often overlooked by authorities. These women can also be called on to perform other basic functions, such as cooking for the group.³⁸

Chemists

Women are tasked with overseeing the crystallization process of coca paste. Women chemists are recruited for their “precision,” and they often have an advantage over their male counterparts in this respect. As confirmed by the FIP,³⁹ in this role, the women must maintain ties and communication with criminal groups. Women in this position can also supervise the production of cocaine, while the work is carried out by others.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 26

³⁶ Luz Piedad Caicedo, *Mujeres En Prisión Por Delitos de Drogas: Espejo de Las Fisuras Del Desarrollo* (Corporación Humanas, 2017), p. 30, https://www.humanas.org.co/alfa/dat_particular/ar/ar_93254_q_MujeresEnPrision.pdf.

³⁷ María Jimena López León, “Las Mujeres Imaginadas de La Guerra: Narraciones de Excombatientes Paramilitares Sobre Las Mujeres y El Conflicto Armado,” 2009, p. 153, <http://www.bdigital.unal.edu.co/9969/>; Mata-Navarro, “El Cuerpo de La Mujer Vinculada Al Narcotráfico Como Narración de Sus Relaciones Sociales.”

³⁸ Jorge Damián Méndez Lozano, “Testimonios de Mujeres Zetas: María,” Vice, 2016, https://www.vice.com/es_latam/article/bne593/testimonios-de-mujeres-zetas-maria.

³⁹ Cuesta, Díaz, and Duran, “Mujeres y la economía cocalera en el Putumayo: roles, prácticas y riesgos.”

Microtraffickers

According to the UNODC, more and more women are entering the drug trafficking world by becoming microtraffickers, transporters of drugs (including inside prisons), or even mules.⁴⁰ These women usually have access to greater income than they would get in many formal jobs, while remaining at high risk of severe prison sentence in case of arrest.⁴¹ These microtraffickers only have marginal chances of rising to leadership, as they are easily replaceable, face a high risk of arrest, and have almost no impact on the operation of the drug trafficking business.

Trophy Wives

Beyond being objectified as “trophies,” these women occupy different roles in the drug trafficking chain, such as transporting drugs or providing cover for money laundering. Cases such as Gabriela Fernández, a Venezuelan beauty queen who was jailed for her ties to Colombian drug trafficker, Daniel Barrera, alias “El Loco,”⁴² or Martha Lucía Echeverry, wife of Miguel Rodríguez Orejuela, who oversaw certain operations and real estate assets of the Cali Cartel leader⁴³ illustrate the alternative roles the wives and partners of drug traffickers can play.

Women tied to drug bosses also can become players in the trade. After the capture of Héctor Beltrán Leyva, leader of the Beltrán Leyva Cartel, his beauty queen wife, Clara Elena Laborín, took over his drug trafficking business. “La Doña,” as she became known,⁴⁴ was responsible for maintaining the group’s cohesion and power in the absence of her husband, while also making alliances with other organized crime groups.⁴⁵ Colombian model Angie Sanclemente was sentenced to six years in prison for her role in trafficking cocaine. She recruited attractive women to travel to Europe with cocaine shipments, paying them US\$5,000. She was arrested in Buenos Aires in 2010.⁴⁶

Logistics Coordination

Within drug trafficking organizations, women also perform jobs requiring a higher level of professionalization, such as keeping track of earnings, organizing the logistics of drug shipments and taking care of money laundering. These jobs require high levels of reliability and trust, so women who work in these logistical roles have more opportunities to develop leadership capabilities.

40 Giacometto, “Mujeres, delitos de drogas y sistemas penitenciarios en América Latina.”

41 Ibid.

42 Daniel Lozano, “Las muñecas rotas de Venezuela,” *El Mundo*, 2013, <https://www.elmundo.es/elmundo/2013/10/25/gentes/1382704175.html>.

43 *Semana*, “LA REINA Y EL JEFE,” *Semana*, 1994, <https://www.semana.com/nacion/articulo/la-reina-el-jefe/23646-3>.

44 *Vanguardia*, “Ella es ‘La Señora’, la reina de belleza que cambió la corona para dirigir al Cártel de los Beltrán Leyva,” *Vanguardia México*, 2018, <https://vanguardia.com.mx/articulo/ella-es-la-senora-la-reina-de-belleza-que-cambio-la-corona-para-dirigir-al-cartel-de-los>.

45 Ibid.

46 *Semana*, “La historia de Angie Sanclemente, la modelo condenada por narcotráfico,” *Semana*, 2011, <https://www.semana.com/nacion/articulo/la-historia-angie-sanclemente-modelo-condenada-narcotrafico/248827-3>.

Sandra Ávila Beltrán, known as “The Queen of the Pacific,” is an example of this. She directed cocaine shipments from Colombia to Mexico for the Sinaloa Cartel, tracked the group’s finances, established new connections with potential buyers or suppliers, and laundered the money of Ismael Zambada, alias “El Mayo,” one of the cartel’s top leaders.⁴⁷

Migrant Smuggling

Migrant smuggling is the movement of people across borders -- either by land, sea or air -- for financial benefit.⁴⁸

Latin America’s large flows of migrants make this a particularly lucrative criminal economy. Due to their geographical location, Colombia and Panama see numerous groups of migrants head northward to the United States. Trafficking routes cross all of Colombia, often beginning from Ipiales on the border with Ecuador to Turbo in the region of Urabá on the border of Panama. From there, traffickers or “coyotes” can arrange passage to Panama by boat or send migrants on the perilous jungle trek across the Darién Gap.⁴⁹ This crossing can cost between \$7,000 and \$20,000, depending on the migrant’s country of origin.⁵⁰

Women play various roles within the trafficking of undocumented migrants through various countries and borders across Latin America.

Logistics Coordination

Similarly to drug trafficking, migrant smuggling requires logistical support, which women often provide. They are responsible for organizing lodging and food for illegal migrants, as well as coordinating routes and departure times with smugglers. These roles remain subordinate in nature.

Ludis María Rivera González, alias “The Godmother,” played this role within the organization led by “Mamá África” in Chocó. Another example was a woman identified as “La Reina,” who was in charge of housing illegal migrants in Ipiales, Nariño, before they continued their journey north.⁵¹

47 Semana, “La Reina del Pacífico,” *Semana*, 2007, <https://www.semana.com/nacion/articulo/la-reina-del-pacifico/88738-3>; Diego Enrique Osorno, “Jefes de Jefes,” *El País Internacional*, 2019, https://elpais.com/internacional/2019/04/08/actualidad/1554731940_431184.html; Alberto Nájara, “Sandra Ávila Beltrán: la reina que no era reina,” *BBC*, 2013, https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias/2013/08/130731_sandra_avila_beltran_reina_del_pacifico_perfil_narcotrafico_mexico_an.

48 United Nations, “United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and the Protocols Thereto,” 2004, available at: <https://www.unodc.org/documents/treaties/UNTOC/Publications/TOC%20Convention/TOCbook-e.pdf>

49 Ombudsman’s Office of Colombia, “La ruta de los migrantes ilegales en Urabá,” *Defensoría Del Pueblo*, 2018, <https://www.defensoria.gov.co/public/especiales/uraba/crónica--la-ruta-de-migrantes-ilegales.html>.

50 Ibid.

51 Blu Radio, “Desarticulan en Nariño red dedicada al tráfico de migrantes,” *Blu Radio*, 2016, <https://www.bluradio.com/nacion/desarticulan-en-narino-red-dedicada-al-traffic-de-migrantes-108490>; Office of the Attorney General of Colombia, “Desarticulada red de tráfico de migrantes involucrada en la muerte de 19 extranjeros que naufragaron en el mar Caribe,” *Fiscalía General de La Nación*, March 1, 2019, <https://www.fiscalia.gov.co/colombia/noticias/desarticulada-red-de-traffic-de-migrantes-involucrada-en-la-muerte-de-19-extranjeros-que-naufragaron-en-el-mar-caribe/>.

Coyotes/Traffickers

While few instances have been seen, there are women who also work as coyotes, or traffickers, in these migrant smuggling networks, physically accompanying the transport of migrants from one country to another.⁵²

Leaders

A woman known as «Mama Africa,» was arrested in March 2019 for leading a migrant trafficking network after a boat carrying 27 people wrecked off the coast of Chocó, Colombia. The smuggling network transported migrants from Congo, Eritrea, Cuba and Haiti, among other countries, to Panama. The migrants paid \$150 to \$350 for the voyage, and even more if they wished to continue their journey north.⁵³

A Nicaraguan woman, operating under the same “Mama Africa” name, was captured in a joint operation between Panama and Costa Rica in July 2019. She is accused of leading a migrant trafficking network that moved approximately 250 migrants from Asia, Africa and the Caribbean to Europe and the United States.⁵⁴

Human Trafficking

Human trafficking is one of the most lucrative criminal economies in the world, moving people internationally or domestically in order to exploit them sexually or force them to work for little or no wages, including as beggars or domestic servants.⁵⁵ The majority of victims of human trafficking are women and children.⁵⁶ However, according to the UNODC Global Report in Trafficking in Persons, women also represent a little more than a third of those arrested for this crime in the Americas.⁵⁷ This makes it important to understand the roles women play within human trafficking rings in the region.

52 María Dolores París-Pombo, “Trayectos peligrosos: Inseguridad y movilidad humana en México,” *Papeles de Población* 22, no. 90 (2016): 145–72, <https://doi.org/10.22185/24487147.2016.90.037>; International Centre for the Human Rights of Migrants, “Desplazamiento forzado y necesidades de protección, generados por nuevas formas de violencia y criminalidad en Centroamérica,” 2012, <http://www.acnur.org/t3/fileadmin/Documentos/BDL/2012/8932.pdf?view=1>; Proceso, “Repatriados cuerpos de menores hondureños que perecieron en ruta migratoria,” Proceso Digital, July 29, 2016, <https://www.proceso.hn/migrantes/item/128719-repatriados-cuerpos-de-menores-hondurenos-que-perecieron-en-ruta-migratoria.html>.

53 El Tiempo, “EE.UU. pedirá en extradición a coyotes asesinos de migrantes africanos,” *El Tiempo*, March 3, 2019, <https://www.eltiempo.com/justicia/investigacion/asi-cayeron-los-ocho-coyotes-involucrados-en-muerte-de-19-migrantes-332724>; Caracol Radio, “Desarticulan banda involucrada en muerte de 19 migrantes en Urabá,” *Caracol Radio*, March 1, 2019, https://caracol.com.co/emisora/2019/03/01/medellin/1551455418_296517.html.

54 EFE, “Costa Rica y Panamá Desmantelan Banda de Tráfico de Migrantes y Capturan a 46 Personas,” *EFE*, July 30, 2019, <https://www.efc.com/efe/america/sociedad/costa-rica-y-panama-desmantelan-banda-de-traffic-migrantes-capturan-a-46-personas/20000013-4033922>.

55 United Nations, ‘Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime’, 2000; INTERPOL, ‘Human Trafficking’; International Organization for Migration, ‘Counter-Trafficking’.

56 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, “Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2018,” 2019, https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/glotip/2018/GLOTiP_2018_BOOK_web_small.pdf.

57 Ibid.

Recruiters

There are women in trafficking networks who are exclusively dedicated to recruitment, often targeting vulnerable, younger victims. The forms of recruitment they use are diverse but often include the promise of employment and travel opportunities. Recruitment happens often within their community or through companies that pose as modeling agencies.

These women are often in charge of procuring travel documents and “preparing” the victims before they are sent to other places where they will eventually be exploited.

Colombian Andrea Vélez used a modeling agency in Mexico City to recruit women who were later sexually exploited by and for the Sinaloa Cartel.⁵⁸ Another woman, known as «La Madame del Amazonas» or «La Tigresa,» was accused of leading, along with two other people, a human trafficking network along the Colombia, Peru and Brazil borders. According to authorities, she was in charge of transporting women and girls from Puerto Nariño, Colombia, to Iquitos and Pucallpa, Peru, where they were sexually exploited for money.⁵⁹

In other cases, victims are coerced or encouraged to become recruiters themselves in order to obtain their freedom, generating a new income to supply their absence in the organization. This creates a vicious circle where some female victims become part of the human trafficking chain.⁶⁰

Ringleaders

Ringleaders, or “madames,” usually recruit and care for women within human trafficking and sex trafficking networks, as well as coordinate and maintain relationships with clients. These women often play mid-ranking roles within a criminal structure. Some of these women have taken on leadership roles, especially when it comes to the exploitation and sexual slavery of women. This was the case of Colombian Liliana Campos, alias “La Madame,” who was jailed on charges of human trafficking in Colombia and other countries. She was also in charge of logistics for the trafficking ring, as well as maintaining the list of contacts and clients to whom the women were forced to provide sexual services.⁶¹

58 La Silla Rota, “Andrea Vélez, la asistente que reclutaba ‘modelos’ para ‘El Chapo,’” *La Silla Rota*, January 15, 2019, <https://lasillarota.com/andrea-velez-la-asistente-que-reclutaba-modelos-para-el-chapo/266322>.

59 El Tiempo, “Una Niña, clave para atrapar a mujer que manejaba red de proxenetas,” *El Tiempo*, February 15, 2019, <https://www.eltiempo.com/justicia/investigacion/gracias-a-nina-atraparon-a-madame-del-amazonas-y-otros-proxenetas-327130>; Boris Miranda, “Cae La Banda de ‘La Madame Del Amazonas’, La Red de Explotación Sexual Que Traficaba Con Menores En Colombia, Brasil y Perú,” *BBC*, February 15, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-47248663>.

60 Gonzalo Escalante and Carmen Berrantes, *Madre de Dios. La ruta del oro: entre el cielo y el infierno. Estudio sobre la trata de niñas y adolescentes con fines de explotación sexual* (Terre de Hommes Suisse, 2016), https://issuu.com/ajml/docs/entre_el_cielo.




61 El Espectador, “Los roles que jugaron La Madame, su pareja y su papá en red de explotación sexual,” *El Espectador*, September 26, 2019, <https://www.elespectador.com/noticias/judicial/el-rol-que-jugaron-la-madame-su-pareja-y-su-papa-en-red-de-explotacion-sexual-articulo-883126>.

Another example is that of The Black Widows (Las Viudas Negras) in El Salvador, a group that forced young women to wed, using the fact that they could live legally in the United States to attract prospective partners. But the Black Widows later killed the husbands and forced the women to claim pension money or life insurance.⁶²

Roles of Women in Organized Crime

A continuing criminal enterprise that rationally works to profit from illicit activities that are often in great public demand. It's continuing existence is maintained through the use of force, threats, monopoly control, and/or the corruption of public officials.^[1]

[1] Albanese, Jay. *Organized Crime in Our Times*. 6th Edition. Routledge, 2014. doi:10.4324/9781315721460

Criminal Economy	Definition	Role
 <p>Drug Trafficking</p>	<p>Drug trafficking is a global illicit trade involving the cultivation, manufacture, distribution and sale of substances which are subject to drug prohibition laws.^[2]</p> <p>[2] United Nations, "Drug Trafficking", n.d., available at: https://www.un.org/ruleoflaw/thematic-areas/transnational-threats/drug-trafficking/</p>	<p>Day Laborers and Coca Pickers</p> <p>Cooks</p> <p>Farm workers</p> <p>Drug mules</p> <p>Eyes and Ears/Falcons</p> <p>Chemists</p> <p>Microtraffickers</p> <p>Trophy Wives</p> <p>Logistical Coordination</p> <p>Collaborators</p>
 <p>Human Trafficking</p>	<p>Human trafficking is one of the most lucrative criminal economies in the world, moving people internationally or domestically in order to exploit them sexually or force them to work for little or no wages, including as beggars or domestic servants.^[3]</p> <p>[3] United Nations, 'Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime', 2000; INTERPOL, 'Human Trafficking'; International Organisation for Migration, 'Counter-Trafficking'.</p>	<p>Ringleaders or "Madames"</p> <p>Recruiters</p> <p>Logistics coordination</p>
 <p>Migrant Smuggling</p> <p>Created in February 2020</p>	<p>Migrant smuggling is the movement of people across borders – either by land, sea or air – for financial benefit.^[4]</p> <p>[4] United Nations, "United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and the Protocols Thereto", 2004, available at: https://www.unodc.org/documents/treaties/UNTOC/Publications/TOC%20Convention/TOCebook-e.pdf</p>	<p>Logistics coordination</p> <p>"Coyotes" Traffickers</p> <p>Leaders</p> <p><i>insightcrime.org</i></p>

62 Anastasia Moloney, "Las 'Viudas Negras' bajo la mira después de caída de matrimonio forzado en El Salvador," *Reuters*, June 3, 2019, <https://lta.reuters.com/articulo/elsalvador-viudasnegras-idLTAKCN1T4IIT-OU5LT>.



Case Study 1 - Human Smuggling in Colombia: Between Victims and Victimizers

The role women play in organized crime constantly challenges the pre-conceived ideas which exist about the agency they have within criminal groups or economies. Beyond being victims of crime, women operate on the other side of the spectrum, wielding power over others through violence and in other ways. Sexual trafficking only adds to this complexity since women appear as victims, recruiters and leaders of their own human trafficking and sexual exploitation networks.⁶³

As shown in various reports and academic papers,⁶⁴ there is a tendency to view the role of women at either end of a certain axis: either they are victims or victimizers.⁶⁵ However, these roles are not mutually exclusive. These definitions overlap with each other in gray areas where women who are victims become victimizers in turn or are prepared to do so in the future.

The 2012 UNODC Global Trafficking in Persons Report stated that women make up 42 percent of convictions for human trafficking in the Americas. This reflects how women have taken on more importance in criminal organizations dedicated to human trafficking, especially in Eastern Europe, Central Asia, Central America and the Caribbean.⁶⁶ A 2006 report by Europol stated that at least 57 percent of human trafficking recruiters were women.⁶⁷

According to figures from the Attorney General's Office, from early 2018 until October 2019, Colombia registered around 222 women as victims of trafficking. In addition to that, according to figures from the Ministry of the Interior, 2019 saw only 108 cases, an increase of 74 percent compared to the 62 cases presented in 2013.⁶⁸

63 According to the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, the crime of human trafficking is defined as “recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labor or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs.”

64 Laura Alva Fuentes, “La mujer en crimen organizado: rol, participación y posición de poder” (Universidad de Alicante, 2017), p. 49, https://rua.ua.es/dspace/bitstream/10045/76538/1/LA_MUJER_EN_CRIMEN_ORGANIZADO_ROL_PARTICIPACION_Y_POSICION_ALVA_FUENTES_LAURA.pdf; Red Nacional de Organismos Civiles de Derechos Humanos, “Derechos y violencias: la experiencia de ser mujer. Situación nacional 2008 – 2017,” 2018, p. 5, https://redtdt.org.mx/violencias_mujeres/index.php/el-informe/; Eryyn Norza-Céspedes et al., “Descripción de la criminalidad femenina en Colombia: Factores de Riesgo y Motivación Criminal,” *Revista Criminalidad* 54, no. 1 (2012): p. 3.

65 Laura Requena et al., “A Psychosocial Study on Crime and Gender: Position, Role and Status of Women in a Sample of Spanish Criminal Organizations / Un Estudio Psicosocial Sobre La Delincuencia y Género. Posición, Rol y Estatus de La Mujer En Una Muestra Española de Organización,” *Revista de Psicología Social* 29, no. 1 (2014): p. 123, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02134748.2013.878572>.

66 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, “Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2012”, 2012, p. 11, https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/glotip/Trafficking_in_Persons_2012_web.pdf.

67 As cited in Rosemary Broad, “A Vile and Violent Thing: Female Traffickers and the Criminal Justice System Response,” *The British Journal of Criminology* 55, no. 6 (2015): p. 4, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azv072>.

68 Grupo de Lucha Contra la Trata de Personas, “Cifras de casos de Trata de Personas”, 2019, <https://tratadepersonas.mininterior.gov.co/observatorio-del-delito-trata-de-personas/cifras-de-casos-de-trata-de-personas>

This national increase has been linked to several causes, including the mass arrival of Venezuelan migrants seeking economic opportunities in Colombia. The situation on the border between the Colombian department of Norte de Santander and the Venezuelan states of Táchira and Zulia has also seen a spike in cases of human trafficking and migrant smuggling since the closure of the border in 2015.⁶⁹ A 2018 report from the National Trafficking Observatory of Colombia's Interior Ministry highlighted that cases involving Venezuelan women had gone from 2 in 2015 to 5 in 2017.⁷⁰ However, due to underreporting, the number of cases is likely much higher.

Along remote “trails” between Colombia and Venezuela, women face different threats, especially forced recruitment by trafficking networks. In recent years, criminal groups in these areas have forced women and children to join their ranks under threat of leaving them at the mercy of rival gangs.⁷¹ Groups such as Los Urabeños and Los Rastrojos maintain control of prostitution networks that exploit minors in urban centers, such as Puerto Santander.⁷²

Pablo Barrera, a legal advisor to Cúcuta's secretariat of the interior and a member of the municipal committee to fight human trafficking, said it has been impossible to quantify the exact number of women coming into the border city, either voluntarily or through trafficking, but the numbers have been increasing.⁷³ Some officials claim to be aware of the alarming number of trafficking cases. But InSight Crime has been able to verify that these same officials are making errors when registering the information about cases of human trafficking.⁷⁴

The lines between sexual exploitation through human trafficking and voluntary prostitution are difficult to separate. Not all Venezuelan women working in prostitution in Colombia were forced to do so. Some women take the decision to willingly engage in these activities as a means of subsistence. According to ASMUBULI, an association helping sex workers in Colombia, about 6,500 Venezuelan women have chosen to engage in prostitution since arriving in Colombia.⁷⁵ In Cúcuta, public officials also say that “approximately 90 percent of women who currently work in prostitution (..) are Venezuelan.”⁷⁶

69 InSight Crime. Interview with an international cooperation official. Cúcuta, Norte de Santander. 8 October, 2018

70 Observatorio Nacional de Trata de Personas, “Migración Venezolana y La Trata de Personas,” 2018, https://trata-depersonas.mininterior.gov.co/sites/default/files/migracion_venezolana_y_la_trata_de_personas.pdf.

71 InSight Crime, “Women, Youth Primed for Gang Recruitment in Venezuela,” *InSight Crime*, December 31, 2018, <https://www.insightcrime.org/news/brief/women-gang-recruitment-venezuela/>.

72 InSight Crime. Interview with an international cooperation official. Cúcuta, Norte de Santander. 9 October, 2018; Nohora Constanza Niño-Vega, “Violencia Armada y género: análisis de la relación a partir de los relatos de vida de jóvenes mujeres de la ciudad de Cúcuta y su área metropolitana,” *Eleuthera* 19 (2018): 149–67, <https://doi.org/10.17151/eleu.2018.19.9.VIOLENCIA>.

73 InSight Crime. Interview with Pablo Barrera, legal advisor at the Government Secretariat of Cúcuta and liaison to the Municipal Counter-Trafficking Committee. 1 October, 2019

74 The flaws include abuses committed by authorities during operations to close brothels, the revictimization of women during support processes and the lack of incentives to denounce human-trafficking, which generates an under-reporting in the number of cases.

75 Caracol Radio, “Migración: De 40.000 migrantes diarios, 5.000 no regresan a Venezuela,” *Caracol Radio*, June 10, 2019, https://caracol.com.co/programa/2019/06/10/6am_hoy_por_hoy/1560171512_487133.html.

76 InSight Crime. Interview with Pablo Barrera, legal advisor at the Government Secretariat of Cúcuta and liaison to the Municipal Counter-Trafficking Committee. 1 October, 2019

«Nobody does this for fun, we do it because we have to.» said Christina,⁷⁷ 24, who crossed over into Colombia in mid-2019.⁷⁸ After her arrival and as the days passed, Christina's savings ran out and she was convinced by a friend to find work in a bar.

She began selling alcohol in the evenings to customers but quickly realized she could not make enough to live on. The owner of the bar then suggested more money could be made for sleeping with customers. While women involved in prostitution can be found throughout the city, Christina and other women said that parks, especially Santander Park, just outside the Cúcuta town hall, have become hotspots for the trade.

Criminal gangs run the prostitution networks in the parks, extorting the women. These same gangs extort merchants and even drug transporters, and they have deep roots in Cúcuta and other parts of the department of Norte de Santander. While at first sight, it might seem these women are simply awaiting a client to offer their services to, a careful look will reveal men watching them from the corners of the parks. They are there to make the women pay for using the park; in other words, they are extorting them and making sure no women from another prostitution ring comes into their turf. These men are members of criminal gangs in Cúcuta whose influence reaches other parts of Norte de Santander. They also profit from extorting merchants and public transport operators, as well as migrant women like Christina.

This case highlights the thin line between trafficking and prostitution that, in cities like Cúcuta, becomes increasingly blurred. The recruitment of women through people known to them offering job opportunities is one of the most common *modus operandi* of human traffickers.

It is crucial to deepen understanding of women's roles as both victims and perpetrators of human trafficking and sexual exploitation. According to Rose Broad, in Europe, there has still been no successful approach to criminal justice which has allowed for the full and layered understanding of how women participate in these networks. This has only further propagated the misconception that women are either victims or victimizers.⁷⁹ The same situation has happened in Colombia.

The lack of knowledge about the roles of women within organized crime has affected criminal justice in Colombia. According to research conducted by Liliana Sánchez Mejía, Leonardo Rodríguez Cely, Gustavo Fondevila and Juliana Morad Acero, many female participants do not represent a risk to broader citizen security, specifically because they are working at a comparatively low level of the criminal chain.⁸⁰

In addition, criminal justice systems mostly view men as *de facto* leaders of such criminal dynamics. This leads to the possibility of women actively participating in

77 Name has been changed for security reasons.

78 InSight Crime. Interviews with sex workers. Cúcuta, Norte de Santander. October 2018

79 Broad, "A Vile and Violent Thing: Female Traffickers and the Criminal Justice System Response," p. 2.

80 Astrid Liliana Sánchez-Mejía et al., *Mujeres y prisión en Colombia: desafíos para la política criminal desde un enfoque de género*, 1st ed. (Bogotá: Editorial Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, 2018), p. 74, <https://repository.javeriana.edu.co/handle/10554/41010>.

higher positions being ignored, since most women captured are at the lowest rungs on the ladder. As a result, trafficking cases have tended to favor the portrayal of an “ideal victim,” namely weak and naive women who need to be rescued from criminal patriarchal figures.⁸¹

This implies the view that women aggressors are aberrant, which does not correspond to the «natural» behavior of women in violent contexts.⁸²

This criminal economy also shows the various forms that violence can take. In trafficking networks, women often act as organizers: they strategically plan, lead the recruitment and exploitation of victims, or have control of finances.⁸³ In many cases the victims themselves become involved in these networks, entering a gray area, where their roles as victim and victimizer overlap. At this stage, if the women involved receive inadequate support from authorities, they run the risk of becoming victims once again. The law does not recognize the duality of the roles people can play within a trafficking ring, and women risk being treated as criminals, and their status as victims altogether cast aside.⁸⁴

Madames, women who lead or manage prostitution networks have also exercised power. In Colombia, for example, Liliana Campos, better known in Cartagena as «La Madame,” managed much of the sex trade along Cartagena’s beaches. Authorities accused her of having sexually exploited 250 Colombian and Venezuelan girls and women.⁸⁵ Campos ran her network behind the façade of a company known as «Cartagena Fantasy Services S.A.S.» which hired restaurants, boats and hotels to serve foreigners.⁸⁶

According to an investigation by Colombia’s Attorney General’s, Campos solicited girls and women with promises of cash and other luxuries, and she then trained them on how to cater to her foreign clients.⁸⁷

81 Broad, “A Vile and Violent Thing: Female Traffickers and the Criminal Justice System Response,” p. 1.

82 Sheldon X. Zhang, Ko-Lin Chin, and Jody Miller, “Women’s Participation in Chinese Transnational Human Smuggling: A Gendered Market Perspective,” *Criminology* 45, no. 3 (2007): p. 701–2, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-9125.2007.00085.x>.

83 Arsovska and Allum, “Introduction: Women and Transnational Organized Crime,” p. 4.

84 Alexis Aronowitz, Gerda Theuermann, and Elena Tyurykanova, *Analysing the Business Model of Trafficking in Human Beings to Better Prevent the Crime*, 2010, p. 43–44.

85 John Montaño, “Las relaciones de ‘Madame’ con proxenetas israelíes,” *El Tiempo*, 2018, <https://www.eltiempo.com/colombia/otras-ciudades/quien-es-liliana-del-carmen-campos-puello-alias-madame-249974>.

86 El Espectador, “La empresa fachada que une a La ‘Madame’, una exreina e israelíes,” *El Espectador*, August 18, 2018, <https://www.elespectador.com/noticias/investigacion/la-empresa-fachada-que-une-la-madame-una-exreina-e-israelies-articulo-806929>.

87 El Heraldo, “El antes y después: de niña tímida a ‘Madame’ de una red de proxenetismo,” *El Heraldo*, July 31, 2018, <https://www.elheraldo.co/judicial/el-antes-y-despues-de-nina-timida-madame-de-una-red-de-proxenetismo-525244>.

The sex workers' earnings depended on the time spent with clients: \$200 for three hours, \$300 for 6 hours, \$400 for 12 hours, and \$600 for a 24-hour VIP service.⁸⁸ Campos made triple what the girls earned.⁸⁹

Starting from Cartagena's popular tourism industry, «La Madame» expanded into the Bahamas, Miami, Panama and Mexico, among others.⁹⁰ Through this network, she was able to obtain passports for the women and gave them stipends in US dollars for their time abroad. However, she then cashed in debts with sex work as payment.⁹¹ In such human trafficking networks, many women help to capture or recruit victims,⁹² which generally carries a greater risk of being captured by the authorities.⁹³ Some women, such as Campos, managed to lead their own networks while distancing themselves from these risks.

It might seem that cases such as that of «La Madame» are atypical. But according to UNODC statistics, just over a third of people convicted of human trafficking in the Americas are women.⁹⁴

88 El Espectador, "Las vueltas de la 'Madame,'" El Espectador, September 11, 2018, <https://www.elespectador.com/noticias/investigacion/las-vueltas-de-la-madame-articulo-811626>.

89 W Radio, "'La Madame' Cobraba En Dólares y Se Quedaba Con El Triple de Lo Que Pagaba a 'Sus Chicas,'" *W Radio*, August 3, 2018, <https://www.wradio.com.co/noticias/judicial/la-madame-cobraba-en-dolares-y-se-quedaba-con-el-triple-de-lo-que-pagaba-a-sus-chicas/20180803/nota/3782109.aspx>.

90 William Colina, "'La Madame' acepta cargos por trata de personas y concierto para delinquir," *El Heraldo*, 2019, <https://www.elheraldo.co/bolivar/la-madame-acepta-cargos-por-trata-de-personas-y-concierto-para-delinquir-668362>.

91 El Heraldo, "El antes y después: de niña tímida a 'Madame' de una red de proxenetismo."

92 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, "Global Report on the Trafficking of Persons 2018", 2018, p. 35, https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/glotip/2018/GLOTiP_2018_BOOK_web_small.pdf.

93 Broad, "A Vile and Violent Thing: Female Traffickers and the Criminal Justice System Response," p. 4.

94 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, "Global Report on the Trafficking of Persons 2018", p. 35

Female Criminal Leadership and Differing Use of Violence

As demonstrated in the previous section, women's participation in organized crime groups is not uniform. The diverse roles that women play in criminal economies allow us to characterize different types of participation forming a spectrum, which ranges from subordinates and victims to protagonists, leaders and perpetrators. Although the exercise makes it possible to verify the very high rate of victimization of women within the analyzed criminal economies, as well as the concentration of domestic tasks they take on at lower ranks of the criminal hierarchy, it also rejects the assumption that women do not voluntarily participate in criminal or violent activities, or take on leadership roles. It concludes that violence and criminal leadership, while being expected of men due to patriarchal stereotypes, are not purely masculine acts.

On the contrary, the participation of women in organized crime economies is not exceptional and does not occur only in minor labor or subordinate positions. In fact, there are abundant examples of female leadership in organized crime economies. The purpose of this section is to present the profiles of seven women in leadership positions in the selected criminal economies, as strong examples. The crossing-over of leadership and violence in this section is intentional, since both of these characteristics associated with women deviate from socially accepted and recognized standards within organized crime, a matter which requires further analysis.



**Enedina
Arellano Félix**



Mexico

Type of Leadership

Non-violent: This is characterized by leaders relying on their own intellectual and technical capacity, and trusted networks, among others, to lead criminal organizations.

Enedina Arellano Félix is a well-known drug trafficker from the Arellano Félix family clan, which founded the Tijuana Cartel in México.^[1]

While her brothers were the visible heads of the crime group, Enedina managed the Cartel's finances, staying under the authorities' radar.^[2] Her accounting work incorporated all of the cartel's criminal economies (trafficking of marijuana, cocaine, heroine, and methamphetamines, extortion, kidnapping, oil theft, human trafficking, contraband smuggling and contract killings).^[3]

Additionally, according to investigations by the United States' Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), Enedina was responsible for laundering money through close to 34 businesses, mostly companies related to livestock and real estate.^[4] Due to the authorities' constant pursuit of her brothers, Enedina assumed control of the organization in 2002.^[5]

She kept her distance from the violence, and strategically maneuvered the group through a crowded criminal landscape that included its rival, the Sinaloa Cartel, and supervised the group's domestic and international expansion.^[6]

She is described as a sensible woman, less prone to violence, who views organized crime in a very rational way. She managed the cartel as a company, reducing costs and maximizing income. She also established connections with other organizations and minimized violence.^[7]

[1] InSight Crime, "Tijuana Cartel", InSight Crime, February 13, 2018,

<https://www.insightcrime.org/mexico-organized-crime-news/tijuana-cartel-profile/>

[2] Perfil, "'La Jefa', La Misteriosa Mujer Que Maneja El Cartel Rival de Sinaloa," Perfil, July 19, 2015,

<https://www.perfil.com/noticias/internacional/la-jefa-la-misteriosa-mujer-que-maneja-el-cartel-rival-de-sinaloa-0718-0024.phtml>.

[3] Ricardo Ravelo, *El Narco En México*, ed. Grijalbo (Grijalbo, 2011).

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Elyssa Pachico, "'Baja California: A Test for Mexico's Pax-Mafioso?," InSight Crime, April 17, 2013,

<https://es.insightcrime.org/noticias/analisis/baja-california-una-prueba-para-la-pax-mafiosa-en-mexico/>; InSight Crime, "Tijuana Cartel", InSight Crime, February 13, 2018, <https://www.insightcrime.org/mexico-organized-crime-news/tijuana-cartel-profile/>.

[7] Ravelo, *El Narco En México*.



**Marlory Chacón
alias "La Reina del Sur"**



Guatemala

Type of Leadership

Non-violent: This is characterized by leaders relying on their own intellectual and technical capacity, and trusted networks, among others, to lead criminal organizations.

Marlory Chacón, known as the "La Reina del Sur," or "The Queen of the South," is a woman who trafficked multiple shipments of cocaine across the Mexico border and managed to launder more than \$4 million in drug money.

Chacón not only consolidated her business in Guatemala, she managed to extend her criminal enterprise into Mexico, Colombia, Panama and Honduras. Mexico and Colombia were key for moving drugs, while Panama and Honduras were where she maintained her secret offshore bank accounts and most of her shell companies.

Chacón's organization transported cocaine to Mexico and the United States. The proceeds were laundered through shell companies, particularly in Panama. In 2012, the US Treasury Department confirmed that Chacón had laundered money through more than 20 companies, including Bingotón Millonario, Revoluciones Por Minuto Aceleración S.A, Fer Seg S.A, Andrea Yari, S.A.^[1]

Chacón struck up relationships with important public officials, including with former Guatemala

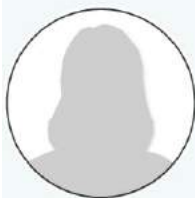
Vice President Roxana Baldetti, to whom Chacón allegedly donated \$2 million in 2011.^[2] It was also reported that the former minister of the interior of Guatemala, López Bonilla, mobilized resources and state personnel for a security team to protect Chacón.^[3] Chacón went unnoticed until 2008, when US authorities started to investigate her for moving drugs to the United States.^[4]

[1] Steven Dudley, "A Guatemala Drug Trafficking Chapter Ends in the US," InSight Crime, February 22, 2019, <https://www.insightcrime.org/news/analysis/guatemala-drug-trafficking-chapter-ends-in-us/>

[2] El País, "Condenada a 15 años de cárcel la exvicepresidenta de Guatemala Roxana Baldetti por corrupción," El País, October 10, 2018, https://elpais.com/internacional/2018/10/10/america/1539127138_240195.html.

[3] Steven Dudley, "Guatemala's Mafia State and the Case of Mauricio López Bonilla," InSight Crime, December 15, 2016, <https://www.insightcrime.org/investigations/guatemala-mafia-state-case-of-lopez-bonilla/>.

[4] Julie Lopez, "Three Traffickers, Jailed in Miami, are a Pandora's Box for Guatemala," InSight Crime, January 7, 2015, <https://www.insightcrime.org/news/analysis/miami-trial-pandora-box-guatemala/>.



Mery Valencia
alias "La Señora"



Colombia

Type of Leadership

Non-violent: This is characterized by leaders relying on their own intellectual and technical capacity, and trusted networks, among others, to lead criminal organizations.

Mery Valencia, known by her alias "La Señora," was a well-known Colombian drug trafficker.

Her name began to circulate in 1994, when a Los Angeles court in the United States accused her of drug trafficking and leading an organization called "Las Chivas."^[1]

She was arrested in 1997 in Río de Janeiro, Brazil, and was extradited to the United States in April 1998 after a unanimous vote by Brazil's Supreme Court, in the decision.^[2] Although she pleaded guilty in 1999 and was sentenced to life in prison, she was released on May 15, 2012, after serving only 13 years of her sentence.^[3] Her current whereabouts are unknown.

While not the top exporter of cocaine during the 1990s, "Las Chivas" became a profitable drug trafficking organization. Even while it was not the largest group, it has a differential element: including Valencia, the main leaders of the group were all women.

Valencia, her sister Luz Dary, and other women led the group, which, exported close to 12 tons of cocaine between 1988 and 1997.^[4] They laundered the drug money through 500 bank accounts located in Miami, New York, New Jersey and Puerto Rico,

evading US government fiscal controls.^[5] In addition to these operations, authorities found floppy disks, videos, chamber of commerce certificates, deeds to 60 houses, apartments, shops, garages, country homes, and properties that made up part of Valencia's money laundering strategy, as well as the businesses Valencia y Cia. Ltda. Pastic-all and the club Black Street.^[6]

[1] Larry Neumeister, "Female Drug Cartel Leader Appears In U.S. Court," San Diego Source, 1998, <http://www.sddt.com/News/article.cfm?SourceCode=19980423cn#.XUBeh-j0nIU>; David Rosenzweig, "Woman Accused of Running Cocaine Ring Is Extradited to U.S.," Los Angeles Times, 1998, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1998-apr-23-me-42205-story.html>.

[2] Caracol Radio, "Brasil autoriza extradición a EE.UU. de colombiana Mery Valencia," Caracol Radio, September 11, 1997,

https://caracol.com.co/radio/1997/09/11/judicial/0873957600_072312.html.

[3] Benjamin Weiser, "Woman Who Led Drug Ring Is Sentenced to Life in Prison," The New York Times, December 17, 1999, <https://www.nytimes.com/1999/12/17/nyregion/woman-who-led-drug-ring-is-sentenced-to-life-in-prison>.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Rosenzweig, "Woman Accused of Running Cocaine Ring Is Extradited to U.S."

[6] El Tiempo, "Descubren cuentas de lavado mediante chivas," El Tiempo, March 4, 1997,

<https://www.eltiempo.com/archivo/documento/MAM-560605>

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Thonya Xiomara
Hubbard alias
"Madame Thonya"



Panama

Type of Leadership

Violent: This type of leadership makes use of violence as a crucial element to keep people in line and maintain control of criminal groups. Women in this category use violence to varying degrees, based on the context of the criminal economy in question.

Thonya Xiomara Hubbard, alias "Madame Thonya," went unnoticed by Panamanian authorities until an investigation by the Antena 3 TV channel in 2000 identified one of Panama City's largest largest sex trafficking.^[1]

The investigations revealed that the network operated throughout Panama's capital, and involved a considerable number of girls, ages 13 to 15. The girls were recruited by two of Thonya's partners, Thayra de La Lastra (arrested in 2011) and Liz Ameglio. Thonya insisted that the young girls were not forced to be a part of the network, as they not only received 20 percent of the profits but their mothers and friends were aware of their work.^[2]

Thonya was a fugitive until 2011, when security officials arrested her at one of her residencies.^[3] That same year, she was sentenced to a little over 3 years in prison.^[4]

[1] Marc Wieting and Sebastian M. Ferrate, "16.000 pesetas por una «peladita» de 13 años," El Mundo, 2000, <https://www.elmundo.es/sociedad/tratapanama/madame.html>.

[2] Wieting and Ferrate, "16.000 pesetas por una «peladita» de 13 años."

[3] La Estrella, "La PN arresta a 'Madame Thonya'," La Estrella, October 14, 2011, <https://www.laestrella.com.pa/nacional/111014/pn-madam-e-thonya-arresta>.

[4] La Estrella de Panamá, "'Madame Thonya' Rumbo a La Prisión," La Estrella de Panamá, October 13, 2011, <http://laestrella.com.pa/nacional/111013/rumbo-madame-t-honya-prision>.

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Liliana Campos
alias "La Madame"



Colombia

Type of Leadership

Violent: This type of leadership makes use of violence as a crucial element to keep people in line and maintain control of criminal groups. Women in this category use violence to varying degrees, based on the context of the criminal economy in question.

Liliana del Carmen Campos Puella, known as "La Madame," "La Ronca" or "Vara de Caballo," grew up in the Blas de Lezo neighborhood, southwest of the city of Cartagena, Colombia.^[1] Prior to getting into the business of human and sex trafficking, Campos was sentenced in 2002 to 33 months in jail in the United States for heroin trafficking.^[2]

After serving her sentence, she was deported to Colombia, where she built the company "Dream Fantasy Cartagena," that functioned worked as a front for her prostitution businesses, initially based in the popular neighborhood El Recreo. Campos recruited underage minors in low-income neighborhoods outside of Cartagena's walled city, and sent them to perform sex work in The Bahamas, Miami, Panama and México.^[3] She arranged their travel, documents and points of contact, thanks to her extensive network of associates.^[4]

According to El Tiempo, she had a set price list for her girls. They were paid 500,000 pesos (\$200) for three hours of work. For six hours, the payment was 700,000 pesos (\$300) and the client received two sex acts. For 12 hours, the fee was 900,000 pesos (\$400) and the client could receive four sex acts. There was also a VIP service, a 24-hour encounter,

in which the client had the right to six sex acts. The young woman would receive \$600 for this service.^[5]

The case of the Madame has been one of the most famous scases of sexual exploitation. It illustrates how sex trafficking networks operate, often through a powerful woman who manages to make large quantities of money by exploiting young women. This sophisticated prostitution ring was transnational.

[1] El Heraldo, "El Antes y Después: De Niña Tímida a 'Madame' de Una Red de Proxenetismo."

[2] Catalina Ruiz Parra, "Fiestas en yates por el Caribe. Así operaba poderosa red de prostitución de menores en Cartagena," El Nuevo Herlad, August 8, 2018, <https://www.elnuevoherald.com/noticias/mundo/america-la-tina/colombia-es/article216328680.html>.

[3] Office of the Attorney General of Colombia, "Cartagena: contra la esclavitud sexual / Operación Vesta," Fiscalía General de La Nación, July 29, 2018, <https://www.fiscalia.gov.co/colombia/seccionales/cartagen-a-contra-la-esclavitud-sexual/>.

[4] Montaña, "Las Relaciones de 'Madame' Con Proxenetas Israelíes."

[5] John Montaña, "El historial delictivo de 'Madame': presa en EE. UU. y en Colombia," El Tiempo, 2018, <https://www.eltiempo.com/colombia/otras-ciudades/historial-de-la-madame-en-estados-unidos-y-colombia-254148%3C>.

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Griselda Blanco
alias la "Viuda Negra"



Colombia

Type of Leadership

Violent: This type of leadership makes use of violence as a crucial element to keep people in line and maintain control of criminal groups. Women in this category use violence to varying degrees, based on the context of the criminal economy in question.

Ana Griselda Blanco Restrepo is better known by her many aliases, which include "Viuda Negra," or "Black Widow;" "La Patrona," or "The Boss;" and the "Madrina de la Cocaína," or "The Godmother of Cocaine." Blanco was one of the most important and powerful women in drug trafficking in the 1970s and 1980s in Colombia. Born in Cartagena de Indias, on February 15, 1943, she grew up in Medellín, surrounded by domestic violence, and she was abused by her step-father.^[1]

Blanco started her criminal career in Colombia and managed to consolidate her cocaine empire in the United States, where she established operations centers in the cities of Tallahassee, Kendall and Fort Lauderdale, Florida, and in New York.^[2]

Blanco is described by some as a defiant, bold and blood-thirsty woman. Some sources said that she was a cruel woman, and when clients did not pay, she would have them killed. She was identified as

an extravagant woman because she managed to obtain a ring belonging to Eva Perón and dishware belonging to England's Queen Isabel.^[3]

In fact, it was La Madrina de la Cocaína that pioneered the concept of "mules," human drug carriers that transported marihuana and cocaine within their bodies. Additionally, she charted and refined the main drug trafficking routes going to Miami, that would later be used by her disciple and later business partner -- Pablo Escobar.

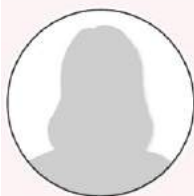
[1] *Semana*, "Griselda Blanco, tan cruel como Escobar," *Semana*, 2012, <https://www.semana.com/nacion/articulo/griselda-blanco-tan-cruel-como-escobar/264426-3>.

[2] José Guarnizo Álvarez, "La Madre de Michael Corleone," *El País Internacional*, 2012, https://elpais.com/internacional/2012/09/07/actualidad/1347034776_043705.html.

[3] *Semana*, "Griselda Blanco, tan cruel como Escobar."

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Yesenia Pacheco,
alias "La Güera Loca"



Mexico

Type of Leadership

Violent: This type of leadership makes use of violence as a crucial element to keep people in line and maintain control of criminal groups. Women in this category use violence to varying degrees, based on the context of the criminal economy in question.

Little is known about Yesenia Pacheco's early days, however, it was determined that she joined the Gulf Cartel in 2009. Her first role within this organization was as a lookout.^[1]

Later on, she would join the cartel's battle with other groups, particularly the murderous Zetas, a splinter group from the Gulf Cartel. Her fellow hitmen and drug traffickers found the way Yesenia violently and brutally murdered the organization's enemies to be unusual. This included an urban legend that she decapitated and skinned a member of the Zetas.^[2]

The use of violence enabled her rapid rise along the organization's ranks. She became the leader of a group of female contract killers known as "Las Hienas," or "Las Flacas," whose purpose was to take Zeta operatives.^[3] Additionally, "La Güera" controlled small groups dedicated kidnappings and extortion.^[4]

In September 2019, the Zetas released a video recorded in June 2014. In the video, a group of women appear, some of them naked, tied and on

their knees. Yesenia stands among them. Two hooded men behind the women eventually behead and dismember them.^[5]

[1] *Vanguardia*, "La Güera Loca... el trágico final de la jefa de sicarios del Cártel Del Golfo que enfrentó a 'Los Zetas,'" *Vanguardia México*, 2018, [https://vanguardia.com.mx/articulo/la-guera-locas-el-tragico-o-final-de-la-jefa-de-sicarios-del-cartel-del-golfo-que-enfrento](https://vanguardia.com.mx/articulo/la-guera-locas-el-tragico-final-de-la-jefa-de-sicarios-del-cartel-del-golfo-que-enfrento).

[2] *Debate*, "La Güera Loca, la mujer que mató a uno de Los Zetas y terminó decapitada," *Debate*, September 25, 2019, <https://www.tribuna.com.mx/mexico/La-Guera-Loca-jefa-del-Cartel-del-Golfo-que-termino-decapitada-por-Los-Zetas-20190925-0135.html>.

[3] *La República*, "'Güera Loca', la mujer que se enfrentó a Los Zetas y terminó decapitada," *La Republica*, September 26, 2019, <https://larepublica.pe/mundo/2019/09/24/narcotrafico-mexico-los-zetas-decapitaron-a-la-sicaria-yesenia-pacheco-ra-mirez-alias-guera-locas-cartel-del-golfo-muerte-fotos/>.

[4] *Unión Jalisco México*, "El trágico final de la sicaria que enfrentó a Los Zetas," *Unión Jalisco México*, November 7, 2018, <http://www.unionjalisco.mx/articulo/2018/11/07/seguiridad/el-tragico-final-de-la-sicaria-que-enfrento-los-zetas>.

[5] *Ibid.*

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The use of violence by some of the women examined in these criminal profiles, contradicts the stereotype that women are naturally care-givers rather than life-takers. The following case study regarding gangs in El Salvador complements the discussion by illustrating that both men and women regularly exercise the use of violence.



Case Study 2: Women in Gangs in El Salvador

The Northern Triangle country of El Salvador saw the formation of some of the most violent and infamous gangs in Latin America: Barrio 18 and the Mara Salvatrucha (MS13).⁹⁵

While a lot has been written at length about these structures and how they operate in countries like El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, the role women play in these groups has not been fully explored.⁹⁶

However, as occurs in other spheres of criminal activity, the agency developed by women within Salvadoran gangs like MS13 and Barrio 18 is on the rise. Fieldwork conducted in the country, has allowed InSight Crime to analyze the dynamics and compile interviews that outline the role of women within these gangs.

The gangs, or maras as they are commonly referred to within the country, are attractive to young people that live in neighborhoods with high rates of poverty and violence. Issues with abuse, abandonment or labor exploitation at home, resulting in the absence of a home as a protective space, leads to gang life becoming a substitute safe space.⁹⁷

According to some women, school was the environment where they found the most support, as opposed to their homes. Nevertheless, this developmental stage is when youth are most likely to join a gang. The conclusion shared by many investigators is that, in most cases, the school environment is not the ideal space to escape family issues, while the gang offers them protection, affection, resources and an identity.⁹⁸

In this context, gangs also provide an opportunity to earn cash, largely through extortion, petty theft and street level drug sales.⁹⁹ Other reasons mentioned for

95 InSight Crime, «El Salvador», *InSight Crime*, March 9, 2017, <https://www.insightcrime.org/el-salvador-organized-crime-news/el-salvador/>

96 José Miguel Cruz et al., “La Nueva Cara de las Pandillas Callejeras : El fenómeno de las pandillas en El Salvador,” 2017; Wim Savenije, “Las pandillas trasnacionales o ‘maras’: violencia urbana en Centroamérica,” *Foro Internacional* 189, no. 3 (2006): 637–59; Nelson Portillo, “Estudios sobre pandillas juveniles en El Salvador y Centroamérica: una revisión de su dimensión participativa,” *Colegio Oficial de Psicólogos* 21 (2003): 475–93.

97 María Lizet Santacruz Giralt, *Seconds in the Air: Women Gang-Members and Their Prisons*, 1st ed. (San Salvador: Instituto Universitario de Opinión Pública, 2010), p. 109, <http://www.uca.edu.sv/publica/iudop/libros/SegIN.pdf>.

98 Interpeace Programa Latinoamérica, “Violentas y Violentadas. Relaciones de Género En Las Maras Salvatrucha y Barrio 18 Del Triángulo Norte de Centroamérica” (Guatemala, 2012), p. 25, https://www.interpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/2013_05_14_Central_Am_Violentas_y_Violentadas_es.pdf.

99 Ibid., p. 101

joining one of these criminal structures, include retaliation or revenge against an aggressor and interest or curiosity.¹⁰⁰

As Sampó explains, “the appeal of drugs, weapons, sex [and] money”¹⁰¹ motivate members with the idea of a “better” lifestyle, despite the fact that it has been demonstrated that conditions within gangs do not always lead to a better quality of life for women.

Romantic ties with male gang members are one of the ways in which women are linked to the group. The gang members prefer to find women that are not associated with the gang, particularly underage girls around 13 or 15 years old. Female companions of gang members are often known as “jainas,” They often end up pregnant, leaving them few options outside of their relationship with the gang member.

Women can achieve different statuses within the gangs, depending on the way they are introduced into the gang. The women that aspire to become members of the gang have two options: sexual relations with one or more of the members of the gang or to submit themselves to a “brincada,” a beating lasting between 13 and 18 seconds that aspiring members must endure in order to obtain a higher status.¹⁰²

These women are immersed in a profoundly patriarchal and chauvinist environment that exalts traditionally masculine behaviors. They are outnumbered by males. For example, considering the different interviews conducted of incarcerated male and female gang members, women never exceeded 22 percent of the sample demographic.¹⁰³ This translates to the women having greater difficulties in earning the respect of their fellow mareros, term used for gang members, in order to demonstrate their abilities and what they are capable of. It is part of what it means to be a minority within the mara.¹⁰⁴

For years, the study of women’s participation in organized criminal structures focused on debates surrounding the sexual nature of their role, concentrating on women as victims of sexual violence within these structures.¹⁰⁵

Although sexual violence certainly persists within these groups, to only focus on the women just as victims is an analysis that over-simplifies their roles within the gangs.

100 Santacruz Giralt, *Seconds in the Air: Women Gang-Members and Their Prisons*, 170.

101 Carolina Sampó, “El Rol de Las Mujeres En Las Maras: Una Aproximación a La Violencia Que Sufren e Infringen,” *Si Somos Americanos* 16, no. 2 (2016): 133, <https://doi.org/10.4067/s0719-09482016000200005>.

102 Deborah Bonello, “Women in Guatemala: The New Faces of Extortion?,” *InSight Crime*, April 26, 2019, <https://www.insightcrime.org/investigations/women-guatemala-new-faces-extortion-2/>.

103 Ibid.

104 Ibid.

105 Sampó, “El Rol de Las Mujeres En Las Maras: Una Aproximación a La Violencia Que Sufren e Infringen”; Mauricio Rubio, “La Pandilla Proxenetista: Violencia y Prostitución Juvenil En Centroamérica,” *URVIO - Revista Latinoamericana de Estudios de Seguridad*, no. 4 (January 23, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.17141/urvio.4.2008.1083>.

Agency within the Gangs

As Santacruz points out, women play active, direct and varied roles within the gangs and their roles can evolve over time. At first they are involved in “operational” tasks and as they demonstrate their capabilities they are included in more activities related to the criminal economy of the organization. The most recurrent assignments for women include surveillance, collecting extortion payments and activities related to the drug trafficking chain,¹⁰⁶ meanwhile, many of them are trained to commit murders and mass robberies.¹⁰⁷

Among the first tasks assigned to the woman are surveilling the gang’s territory, an activity known as *posteo*, which consists of keeping the rest of the gang informed about any activities occurring within said territory.¹⁰⁸ As a source told InSight Crime, another of these initial assignments consists of identifying potential subjects for extortion and communicating this with other gang members who will then conduct the operation.¹⁰⁹

Once the women belong to a “*clica*,” as they refer to a small group of gang members within the same gang structure, they perform the same tasks as their male peers and often use violence just like the men: they do not leave home without a knife and gun, as they will surely be needed for their day’s work.¹¹⁰ This raises questions about the social expectations of roles assigned to men and women.

In this sense, it is evident that the women exercise violence with the same motivations as the men, therefore it cannot be considered as a psychological abnormality, as Gentry and Sjoberg point out.¹¹¹ On the contrary, acting violently is part of autonomous and considered decisions made by women in specific contexts.

The case of Arleth Liliana Torres, alias “Palina,” effectively illustrates this point. This woman joined the Barrio 18 gang at the age of 12. She started as a *postera* or *campanera*, before being assigned other tasks, like storing weaponry for the group, a crime for which she was held in a juvenile facility during her teenage years.¹¹² When she was released from prison, she was trained, along with five other female gang members, to join a team of hitmen within her *clica*.¹¹³ This led to Palina being arrested and sentenced to 25 years in prison for the murder of Carlos Alfredo Chacón, a soccer coach.

106 Santacruz Giralt, *Seconds in the Air: Women Gang-Members and Their Prisons*, p. 206.

107 Melissa Silva Franco, “Lucía Pérez: ‘A Los 12 Años Aprendí a Ser Una Asesina,’” *La Vanguardia*, July 3, 2013, <https://www.lavanguardia.com/vida/20130702/54376464422/entrevista-lucia-perez-mara-salvatrucha.html>.

108 InSight Crime. Interview with a judicial official from San Miguel. San Miguel, El Salvador. 16 September, 2019

109 InSight Crime. Interview with a protected source. 14 September, 2018

110 Santacruz Giralt, *Seconds in the Air: Women Gang-Members and Their Prisons*.

111 Gentry and Sjoberg, *Beyond Mothers, Monsters, Whores: Thinking about Women’s Violence in Global Politics*, cxi.

112 ElSalvador.com, “Palina, La Pandillera Sicaria de La Comunidad Las Palmas,” *ElSalvador.Com*, September 17, 2019, <https://www.elsalvador.com/eldiariodehoy/la-palina-la-pandillera-sicaria-de-la-comunidad-las-palmas/641042/2019/>.

113 Ibid.

However, women never seem to join the top leadership ranks, or ranfleros, who hold power the gang at a national level. The highest-ranking position achieved by women is as a jaina. The only condition for maintaining their power is to be loyal to the ranfleros, as infidelity is punishable by death. In an interview with InSight Crime in El Salvador, a judicial official stated that when the “boyfriend” of a jaina is imprisoned, she must remain faithful, as she can be killed for getting involved with another gang member.¹¹⁴

Women can exercise a leadership role within one of the clicas or palabreras, such is the case with Bamby de Teclas, the founder of the clica “teclas.” Bamby is close to the group’s current leaders. According to Central American authorities, this woman is responsible for managing the organization’s money within and outside of the country.¹¹⁵

Many of the women involved say that, regardless of their status, they are always seen as maternal figures, even when they are younger than their fellow male gang members. According to testimony by former gang members, the women within MS13 and Barrio 18 always assume the same roles as the ones designated by Salvadoran culture: as responsible for domestic chores and caretakers. One woman InSight Crime spoke with stated: “I was like everyone’s mother: I did the laundry, I cooked for them, I organized food packages for them [...]”¹¹⁶

The case of female gang members in Central America illustrates the highly complex nature of the roles women play in organized crime. It is evident that women achieve leadership roles – and as a result, often act violently – which inverts the traditional roles assigned to men and women. However, this takes place in a context where masculine values and traits are highly valued and where patriarchal cultural norms persist. While female protagonists are fewer in number than their male counterparts, they remain highly important when trying to understand urban violence and organized crime.

114 InSight Crime. Interview with a judicial official from San Miguel. San Miguel, El Salvador. 17 September, 2019

115 Office of the Attorney General of El Salvador. Ref. 85-UCCO-2016. 2016

116 Ibid.

Conclusions

As has been reiterated throughout this report, the participation of women in organized criminal economies is becoming ever more relevant and is accelerating. Studies of this phenomenon, which have been fundamental in understanding this situation, are still too few given their importance and magnitude. In addition, these studies have mainly focused on examining the female prison population linked to minor drug trafficking roles or the victimization and exploitation of women within human trafficking and migrant smuggling. This has left other avenues of potential analysis unexplored. The full spectrum of women's participation in different organized crime dynamics across Latin America presented in this document is one such avenue.

The characterization of the roles women play in criminal economies addressed above - drug trafficking, human trafficking and migrant smuggling - is intended to provide a more nuanced picture of existing knowledge. Although female participation has been lower than male participation and has traditionally been focused on subordinate roles in a criminal world that privileges and rewards male behaviors, their growing prominence in organized crime merits thoughtful and layered analysis.

It has been argued that the gender lens is highly useful for understanding this complexity, since it allows for the visualization of gender arrangements within criminal structures. These assign differentiated and hierarchical roles to men and women, and exalt supposedly masculine values, as occurs in other spheres of social life but are also frequently transgressed by women whose behavior deviates from the established rules. The construction of a more complete picture of women within organized crime, including the factors driving them to join, the roles they play and their ability to evolve within these groups, is imperative in designing effective public policies to tackle this problem.

Recommendations

The findings of this investigation allow for the formulation of several public policy recommendations for national governments and local authorities. Given the scarce systematic empirical evidence about the participation of women in organized crime, the recommendations are mainly oriented towards diagnosing this phenomenon based on more sophisticated measurements and analytical lenses that allow for a deeper comprehension of the problem. Additionally, the investigation leads to some recommendations focused on prevention and attention for affected communities. Finally, a gender lens must be applied in the design of public policies to confront this problem in an effective and differentiated manner across the region.

1. Strengthen statistical information systems related to organized crime and the participation of women in criminal acts – as victims and victimizers - in order to bolster academic research in the area, and to build baselines which can feed the design and evaluation of specific public policies.
2. In order to accurately build strategies which account for the varied nature of the participation of women in criminal economies, a gender lens must be applied to this area as has happened in numerous other areas of public policy.
3. Understand the factors that drive women to participate in illegal acts for preventive purposes. Although their motivations are varied, marginalization and the types of need derived from it are decisive factors leading them toward criminal activity. Prevention policies should be focused on the creation of economic alternatives for women, who face poverty and reside in areas with a strong organized crime presence. Putting these resources in place at an early age through improved education and inclusion programs in highly vulnerable areas could reduce the recruitment of people into organized crime organizations.
4. Map out the multiple and varied roles women play in organized crime, including in criminal economies across Latin America, including illegal mining, smuggling and extortion. This implies an exhaustive review of the location of criminal economies and the way they function in different countries, the systematization of the roles performed by women and the construction of indicators that allow for rigorous monitoring of the problem.
5. For the construction of a regional panorama regarding the participation of women in organized crime dynamics, information systems should be strengthened using mixed methodologies (qualitative and quantitative) in all Latin American countries. In this regard, quantitative information is vital to generate baselines, as well as for the formulation and evaluation of public policies.

6. Promote the empowerment of women, through collective initiatives which seek to give opportunities to those at risk of being recruited by organized crime. In Colombia, Peru and Bolivia, for example, there are cases where female coca growers have assumed leading roles within their communities and are working on collective initiatives that seek to provide opportunities for people at risk of being recruited into organized crime.

7. In the context of the fight against organized crime, it is necessary to understand the factors that push women towards participating in illegal activities in order to generate policies that prevent this in the first place. Although the reasons for women joining organized crime are varied, one of the main factors is poverty, coupled with the need to sustain their families. Public policies aimed at prevention should be focused on providing economic alternatives for women that are in vulnerable contexts due to the lack of opportunities and the presence of organized crime groups. For this, resources should be concentrated on prevention for young women through public schools or social inclusion programs.

8. Generate robust collaborative mechanisms between local, regional and national governments across Latin America, including allowing survivors of migrant smuggling and human trafficking to receive assistance, accompaniment, protection and reparations, in accordance with the law of each country. It is especially important to have internal control mechanisms to investigate and punish abuses against victims of human trafficking that report their cases to the authorities, especially when the victims have also acted as recruiters or participated in the trafficking network's activities. The lack of knowledge the authorities have regarding the protocols for the attention of victims of human trafficking increases their distrust of police and leads to an increased possibility of revictimization.

9. Urge Latin American police and judicial bodies to apply a gender approach to their investigations, including the appointing of investigators or prosecutors dedicated to gender issues, and the establishment of differential support measures for people, especially women, who decide to denounce the networks of human trafficking and migrant smuggling.

10. Seek effective collaboration between social, economic and educational policy institutions in order to reorient those women specialized in certain roles within criminal economies towards legality, through targeted reintegration programs. This is, because some specific skills developed inside criminal groups, such as logistics or finance, could be redirected toward legal employment.

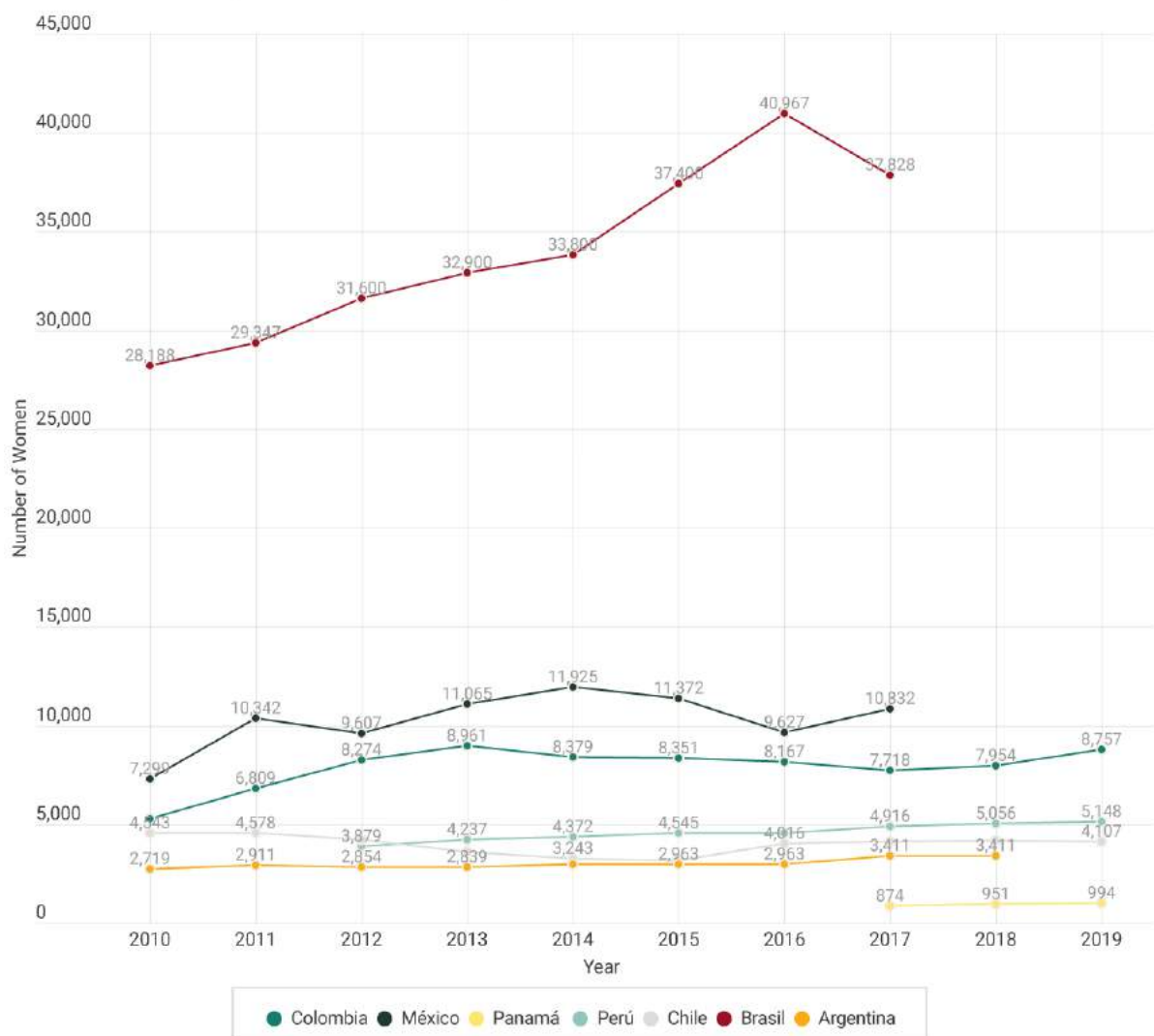
11. Review the use of punitive measures like jail time as a punishment for crimes related to organized crime committed by women. In general, the women that are arrested for these crimes are in the lowest ranks of the organization, taking on low-level but high-risk tasks like transporting or selling small amounts of drugs. Since most of these women are not a danger

for public security and their arrest does not have a significant impact on drug trafficking networks, seeking alternatives to incarceration and reducing the overall time spent in prisons may help break the vicious cycle in which women enter organized crime due to a lack of opportunities and are faced with even less opportunities upon leaving prison.

6

Annex 1: Number of women in prison in Latin America

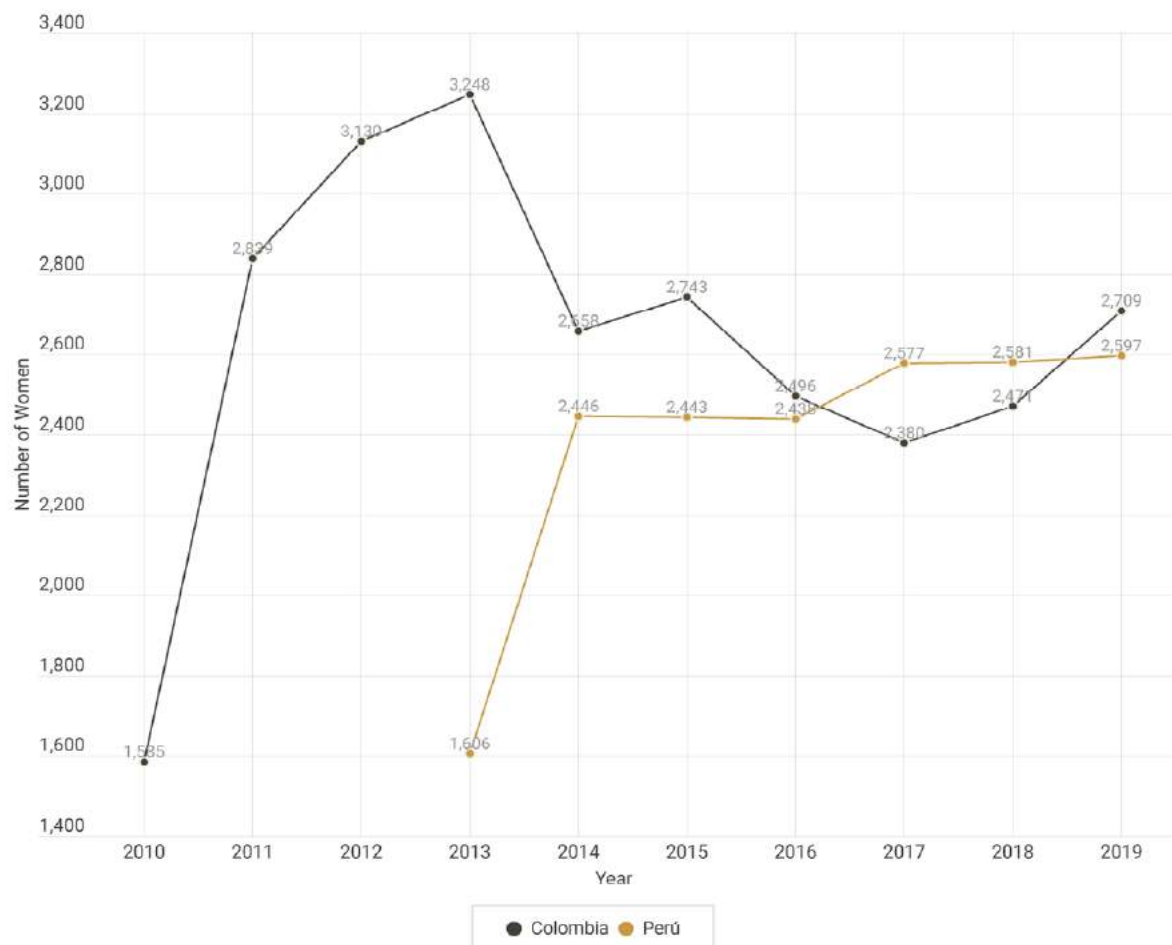
Number of Women in Prisons in Latin America (2010-2019) *insightcrime.org*



Created in February 2020

Sources: INPEC (Colombia), INEGI (México), República de Panamá / Ministerio de Gobierno (Panamá), INEI, INPE (Perú), Gendarmería de Chile (Chile), DEPEN, Ministerio de Justicia (Brasil), SNEEP (Argentina) y Parlamento del Uruguay (Uruguay)

Number of Women in Prison for Offences Related to Drug Trafficking in Colombia and Perú (2010-2019) *insightcrime.org*



Created in February 2020

Sources: INPEC (Colombia), INEGI (México), República de Panamá / Ministerio de Gobierno (Panamá), INEI, INPE (Perú), Gendarmería de Chile (Chile), DEPEN, Ministerio de Justicia (Brasil), SNEEP (Argentina) y Parlamento del Uruguay (Uruguay)

This document is the product of a project carried out by InSight Crime, Universidad del Rosario and the British Embassy in Colombia, with funds from the United Kingdom through their Embassy.

It is known that, while Colombia and the United Kingdom have collaborated on justice and criminal policy to address the issue of organized crime for decades, the understanding of this phenomenon has not always been approached through a gender lens that allows for the analysis of women's role inside it.

In this sense, it has highlighted the potential for an increased exchange in experiences surrounding public policies that tackle the link between criminality and women, including those aimed at providing this problem with a gender lens and a measure of social justice.

Without a doubt, each country differs in its criminal policy, according to its context and specific challenges. However, the idea of this project was to identify common areas that promote a critical look at the way that knowledge has been built around such a relationship.

With this goal in mind, the Colombian Observatory of Organized Crime was tasked with writing this document in order to promote a deeper analysis of the role of women in organized crime, as well as identify areas where it believed better public policies regarding the justice system and the fight against organized crime could exist in Latin America.

As such, this document presents the independent opinions of the Colombian Observatory of Organized Crime, a result of its own analysis. This document does not necessarily reflect the perspective of the Colombian and British governments, both of which do not take the recommendations contained within as obligatory. Both governments reserve the right to question that which they may consider inappropriate or wrong according to their respective positions.
