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The Evolving Role of Women in the Sinaloa Cartel: An Analysis of the Relationship between Drug Trafficking Organizations, Female Agency, and Economic Mobility

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Catherine Alexandra Page

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College

Oxford
April 2022

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Kennady Leigh Hertz

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the women of Mexico who continue to fight for equity and equality in a male-dominated society.

Acknowledgments

Catherine Page

I would first like to thank Kennady Hertz for her knowledge, her courage, and her academic prowess. Without her, this project would not have been possible. Professor Wesley Yates was integral in the development and execution of this project, and his many encouragements throughout this process were greatly appreciated. Dr. Linda Keena was an incredible ally in editing this thesis and in ensuring the accuracy and quality of our source materials. Mrs. Susan Kelly was always a great mentor who helped with the defense portion of our thesis. I would like to thank my parents who have, loved, encouraged, and supported me throughout this 18-month journey. I would especially like to thank my sister, who has read this thesis many many times always with the same focus and dedication. Many thanks to Racheal Embry for the late-night thesis help, and for her endless patience during the presentation development. Lastly, I would like to thank my fiancé, Boston Sharp, who has loved, motivated, and caffeinated me throughout the production of this thesis.

Kennady Hertz

I want to first thank Catherine, foremost for her remembering to type down some of our best ideas before we forgot them the next minute. It is an honor to work with such a powerful, accomplished woman and I am excited to see what you do next. Thank you to Professor Wesley Yates, whose guidance throughout the project and patience with Catherine and I's endless questions early on Wednesday mornings made this end result possible. Dr. Keena and Dr. Sullivan-Gonzalez, thank you for your review and assistance in the finalization process of this thesis. Mrs. Kelly, you gave me a space to feel comfortable at in college and I could not be more thankful. Dr. Parsons, Honors 101 with you (and DSG!) made me want to experience everything the world has to offer; this is one of those things and I am happy that I did it. I would like to thank my friends, for them constantly distracting me from this project but still showing up at the end to support me and make me feel special. Lastly, I want to thank my parents, older brother Nicholas, and grandparents for always loving and supporting me.

ABSTRACT

Exploring the role of women in Mexican drug trafficking organizations is a topic that has gained significant traction in the past 30 years. Despite the increase of literature on the topic, few papers theorize as to why women participate. This product sought to explore the various reasons why women participate in Mexican drug trafficking organizations, either willingly, or against their wishes. We hypothesized that women join drug trafficking organizations for two primary reasons: a) they are coerced by male figures in their life, and b.) they participate willingly in an effort to gain economic mobility. To test our hypothesis, we utilized open-source information on a variety of issues facing women in Mexico such as single motherhood, education disparities, domestic violence, the gender wage gap, femicide, as well as other economic data trends. We also utilized anecdotal evidence and conducted case studies on a variety of predominant women associated with the Sinaloa cartel. We determined that single motherhood had a large impact on a woman's decision to engage in cartel activity as a result of poor economic opportunities caused by sexism and *machismo* culture in Mexico. Some women were able to subvert this lack of agency for their own benefit and effectively utilized patriarchal structures present for their own benefit, gaining economic opportunities through their relationships with male cartel members. After reviewing our research, we found that our hypothesis of coercive participation did not fully encompass all women’s experiences; we concluded that the term exploitation was better suited. This was largely in part due to the consistent violence perpetrated against women, and our analysis of scholastic opinions on incarceration. This paper examined what economic factors lead women to participate in such activities and can be used to further examine female agency in the world of drug trafficking in Mexico.

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DEFINITIONS

Capo: the boss of a drug trafficking organization, responsible for supervising the entire drug industry, appointing territorial leaders, and making alliances, in addition to planning high-profile murders.

Drug Cartel: large, highly sophisticated organizations composed of multiple drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) and cells with specific assignments such as drug transportation, security/enforcement, or money laundering.

Drug Mule/Courier: a mule or courier is someone who personally smuggles contraband across a border for a smuggling organization.

Drug Trafficking: a global illicit trade involving the cultivation, manufacture, distribution, and sale of prohibited substances.

Drug Trafficking Organization: complex organizations with highly defined command-and-control structures that produce, transport, and/or distribute large quantities of one or more illicit drugs.

Informal Economy: the diversified set of economic activities, enterprises, jobs, and workers that are not regulated or protected by the state.

Jefa/Jefe: colloquial term for capo/drug lord

Narco/Narcas: individuals who sell drugs.

Sicaria/ Sicario: assassins associated with drug trafficking organizations.

Queen/Queenpins: female drug lords

Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

For much of its recent history, Mexico has been governed by the will of major drug trafficking organizations, so much so that the very dynamic of society has been altered to fit their needs. From beauty standards to efficacious job markets, the influence of narco politics and narco culture is ubiquitous throughout Mexico (Luviano, 2021). In the past 30 years, the demographic makeup of these drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) has experienced notable changes (Tickner, et al., 2020). The male-dominated space of drug trafficking has shifted, with women participating in higher numbers and in more roles than ever before. This trend of increased participation has held steady since the 1990s, with women now occupying positions in almost all levels of these organizations (Bonello, 2021b). Though there is extensive literature on this marked evolution, few have explored the reason for this engagement. Why, despite narco culture's highly patriarchal influences and the historically dominant role of men in society and in the workforce, are more women participating in decisive roles in DTO operations? We hypothesized that women in Mexico are either coerced into performing low-level DTO operations by men or seek to participate for more economic mobility. Economic mobility, whether by choice or by necessity is due to the lack of quality jobs in the formal economy.

The purpose of this study was to seek an understanding of why Mexican women participate in DTOs, specifically the Sinaloa Cartel, despite poor treatment and abuse. Women have long been viewed by men as sexual commodities and tools for profit through sex trafficking. Since the rise of cartels, submissive, scantily clad women have been perceived as a symbol of success for male drug traffickers, in which they showcase their prestige and power (Tickner et al., 2020). For high-ranking officials in these organizations, it is common to have a spouse in addition to numerous mistresses and other intimate partners. For example, Joaquin Guzman, commonly known as El

Chapo, had many mistresses who took the stand against him during his infamous 2019 trial. Despite his many affairs, his wife avidly supported him throughout the trial and continued her work in the Sinaloa Cartel after his final incarceration (Female Narcos, n.d.). Today, Narcos can still be seen toting beautiful women on their arms, but the suggestion that women in the drug trade are only useful as accessories is no longer entirely accurate.

While we can attempt to measure women's participation in the drug trade through data and official documents, it would be remiss to consider these records to be accurate portrayals of the true contribution women make to these organizations. The personal experiences of women actively engaging in cartel operations, which is an essential primary source for qualitative analysis, have not been widely published either. In addition to a paucity of reporting of this data, not every crime is documented by law enforcement and the documents that exist are seldom clear-cut and detailed. We recognized that, historically, women involved in the drug trade in Mexico are a marginalized group that has been victimized by both the cartel and law enforcement. We, in an effort to appraise the varying shifts in female cartel involvement while not having primary sources available, selected verified case studies of women, many of which focus on women involved with the Sinaloa Cartel. Information obtained directly from these women was critical to forming a more thorough understanding of their roles in DTOs. Put best, Elaine Carey, professor of history and Dean of the College of Humanities, Education, and Social Sciences at Purdue University Northwest stated: "The great male narrative, whether of the capo or the cop, is only a small part of the story" (Carey, 2014 p.197).

With positions ranging from lowly drug mules to high-ranking jefas (bosses), women now occupy many of the same roles as men in the drug trade, though their experience is noticeably distinct from their male peers (Borders, 2022). Even the women in the top, most privileged

positions in cartels are victims of the patriarchal structures and practices that come with participating in any male-dominated industry. Women's gendered experiences in cartels include threats of assault and sexual violence against them, being underpaid compared to their male peers, and quotidian misogyny (Carey, 2014).

Our paper serves as an addition to the literature surrounding the ever-shifting cultural and contextual factors that facilitate women's foray into the drug trade. Following our introduction, we presented a background and literature review section where we evaluated what previous authors have said regarding our topic. We then presented our methodological approach to testing our hypotheses and answering our research question, "Why and to what capacity are women participating in DTOs, specifically the Sinaloa cartel?" In our analysis, we organized women's current known roles into two categories (low level/ high level) as well as constructed a profile of a fictional woman who is susceptible to joining a DTO. We note that our profile should not be used by law enforcement or others to accuse certain women of participating in the drug trade without substantial evidence to support their claim but can be used as a guide to consider the effective reasoning behind the levels of participation seen today.

Chapter 2: BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Our background research can be divided into five separate sections: (a). Traditional Gender Roles in Mexican Society, (b). Women's Suffrage and Social Change in Mexico, (c). Origin of the Drug Trade in Mexico, (d). the War on Drugs, and (e). the Rise of the Sinaloa Cartel. We chose to focus on these five topics for our background section to provide context to the average reader who may not be familiar with gender dynamics and the formidable influence of the cartels in everyday life in Mexico. Following our background, we compared two contemporary perspectives regarding the state of affairs of women in Mexican DTOs: *The Evolving Role of Women in the Mexican Drug Cartels* by Linda Mais, (2013) and *Women and the Changing Structure of Drug Trafficking in Mexico* by Marisol Franco Díaz (2015). Both offer similar key insights on the motivations and duties of women in DTOs while having opposing hypotheses. By having conflicting perspectives in our literature, we hope to look beyond possible unidentifiable bias and conduct an objective analysis.

Traditional Gender Roles

In Mexico's traditionally patriarchal society, women functioned in different capacities to satisfy the needs of the men around them, whether this meant playing the role of a concerned mother, sexual object, domestic servant, or otherwise (Knapp et al., 2009). In everyday life, these women were expected to mold themselves into a tool useful for men. The cultural orientation of Mexico sets family relations, which provide a sense of security and support, as the most important aspect of life. Women were taught from birth that they are reflections of the men around them and that they are to be dutiful daughters, wives, and mothers. For a long time in Mexico's history, women's identities relied solely on their family and their ability to nurture said families (Meyer, 1977).

The Institute for Latino Studies at the University of Notre Dame detailed the traditional gender roles in Mexico. The symbolic *la calle* and *la casa* were codified as the domains for women and men. *La Calle,* the street, represents man's "space". Men were able to travel outside the home for work or pleasure without constraint. Their purpose was to provide for the family but could frequently engage in ignoble recreational activities such as drinking and extramarital sexual relationships. Women however were not afforded the same liberties. *La casa,* the home, was regarded as the traditional female "space". The home was seen as a place of order and fidelity, contrary to the view of the street. The role of women in the home was described as *amas de la casa*, homemakers, tasked with maintaining the well-being of the children. Women were obligated to serve their families in other ways as well; whether it be through mending clothes or even helping harvest crops if there was not enough male labor. All of the women's domestic work was seen as insignificant and invaluable for a long time (Knapp et al., 2009). Though women had plenty of responsibilities, their work went unnoticed and without pay. As a consequence of this, women did not have many employment opportunities and were unable to get a proper education, salary, or sense of self-sufficiency, (New York Times, 1977). Once a daughter was old enough to assist with domestic duties, she left school (if she ever attended).

Scholars of the Harvard International Review assert that these strict gender roles reinforced for centuries in Mexico led to the concepts of *machismo and marianismo* (Morena, 2020). These gender roles, and the family dynamics that stemmed from these gender roles, were heavily influenced by the Catholic religion, which over 80% of Mexicans still today practice (Evason, 2018). *Machismo* is defined as a set of beliefs and practices that reinforce the notion that men have innate superiority over women, (Morena, 2020). *Machismo* instilled the idea that the traits of bravery, honor, dominance, and aggression are what make a real man. *Marianismo*

on the other hand, saw the Virgin of Guadalupe as the ideal woman to emulate, a woman who was self-denying, moral, and dedicated to her family, (Evason, 2018). These revered extremes are what continually forced women into acquiescent domestic roles; Carmen Contreras, a Mexican government researcher for the Mexican Institute for Family and Population Research asserted that *machismo* resulted in long-term, systematic gender-based discrimination in Mexico from education opportunities to societal portrayals of subservient women (Morena, 2020).

The mindset of the majority of Mexican women at this time was very limited due to the societal restrictions placed on them by the patriarchy. Whether it was obeying their fathers, husbands, or even sons, women were expected to be submissive in almost every respect for their entire lives. It was difficult for many to imagine anything different. The heavy restraints on women's everyday lives lasted until the late 20th century, but remnants of this stratified culture still exist today (Knapp et al., 2009).

Women's Suffrage and Social Change in Mexico

Many social changes in Mexico occurred after the Mexican Revolution of 1910. During this period of flux, women took an active role in the transformation of Mexican society. Women who joined the political movement, which was primarily educated upper-class and middle-class women, took up the roles of teachers, journalists, soldiers, and even spies. (El Universal, 2020).

Prior to the revolution, there was no formal feminist movement in the country (Na'atik, 2021). During and after the revolution, women began to pursue jobs and careers outside of their homes to help provide for their families. Many women at first did so reluctantly; having a job outside the home seemed unwomanly. Over time, however, these sentiments changed. Despite most jobs paying very little or not at all, having one assisted women in becoming more involved

citizens; they were no longer limited to the home and new opportunities were opened for them (Meyer, 1977).

When the revolution was over, however, women lost the sense of autonomy they had gained. They were expected to go back to being dutiful housewives with no purpose other than to see to their families. Despite harsh challenges that would have to be overcome to reach equality, the seed had already been planted. Women's suffrage and equality was becoming a more and more popular topic in social discourse. The same group of women who became empowered during the revolution, educated, middle-class, and upper-class women, led the charge for the burgeoning feminist movement (Na'atik, 2021). In 1915, women earned the right to divorce and in 1916 convened the First Feminist Congress in Méridia, Yucatán, Mexico which "laid the foundation of many of the rights that would become outlined in the Constitution of 1917," (Macías, 2013, p. 2).

Women being oppressed throughout the history of Mexico makes their impacts on society seem relatively limited. However, when women's roles in their homes began to change in turn with social reforms and economic development, it left a large and lasting cultural impact on Mexican society. In 1953, Mexico became the last country in Latin America for women to gain the right to vote in federal elections (Na'atik, 2021). In June and July of 1975, the first UN World Conference on the Status of Women was held in Mexico City. Mexico hosted delegates from 133 member states for discussions on the best way to implement programs promoting gender equality and governments were forced to evaluate how women fared in their societies, (United Nations).

Since then, there have been some major strides made in terms of gender equality on a national scale. Today, Mexico boasts one of the highest rankings in the world for female

representation in government and has reached parity with boys and girls attending school (Na'atik, 2021). Despite this, there is still a long way to go if true equality is to be achieved.

Origin of the Drug Trade in Mexico

Mexico has been a large producer of both marijuana and opium poppy since the late years of the nineteenth century when both drugs were first introduced by Chinese immigrants in the Mexican state of Sinaloa (A&E, 2019). When the crops took well, Mexican farmers began cultivating them. Over time, morphine, heroin, and opium were all being used medicinally and, in some cases, recreationally. Opium poppy fields first developed in Sinaloa, and opium dens quickly spread from Sinaloa to many other areas of the country (Hyland, 2011).

When organized crime first began emerging during the U.S. Prohibition era, smuggling organizations established hubs of activity in cities along the Mexican Border with the United States. United States policies such as the United States Opium Exclusion Act of 1909, the Harrison Narcotic Act of 1914, and the Narcotic Drug Import and Export Act of 1922 influenced Mexico into becoming a drug-exporting nation. These acts created a profitable market for narcotics in the United States leading to the production and shipment of drugs in larger quantities (Werner, 2001). In the 1920s, Mexico's government under President Obregón banned the cultivation of and sale of marijuana, barred the importation of opium, cocaine, and heroin, and implemented stricter penalties for the cultivation and processing of those drugs and their source plants. This did not stop the growing trade, however, and by the 1930s, Mexico supplied over 15% of the United States opium market. (Werner, 2001). By the late 1950s, the term "drug dealer" had been introduced to describe those who smuggled and sold drugs (Hyland, 2011).

To adapt to efforts from both the Mexican and United States governments to hinder the drug trade and to keep up with the increased demand from American citizens for drugs in the late

1960s, drug traffickers consolidated their efforts into larger professional production networks that more efficiently cultivated and distributed drugs. Despite the bans, by the early 1970s, Mexico had become the biggest supplier of marijuana and opium into the United States as well as a popular transit route for cocaine (Hyland, 2011).

The War on Drugs

Cartels operated with near impunity for decades, facing little to no legal proceedings for their smuggling efforts and inter-cartel violence. Drug lords' informal agreements with the governing members of the predominant political party Partido *Revolucionario Institucional (*PRI) were effective in preventing widespread violence but promoted corruption in the upper echelons of Mexico's political sphere. Cartels were allotted specific territories and operated within those zones. This working relationship, however, was discontinued in the 1990s when the PRI began to lose its political influence, and the government shifted to a democratic multi-party system. These informal agreements were terminated, and violence began to increase rapidly (Ennega, 2021).

The political shift in Mexico from the 1990s to the 2000s left cartels exposed. The loss of government protection prompted many drug lords to seek their own form of protection: militias. Cartels created armed groups to protect themselves from government incursion and rival cartel influence. This creation of militant cartel fighters marked the beginning of major cartel violence in Mexico, allowing these organizations to not only defend their own operations but to invade and take control of trafficking routes under other cartels' jurisdiction (Trejo & Ley, 2017). The lack of political protection also pushed cartel leaders to bribe government officials to go pursue punishment for rival cartels. These compounding changes led to the large-scale cartel wars we are witnessing today. Three major cartels dominated the drug trade in Mexico in the 1990s: the Sinaloa, Gulf, and Juarez cartels (Payan & Saldaña, 2016).

The dominance of major cartels was challenged in the 2000s. The militarization and lack of governmental oversight (even corrupt) led these cartels to shift from loosely connected groups of traffickers to fully-fledged criminal organizations (Trejo & Ley, 2017). When Mexico President Felipe Calderon was elected in 2006, he instituted a national crackdown on drug trafficking organizations. His plans included deploying 50,000 soldiers to the streets of Mexico to curb the influence and effectiveness of cartel operations. President Calderon declared the beginning of the “War on Drugs” in Mexico in an effort to root out the expansive influence of cartels in the country. Brown University examined the effectiveness of Calderon’s policies and found that these plans fell short of mitigating violence and preventing corruption (Waters, 2012). During Calderon’s term, 120,000 homicides occurred, a figure twice as large as his predecessor’s (CFR). Corruption of government officials continued, with notable anti-cartel officials such as Noe Ramirez who accepted 450,000 USD per month from major cartels in exchange for information regarding government and military activities. (Waters, 2012). This strategy also utilized leadership removal but was ineffective in curbing cartel influence. Instead, the cartels whose leaders were removed splintered into smaller cartels that were notably more violent (CFR, 2022).

The Rise of the Sinaloa Cartel

The drug trade history is expansive, dating back decades. Numerous drug trafficking organizations have developed and fallen apart, but few have persisted through the course of recent history (Payan & Saldaña, 2016). Miguel Ángel Félix Gallardo became the leader of Mexico’s first major cartel, the Guadalajara Cartel, in the 1980s, when he became a collaborator with cocaine trafficker Pablo Escobar of the Columbian Medellín cartel (Beith, 2011). After the death of U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration Agent Enrique Camarena in 1985 by way of the

Guadalajara Cartel’s co-founder, Rafael Caro Quintero, a meeting where Mexico was split up into several regions with various cartels in charge of each region occurred (Beith, 2010). This meeting led to the formation of the Sinaloa Cartel, one of the oldest and most prominent cartels in Mexican history.

According to the National Drug Enforcement Administration’s 2020 National Drug Threat Assessment, the two largest, most influential transnational criminal organizations are the Sinaloa and Jalisco New Generation Cartel. Both cartels appear to be expanding in Mexico via business alliances with other organizations (Drug Trafficking Organizations, transnational gangs, prison gangs, etc). The Sinaloa cartel holds a significant presence in approximately 15 of the 32 states of Mexico, predominantly controlling drug activity along the Pacific Coast (DEA, 2020).

The Evolving Role of Women in the Mexican Drug Cartels

Linda Mais of the University of Texas at El Paso published a paper entitled *The Evolving Role of Women in the Mexican Drug Cartels* which detailed the increased participation of women in all levels of cartel operations. Mais discussed the roles women traditionally played as couriers/mules, mistresses, and wives, and the slow rise to higher ranks and more sophisticated positions. Additionally, in her description of typical positions within drug trafficking organizations, Mais describes women in strategic and tactical roles which were previously allocated to men alone (Mais, 2013). She framed the increased participation of women as a new threat to law enforcement in both Mexico and the United States because of the perception of women as “victims" instead of participants.

Mais explored an interesting point regarding women's belief in their agency and free participation, and the reality of exploitation. In her research, she noted that there was very little literature on the rising and evolving role of women in Mexican cartels, so in order to bridge the

gap of understanding of women in similar syndicates she explored the role of women in terrorist organizations. In these roles, many women believed that they were acting out of their own free will, whereas many of their actions were directed by the ambitions of these male-dominated institutions. She correlated women in terrorist organizations to women in the Narco trade through their tactical and traditional roles. She asserts that women are not gaining agency or influence through their participation but are instead filling a void that has been caused by the increase in violence in Mexico which has taken the lives of more men than women (2013). Mais's research was extremely helpful in directing our understanding of the past and current roles that women were playing in these organized crime syndicates, but her paper did not dive into why specifically these women elected to participate in cartel activities.

Women and the Changing Structure of Drug Trafficking in Mexico

Marisol Franco Díaz's *Women and the Changing Structure of Drug Trafficking in Mexico* addresses the impact of modern-day narcoculture on the reconfiguration of DTOs. Narcoculture is a dynamic subculture that has emerged in Mexico as a result of the strong influence of drug cartels that emphasizes the male individual and his achievements. Narcoculture resurrected the ideal of the "kingpin" way of life filled with hedonism, violence, honor, prestige, and consumerism. Franco Díaz (2015) asserts that, since 2006, there has been an increasing tendency in narco culture to view women as trophies rather than actors or colleagues. Though women have always been pressured to conform to certain beauty standards, narcoculture demands for them to be fully developed "items for exhibition" for the men around them. In turn, present-day narcoculture has altered the capacity to which women participate in the drug trade. In her article, Díaz contends women have transitioned from positions of prominence to the lower echelons of DTOs through exclusion from economic decision-making. Previous roles of women included

being leaders, producers, and distributors while now they are mostly drug mules, money launderers, and even involved in execution and kidnapping plots (Franco Díaz 2015).

The history of women is distinguished by perceived inferiority, which, in part due to narcoculture, continues today. Díaz cites Judith Butler's proposal about the construction of gender identity and how people typically choose to express themselves, recalling Butler's conception of gender identity as "a piece of theater that individuals play out in order to fit into the roles defined for their sex." Díaz states that while people do not have to make decisions in accordance with the perceived ideas of what their gender is supposed to do, many more traditional countries, including Mexico, maintain this notion. Franco Díaz (2015) notes that gender identities defined in current day narco culture adhere to gender roles determined by the ideals of masculinity and femininity, which encourages women to be in subordinate positions to men.

At the end of her article, Díaz notes that while it is critical to discuss how women's roles have changed over time, it is even more important to understand how these women currently participate and fit in masculinized spaces (Franco Diaz 2015). Díaz's research was crucial to understanding the extent of narco culture on gender identity as well as providing case studies of popular women in the drug trade but failed to include any specifics on the Sinaloa Cartel.

Chapter 3: THEORY AND HYPOTHESIS

When exploring data to support our hypothesis of economic mobility, we predicted that there would be a strong correlation between single-mother households, lack of social safety net programs, and limitations facing women in the workforce. We anticipated these values would correlate strongly with low-level participation in Mexico's Drug Trafficking Organizations (DTOs) and sought to support this by analyzing female incarceration rates and personal accounts from women in Mexico. In regard to our second hypothesis, coercion, we anticipated that violence against women, femicide, and interpersonal violence would highly influence our analysis. Through reviewing statistical information regarding these abuses, we predicted that women's lack of protection along with a history of machismo culture will compound and explain coercion.

The literature gathered for this project mainly focused on the evolution of women in cartels, yet few accessible papers have theorized as to why this observable shift has occurred. The role of low-level couriers and sexual entities has never been an acknowledged position in these highly stratified organizations, but the undeniable contribution of women can no longer be overlooked. It is important to note that while women still occupy the positions of mistress, trophy wife, and involuntary mules, the number of women who are participating in a willing capacity has increased significantly (Tickner, et al., 2020). In the 1990's the long-term system of corruption that held the violence of cartels at bay dissolved when Mexican leadership increased its stance against these syndicates (Waters, 2012). The sentiments of anticorruption continued into the mid-2000s, with the election of President Calderon and the advent of the War on Drugs. When violent interactions between law enforcement and cartels skyrocketed, every individual in the nation was affected, including the mothers, sisters, aunts, wives, and mistresses of the men involved. The drastic increase in male murder rates has contributed to higher rates of female participation in the informal

economy, and as violence continues, women have experienced more prominent responsibilities in DTOs (Olivi, 2018). This continued violence marked a paradigm shift in a woman's role within her family, drug cartels, and within society as a whole: from mother to breadwinner, daughter to jefa, and sister to smuggler. Why did these women begin working, and what has led them to choose to work for a cartel instead of pursuing legal means of employment? This gap in understanding has led us to theorize as to why more women now hold permanent positions in lieu of their previous transient ones.

We hypothesized that there are at least two key reasons why women are becoming involved in Mexican DTOs at higher rates. These reasons are coercion and the desire for economic mobility. In a male-dominated society, women in Mexico are often forced, either directly or through their desolate conditions, to participate in DTO operations. On the other hand, some women seek to utilize this system to their advantage, either gaining favor with sexual intimacy with high-ranking male jefos or by taking advantage of existing familial or close interpersonal connections.

For the purposes of this paper, coercion is defined as "the act or process of persuading someone forcefully to do something that they do not want to do," (Harper-Collins). Extortion, blackmail, or threat of sexual assault all constitute forms of coercion. Through our research, we have categorized economic mobility to encompass the broad array of women who actively choose to play a part in the extensive system of cartel operations. The two categories within economic mobility are economic necessity and economic affluence. For some women, the choice is not one made lightly. In desolate conditions with no way to provide for their families, women will often turn to the drug business as a way to make money. They are in need of work, and in many cases, these women feel as though they do not have another option (Tickner, et al., 2020). We utilized the same data as mentioned above to assess the statistical patterns associated with poverty and lack

of access to proper resources. These statistics shed light on the economic stressors that could push a woman to join a criminal syndicate.

Categorically speaking, the women who seek out the narco lifestyle in a desire for affluence are not always in desperate need of financial assistance. Some of these women are seeking to profit off of the highly gendered society where they can utilize their position as sexual commodities to meet beauty standards and maintain a comfortable living situation (Bonello, 2021b). This category also encompasses women who are involved in strategic-level positions in cartels. The women in these positions of power are often related to or have intimate relationships with other high-ranking cartel members (Fleetwood & Laban, 2022). This aspect of narco politics is not well documented, so we utilized a variety of qualitative data and ethnographic data to assess these women as well as the true power they hold within the trafficking industry.

The construction of this hypothesis began through our appraisal of the Mexican government's publication of raw data, archived disclosures from women who were past participants in Mexico's most notorious cartels, and official non-profit organization publications. While we were limited in our ability to gain primary source interviews, there is an ample amount of accessible open-source data available online regarding this topic that, when analyzed in conjunction with case studies, helps illustrate a clearer connection between ethnographic and statistical data. We sought to demonstrate that there are numerous situations in which women are forced to participate in cartel operations and other situations in which they choose to do so for their own benefit. Within the scope of this project, we cannot properly identify every scenario in which women participate, but we are confident in our analysis of key factors that contribute to this participation.

Chapter 4: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The involvement of women in DTO operations is not well represented enough through statistical data alone to determine the scope of our hypothesis. We reviewed a variety of quantitative data, qualitative data, personal anecdotes, and secondary ethnographic research for our assessment. In analyzing the data, we collected for this project, we utilized the *Handbook of Analytic Tools and Techniques.* This handbook features a compilation of strategic analytic techniques that allow an author to limit personal biases, investigate alternative analyses, and identify key characteristics of analysis that would be otherwise overlooked (Pherson Associates, 2008). These strategic analytic techniques allowed us to develop our hypotheses and prompted much of our research exploration.

We designed our research practices with a holistic approach, seeking to combine statistics from multiple disciplines with anecdotal evidence from women in Mexico to supplement our analysis. We believe that this anecdotal support is integral to assessing key indicators of the various aspects and origins of female participation in Mexican DTOs. We were able to connect various data trends and major events within Mexico to the observable participation of women confirmed through incarceration records obtained by non-profit organizations studying this issue.

To address the different facets of participation (coercion, economic affluence, and economic necessity) we explored numerous data patterns on female arrest rates, statistical research on violence against women, and single-mother households, labor force participation, annual trends on homicide rates for both men and women as well as arrest rates for possession of paraphernalia. We also explored data on Mexico’s GDP and the average GDP fluctuation from year to year. Many of these statistics were available in the World Bank Group publication, “Mexico Gender

Assessment". The World Bank Group is known for its highly reliable, unbiased reporting, so we were comfortable utilizing its data for our analysis.

We chose to focus on compiling information that helped contextualize the economic and social circumstances of women in DTOs, and, more specifically, in the Sinaloa Cartel. Through the use of search terms related to aspects of the drug trade and gender stratification in academic journals, databases, and Google Scholar, we compiled a list of 50+ sources pertinent to our topic. All publications were in English except three Spanish articles (translated reliably by peers) and one Italian article, which an author had the capacity to translate. Due to limitations on language and access to information, we cannot claim that this paper is fully representative of all women's experiences, but our extensive analysis of available data over a period of 18 months tells a compelling story that could serve to supplement future research.

We recognized that quantitative data is limited in terms of a governments or organization's capacity to collect accurate information, especially in instances of an informal economy such as the drug trade. While quantitative data offers insight, a substantial portion of information pertinent to our study can only be obtained through direct encounters with and testimonies from applicable women. Given this, our review drew from qualitative data from verified case studies of women in diverse positions and levels of power in the Sinaloa cartel.

For the purpose of this thesis, we focused our research primarily on female involvement with the Sinaloa cartel for a few reasons. Firstly, the Sinaloa cartel is one of the oldest and most influential cartels in Mexico with international and regional influence (Payan & Saldaña, 2016). Secondly, the regional territory controlled by the Sinaloa cartel encompasses both rural and urban geographies, which allows us to analyze female participation from both aspects, which we observed in our ethnographic research (Guzman, 2015). Lastly, with recent arrests of high-ranking

officials within the Sinaloa cartel, reporting is easily accessible and allows us more information to analyze (Felbab-Brown, 2022). Because the economic circumstances facing women in Mexico are not specific to the state of Sinaloa, and a lack of some specific information, we also utilized national data to illustrate the greater issue.

Chapter 5: RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS

To test this broad hypothesis of economic mobility, we split our research into two sections, with the first addressing lower-level participation and the second addressing higher-level participation. Section 1 addresses the relationship between education, the gender wage gap, and single-mother households, as well as how Mexico's homicide rate affects purposeful economic participation. This section also discusses the lack of social safety nets available in Mexico for women to rely on when faced with financial issues. Section 2 will explore the higher echelons of female participation through secondary ethnographic research as well as through case studies of prominent women in the Sinaloa cartel. For our second hypothesis regarding coercion, we examined data on femicide, violence against women, as well as interpersonal violence to assess how coercion affects participation. We also used female incarceration records to further assess coercive measures taken against women.

Hypothesis 1, Section 1: Economic Necessity

To address women's participation in the informal sector of the drug trade, we addressed the legitimate employment opportunities open to women. Globalization and women's rights movements have proven effective in advancing the role of women in the workplace, and Mexico has enacted numerous federal programs intended to bridge the gender gap, but the data detailed below indicates that despite progressive moves to include women, they still have many barriers to entry and within the workforce (Gurría, 2020).

When considering how to answer the question of why women elect to participate in drug trafficking organizations, we brainstormed possible reasons which would place women in unfavorable financial positions that might implore them to seek out work with a DTO. From here,

we determined that limited education, poor working conditions for women in the formal economy, and being a single mother all contribute significantly to poverty in women.

Education

Despite a sizable number of women in the labor force, the lack of quality jobs that are accessible to educated women in the formal economy in Mexico is notable. Though recent statistics state that women have achieved higher education parity with their male peers, women still have a substantially lower participation rate in the formal labor market with few opportunities for high-paying jobs (Hofer, 2019). We determined Mexico's long-held tradition of *machismo* culture is still evident today, especially in rural areas. Though *machismo* still persists, it has not stopped women from making great strides in educational attainment. Education is a major qualifier for entry into the job market, and many teenage single mothers and other vulnerable communities of women are less likely to complete schooling, which can place them at a greater risk of poverty and unemployment (Damaske et al., 2017). We assumed that there was a possibility that with the high degree of workforce inequity, the educational attainment of women may not have yet become on par with men. This proved false, however, with women in Mexico in the 2018-2019 school year, representing 49.5% of students in bachelor's degree programs compared to 50.5% of men. In postgraduate programs, women comprised 52.1% of students, with female enrollment actually surpassing men's 47.9% of students (Hofer, 2019). However, despite women reaching parity with men among enrolled students in Mexico's higher education network, we observed that they are not afforded the same job opportunities.

The report *One Aspiration, Two Realities: Promoting Gender Equality in Mexico* by McKinsey & Company (2019), while analyzing women's participation in the workforce in Mexico, asserted that 75% of female college graduates in Mexico do not have a paid job in the

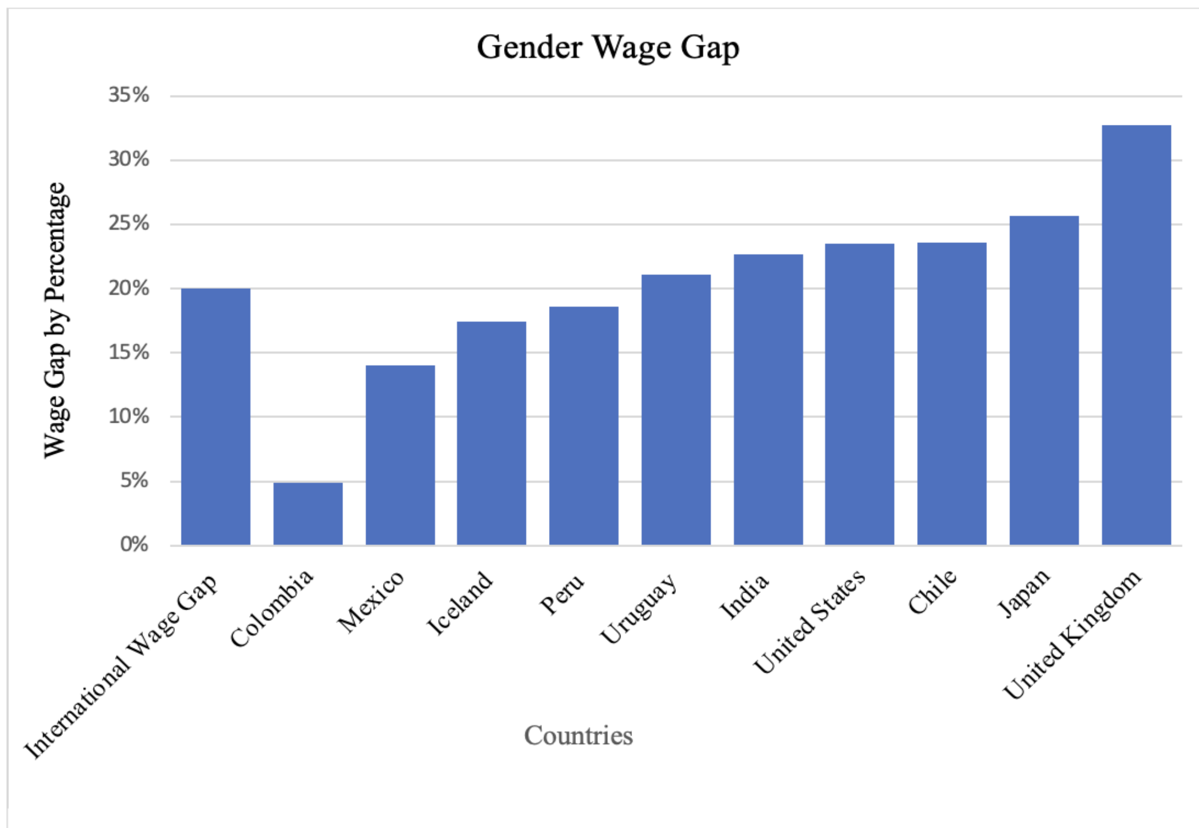
formal economy. Mexico continues to lag behind other emerging countries in female labor force participation (Bolio et al., 2019). Since 1990, there has been a ten percent increase of women in the labor force, from 33.3% to 43.8% (Inchauste et al., 2019). Despite this increase, less than half of the female population in Mexico participated in the labor market in 2021 compared with almost 80% participation of men (Gurría, 2020).

Poor Working Conditions for Women in the Formal Economy

Because there are limited job opportunities for women within the formal economy that protects them from gender-based discrimination and has decent working conditions, many women who work in DTOs resort to it out of economic necessity to support themselves and their families (Gurría, 2020).

Women around the world face a gender wage gap of almost 20% according to the Borgen Project (2018), a nonprofit organization dedicated to addressing poverty internationally. In Mexico, a woman who works within the formal economy will earn, on average, 14% less than what their male counterpart makes. In addition to this wage gap, over 66% of working women receive salaries equivalent to 2 times less than the minimum wage of 173 pesos per day. This wage gap is notably the second best among the 10 nations observed in the graph below (Mexico Daily News, 2022).

FIGURE 1: Gender Wage Gap



Graphic developed from information provided by Mexico Daily News 2022

Women earn 27% less than men in the nongovernmental services sector, 26% less in the retail sector, 24% less in the manufacturing sector, and 24% less in the accommodation and restaurant sectors. Given that women are working in the same positions for less financial profit, many women find themselves unable to meet their basic needs (Mexico Daily News 2022). The Borgen Project conducted an interview with 64-year-old Hila Gudino, a single mother in Jalisco who works at a clothing store. She earns 10 pesos per day (equivalent to 50 US cents). She attributes her poor salary to the rural area where she resides, claiming that there is not much work. In these rural areas with few opportunities, women do not earn a wage large enough to support themselves and their families (Borgen Project, 2018).

Poor access to social safety net programs and limited government oversight in the formal economy has created conditions that discourage women from seeking safer jobs as they cannot afford to lose their income, even if they are being exploited or sexually harassed. Mexico's Committee on Economic Social and Cultural Rights detailed in a publication that in addition to discrimination in earnings, shift allotments, and benefits, some women have also been required to take a pregnancy test before they could be officially hired. A study that explored the impact of intimate partner violence on employment for low-income women found that one in four women of the approximately 900 sampled reported missing work or school, losing their job, or having to change jobs due to the sexual or physical violence they were experiencing (Immigration & Refugee Board of Canada, 2020). Women are not even safe getting to work; they have described getting to and from work as "the most dangerous part of their day," with nine out of ten women having experienced sexual harassment while using public transport (Criado-Perez, 2019). Cars of men patrol bus stations, hoping to kidnap women getting on and off buses" (Criado-Perez, 2019). These compounding factors may encourage women to work for DTOs as they can earn higher pay for the same sexist working conditions.

Homicide Rates & Single-Mother Households

Femicide is defined by the United Nations as, "intentional killing with a gender-related motivation" and is commonly driven by archaic social norms, gender-based discrimination, and unequal access to resources between men and women (UN Women's Council, 2022). Rising femicide rates due to cartel violence in Mexico are of increasing concern, yet the number of male homicides remains significantly higher (Adams, 2022). In 1985, when drug cartels were still under the protection of the PRI, approximately 14,000 men were killed compared to 1,500 women. The data below shows a spike in female homicide rates after 2006 caused by government crackdowns

on Mexican drug cartel activities. The turf wars that ensued after the 2006 inception of the "War on Drugs" dissolved many traditional codes of ethics between cartels, and sicarios began targeting their enemies' wives, girlfriends, and children (Olivi, 2018). In 2016, approximately 20,000 men were murdered compared to 2,700 women (Inchauste et al., 2019)

FIGURE 2: Homicides in Mexico by Gender and Year

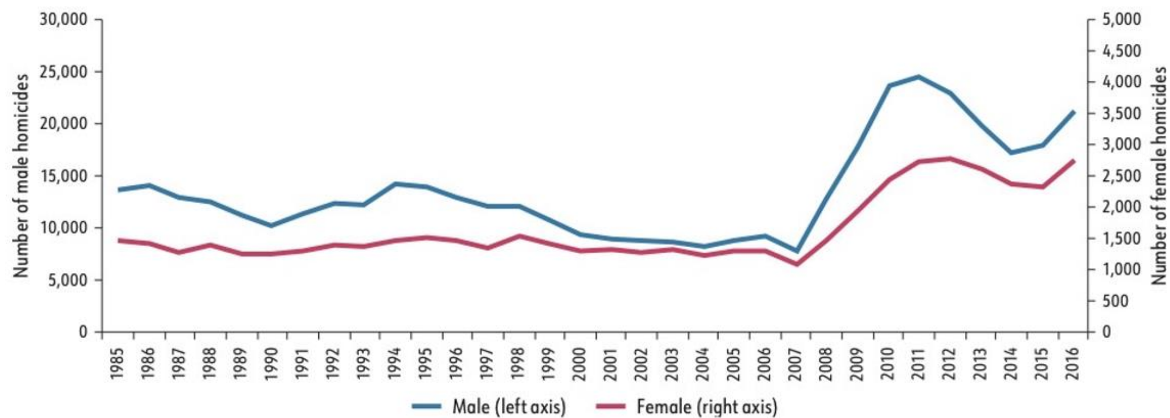


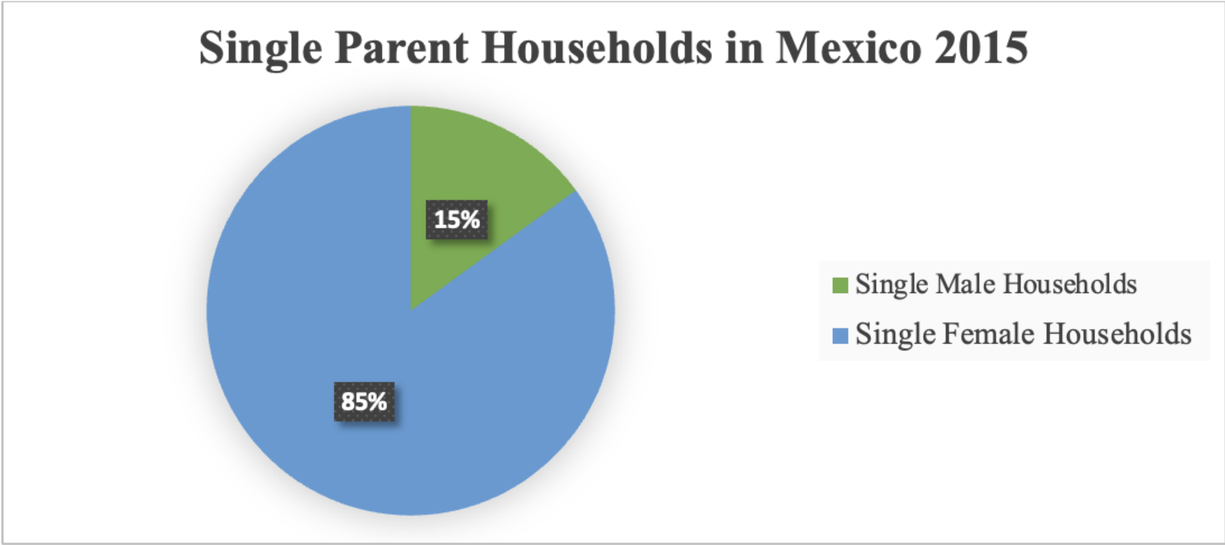
Illustration from World Bank (Inchauste, 2019)

More recent data shows that 34,000 people were killed in Mexico in 2021 alone, which is one of the deadliest years in Mexico's history. Of the 34,000 people killed in 2021, men comprised 89% of the total (Adams, 2022). It is important to acknowledge that many of these men are fathers, brothers, uncles, and close family members who are likely the breadwinners of their families, and in the event of their deaths, the women in their lives have to assume the role of both caretaker and breadwinner. With this in mind, we explored statistics on single-parent households.

In 1990, 17% of households were led by women; as of 2015, that number has increased to 29% percent. This shift illustrates the growing responsibility of women to provide for their familial

unit, a burden historically not allotted to them. Furthermore, in 2015, women comprised 85% percent of single-parent households (Inchauste et al., 2019). The average woman in Mexico completes six hours of unpaid housework per day, which presents a challenge to women seeking to pursue an education or even a part-time job. In addition to balancing the pressures of playing the role of caretakers and breadwinners, many women must select jobs that allow them to take care of their families while earning a wage, limiting their options even further. Of the 10 million reported female heads of households, only 5.23 millions of them were employed. According to the 2019 Rules of Operation for the Comprehensive Assistance Program for Single Mothers, women who are classified as "low income" and have children under age 15, "face limited access and enjoyment of the right to food, as well as economic, social and cultural rights." (Immigration & Refugee Board of Canada, 2020)

FIGURE 3: Single-Parent Households in Mexico 2015



When the burden of providing both financial and parental support becomes too much, many of these women will turn to the drug industry. Some do so in an effort to escape their harsh

reality and others will utilize the readily available job to either provide supplementary income for their family or as a main source of income to support their addiction as well as their household (Olivi, 2018). Coletta Youngers, a fellow at the Washington Office on Latin America's drug policy reform project said, "They are engaging in selling drugs or transporting a small number of drugs because it's an easy way to combine their childcare responsibilities with an income, and they're looking for a way to put food on the [table] for their kids." (Garsd, 2018)

The World Radio Program, funded by the MacArthur Foundation, reported that cartels actively look to recruit women, specifically single mothers, as foot soldiers to sell their products. Carmela Rodriguez Reyes, a 32-year-old single mother found herself serving a two-and-a-half-year prison sentence for selling crack cocaine in Mexico City. When her husband left her and her children, she found herself unable to pay for her expenses. She cited poor government support for single mothers as a major cause of her stress while trying to provide for her family. She met and began dating a small-time drug dealer and became addicted to the drug. Her partner recruited her to sell on the street since she was using his product (Garsd, 2018). Later when she approached her boyfriend asking to stop selling, he said she had no choice but to continue selling.

Hypothesis 1, Section 2: Economic Affluence

According to our research, at the lower levels of cartel operations, the majority of women are either coerced into cartel work or choose to participate out of economic necessity. Despite this, there is a population of women who actively choose to descend into the world of narco-operations at all levels (Olivi, 2018). This section will detail reasons why women become involved in DTO operations as well as significant women who have been recognized internationally as the female faces of Mexico's drug world. These women choose involvement in DTOs to make a name for

themselves as high-ranking members of the cartel and to secure a lifestyle of wealth and luxury. Specific to the communities of Sinaloa in which drug trade and the narco lifestyle have become accepted, the standards applied to women are integral to the assessment of their participation in the organization as a whole (Vásquez Mejías, 2016).

Beauty

Financial desperation is not the only reason that women become involved. Unlike the stressors detailed above, some women utilize cartel connections for their own gain. Narco culture highly influences the preferred appearance and beauty standards of women in Mexico. Culiacan, a major city in the state of Sinaloa, is the plastic surgery capital of Mexico (Tickner et al., 2020). Dr. Rafaela Martinez Terrazas, a cosmetic surgeon in Culiacan detailed her experience with the many women who have come into her office requesting operations conducive to the “narco-aesthetic.” She described the operations as, "A smaller, defined waist… Wider hips with bigger buttocks… And if we're talking breasts, they're generally large,". (Pressly, 2021). The overexaggerated feminine figure is consistent with the silhouette most commonly known as *la buchona.* A buchona is typically a woman who seeks to fit the “drug girl aesthetic” of expensive clothing and accessories and plastic surgery, typically to attract attention from men who will provide them with affluence and a comfortable lifestyle (Reina, 2021). Women ranging from 18 to 40 elect to have these procedures. She described a high volume of these women coming into her office with “boyfriends" who pay for the surgery, and women who are sent in by men to get similar procedures done. Dr. Martinez Terrazas attested that over 30 women were sent by the same man to get these procedures done (Pressly, 2021).

Men will “sponsor” women by paying for these procedures in return for sexual favors for a period of time. These informal agreements are not specific to these procedures but can also encompass other areas of these women’s lives. "Often if a woman isn't the daughter of someone with means, they look for a boyfriend who can support them," he says. "So, the agreement might be for things like a car, a house, cash or luxury items."(Pressly, 2020). The stereotype of men having multiple female partners holds true, and the women are well aware of it, and accept it as simply part of the culture. An ethnographic study describing women in the Sinaloa cartel, shed light on this. A student at the Autonomous University of Sinaloa, José Carlos Cisneros Guzman, conducted interviews with women who were known to be involved with the Sinaloa cartel. He spoke to one woman, Rosa (pseudonym) who began dating a drug lord’s son for a time, and even after he moved to a different city and got married, she still continued to have a relationship with him. Rosa claimed she genuinely loved him and appreciated the lifestyle that their relationship afforded her (Cisneros Guzman, 2018).

Not all women who seek affluence do so through romantic entanglements with cartel members. Guzman also interviewed a Narco queen who had been involved in the drug trade since childhood. Claudia (pseudonym) assisted her father with his business as soon as she came of a certain age. She detailed her experience, and how she eventually would “deal with men who came to do business with him.” When asked about her perception of her work she stated, “Yes, I am a queen, and there are so many other queens. I won’t fight for a title, but I will fight for profit. I care and protect what is mine,” (Cisneros Guzman, 2018). Guzman also asked about her experience in working with both men and women in the business and she asserted that it was easier for her to work with other women, but many of her female counterparts would utilize their beauty and seduce men into business deals. In her own experience,

"...once, when I negotiated with a man, he was flirting with me instead of concentrating on the business deal. I really hated that. I think that in the end they are just "men", they do not feel offended, but they think that because I'm a woman I want to fu*k them like one of their whor*s that is always chasing them because of money. But what they don't realize is that I have my own money, my own power, and I don't need to sleep with them. It is not that I'm a saint or anything like that, but business is business". (Cisneros Guzman, 2018 p.8)

Guzman rode with Claudia through the city and when they encountered a roadblock where officers were checking cars, Claudia spoke briefly to the officers, and they were quickly let go. She described "beautiful" women's interactions with police officers and explained that when women and children are in the car, or when women are alone, officers rarely search the vehicle. "Now you see what I meant before about being a girl; after all, it is not that bad. They (the Police) don't think that with this face I could be dangerous." (Cisneros Guzman, 2018).

Sicarias

Within Mexico's premier cartels, a branch of *sicarios*, or assassins, can be found. Women's engagement in this branch of cartel activities has captured media attention in recent years. While most of our case-specific anecdotes revolve around the Sinaloa Cartel, there is limited reporting on *sicarias,* female assassins, in the Sinaloa cartel, so we utilized reporting of women in other major cartels to supplement this aspect of our research.

Maria Guadalupe Lopez Esquivel, "La Catrina", was a suspected leading member of the Jalisco New Generation Cartel, until her death at age 21. Her monikers, "La Catrina" and "Dame of Death" illustrated her ruthlessness as a *sicaria* alongside her fellow male assassins (Hall, 2020).

La Catrina found herself quickly rising in the ranks of the Jalisco cartel after her boyfriend (also a prominent leader in the cartel) introduced her to the organization. She is allegedly one of El Mencho's (leader of the Jalisco New Generation Cartel) high-ranking regional lieutenants. Throughout her time with the cartel, she posted on her social media toting weapons and her glamorous lifestyle within the cartel, which is known as one of the most violent organizations in Mexico (Hall, 2020). Experts claim that the cartel benefitted from her postings as it romanticized cartel work and served as a great recruitment tool. In her role as a *sicaria,* she led a team who was allegedly responsible for killing more than 13 state officers. She is also allegedly responsible for coordinating assassinations, kidnappings, and extortion for the Jalisco cartel (National Post Staff, 2020). Maria Jimenez did similar work in the Zetas cartel until her arrest in 2012 for over 20 counts of murder. She conducted a variety of operations for the Zeta cartel such as executions, kidnappings, and controlling points of sale for the cartels. (Infobae 2012). There are many women similar to those detailed above, and their growing prominence in the media illustrates their growth within this branch of DTO operations.

The role of "trophy wife" is still prevalent in Mexico's premier drug trafficking organizations, but the highest echelons of these syndicates have evolved (Tickner, et al., 2020). We have elected to review and assess women of high status in the Sinaloa cartel in an effort to explain how women rise to power and how they maintain agency in such a male-dominated industry. We will next discuss Emma Coronel Aspirio, but it is important to note that her beauty and influence are just one aspect of her observable competence and power within Sinaloa. Women such as Coronel have been able to maintain their femininity and impose their influence in an overwhelmingly male organization. These women capitalize on their status as queens and use it to their advantage, by developing skills in sectors such as administration and financial management,

while creating and maintaining meaningful connections with leading men in cartels. (Asmann, 2021).

Emma Coronel Aspirio

Many women get their start in cartel activities through the men in their lives, and it is evident when reviewing the lives of prominent female cartel members that they are able to acquire and maintain agency as pivotal figures in the cartel. They are often born into an affluent family that has ties to major cartels or becomes intimate partners with active members, as seen with Emma Coronel Asipiro. Her father Ines Coronel and uncle Nacho Coronel were prominent members of the Sinaloa Cartel (Salam Lab 2021). Her father arranged her union with Joaquin Guzman when she was only 17 years old. After she won the Sinaloa beauty contest, she attended a party with her boyfriend when Guzman asked to dance with her. Despite being in a relationship at the time, she said yes, "Because at ranches even if you have a boyfriend you have to dance with anyone who asks," and saying no could have harsh results (Reina, 2021). She married him shortly after this interaction. In the Sinaloa cartel, Emma Coronel Aispiro, Joaquin Guzman's "beauty queen trophy wife" proved to be an integral player before and after her husband's arrest. According to the United States Department of Justice, Coronel was an active co-conspirator in a variety of operations of the Sinaloa cartel. The United States Drug Enforcement Agency confirmed that undercover agents within the Sinaloa cartel received orders from Coronel during her husband's first detainment in Altiplano Prison (Department of Justice, 2021).

Guzman's escape from prison was largely in part due to the coordination and planning of Coronel. She met with other members of the cartel and organized drug trades and laundering efforts to fund her husband's escape. Her direct purchase of property closely located to the prison where

Guzman was being held allowed other conspirators to dig a tunnel, subsequently allowing Guzman to escape. During the period of his detainment, she relayed numerous messages to key players within the Sinaloa cartel, proving her stature in the organization despite her husband's absence (Asmann, 2021). Coronel's influence set her apart from the stereotypical love interest of Narcos; she utilized the perception of the typical cartel wife, who often embodies *la buchona,* to maintain an active position throughout her marriage, even after Guzman's arrest (Reina, 2021).

"Traditionally, drug dealers' wives are seen as sexual objects without their own agenda" **– Cecilia Farfán-Méndez of the University of California, San Diego (2022).**

Coronel was able to establish herself independent of her husband in multiple facets as a businesswoman. She previously owned the Rios Casino in Durango, Mexico. Coronel had a large social media presence and other business ventures such as a fashion line of merchandise with her husband's name and likeness (Espinoza, 2019). She was also set to appear on a reality TV show as a recurring member of the "Cartel Crew", but she was arrested before this could occur (Reina, 2021).

During her husband's trial, she participated in an exclusive interview with a Mexican news channel *Noticias Telemundo* to discuss her husband's trial. Throughout the interview she held true to her position as the dutiful wife, standing by her husband's innocence. She defended her own innocence claiming over and over, "I'm a normal person." (Translated portion from interview). "I've never feared for my own safety. People know who I am. People know who El Chapo is." She maintained his innocence through the trial and his subsequent incarceration (Noticias Telemundo, 2018). While Coronel was a major queen in the Sinaloa cartel, she was not the most powerful woman in the syndicate.

Guadalupe Fernandez Valencia

A trend that we have noted specifically when analyzing the Sinaloa cartel, is that while women do participate in drug-running, more often than not, these women are in charge of arguably the most important aspect of the business, money. The name Guadalupe Fernandez Valencia was widely unknown until her placement on the Kingpin list for her role as a lieutenant in El Chapo's financial network (Bonello, 2021).

FIGURE 4: Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman Loera's Financial Operators

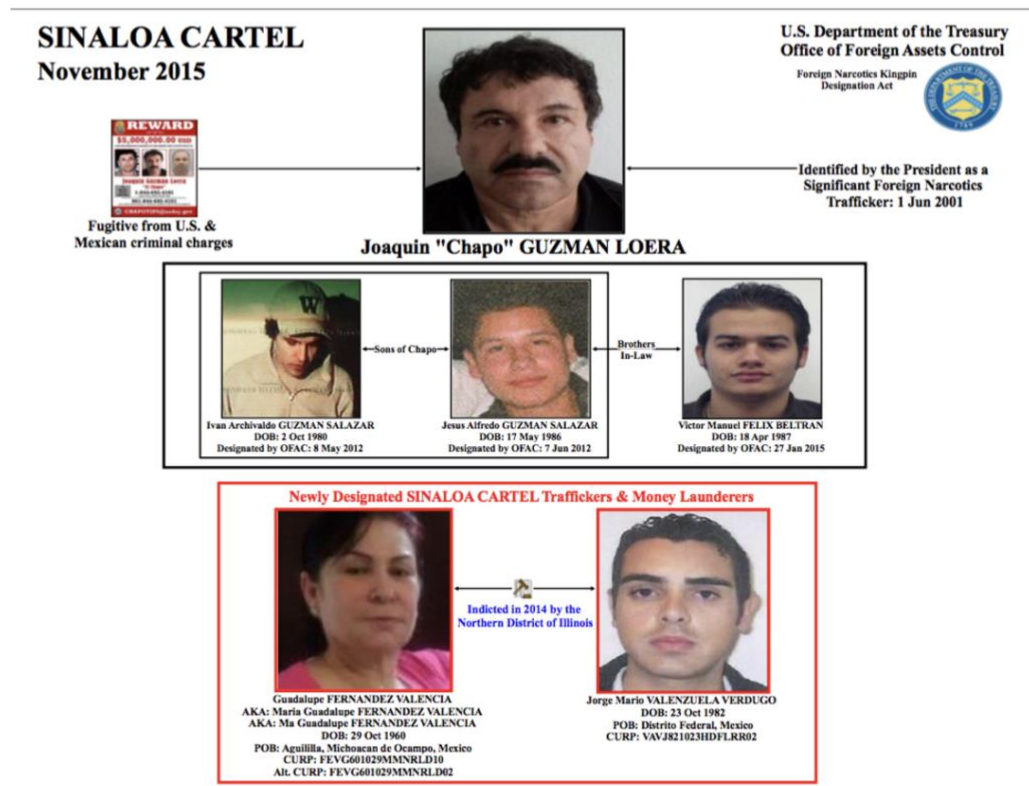


Illustration from the U.S. Department of Justice

Valencia was responsible for many aspects of the Sinaloa cartel's business ventures and was one of the few women who successfully rose the ranks from a low-level drug smuggler. Valencia grew up in Michoacan, where she was unaware of the extensive crime network

enveloping her country. Once the area was taken over, and violence overtook the region, she escaped to the US where she began dealing drugs in California. She was arrested in 1998 for trafficking in the United States, where she served 10 years until she was deported back to Mexico. She reportedly immediately assumed a position in the cartel, through her brother, once she returned to Culiacan, Mexico. Between 2009 and 2010, Valencia assisted in the smuggling of 3500 pounds of marijuana into the United States. During the same time, she moved an average of 30 kilos of cocaine weekly to customers in the Los Angeles area. When her brother was arrested in 2010 for drug-related charges, she moved her family to Guadalajara, Mexico, and left the business for a time (Seidel, 2021). Valencia described in her plea agreement that she was approached by an individual within the Sinaloa cartel who invited her to return to Culiacan to resume her role in the drug trafficking organization. Her description of the interaction made it clear that this "invitation" did not pose a choice but was instead a requirement. Between 2012 and 2014, she began selling cocaine, marijuana, and methamphetamines, but this time she began paying people to smuggle drugs in cars and in tunnels from Tijuana to the United States. She was also responsible for moving drug money from the United States to Guadalajara where she took a 3% cut of all the money she moved. She eventually worked directly with Alfredo Guzman Salazar, El Chapo's son, on financial matters, where she helped to launder billions of dollars for the Sinaloa cartel (DailyMail, 2019). Valencia was arrested in Culiacan Mexico in 2016 and extradited to the United States for her trial. She was indicted for her role as a drug smuggler within the cartel, and after providing the Department of Justice with information regarding the trafficking organization, she was given a sentence of 10 years.

The Women Who Comprise El Mayo's Financial Network

After the arrest of El Chapo, a close friend and fellow member of the Sinaloa crime syndicate Ismael Mario Zambada Garcia, also known as El Mayo, now assists El Chapo's sons and wife with the help of his own wife and four daughters (Bonello, 2021b). These women create a "shield" for the financial, legal, and social aspects of the drug laundering business. The illustration below from the U.S. Department of the Treasury details El Mayo's Financial Network as managed by his wife and four daughters (Infobae, 2020).

FIGURE 5: Ismael Zambada Garcia "El Mayo" Financial Network
(Department of Treasury, 2007)

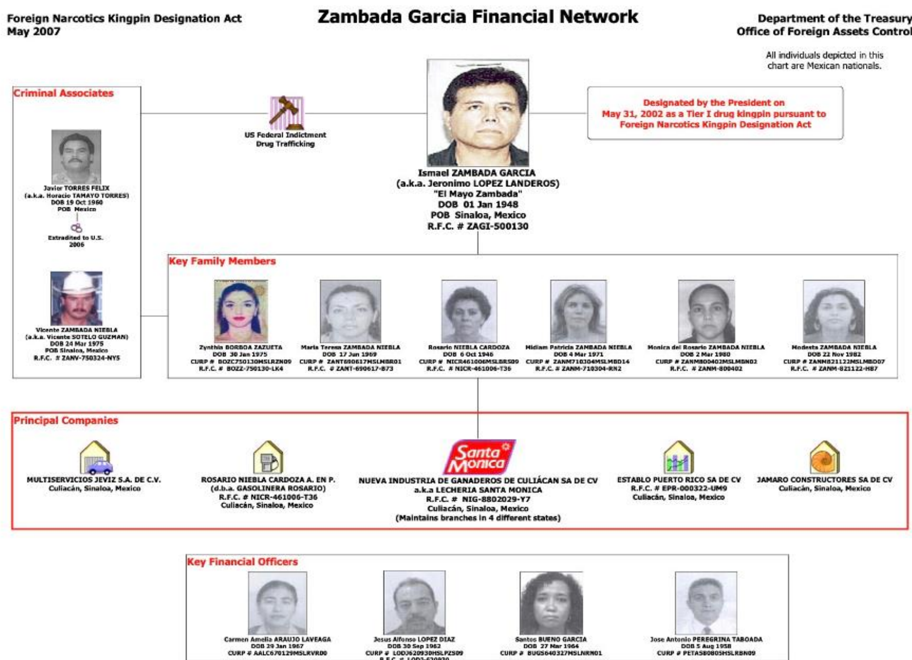


Illustration from the U.S. Department of Treasury 2007

Rosario Niebla Cardoza, Miriam Patricia, Maria Teresa Modesta, Monica del Rosario, and Zynthia Borboa Zazueta have developed over 12 companies in various sectors such as livestock, real estate, transport, fuel distribution, education, and childcare. These women are highly educated; Rosario and Patricia have degrees in business administration from the Autonomous University of

Sinaloa, Modesta is a law graduate from the Culiacan University Studies Center, and Teresa is a teacher. It is important to recognize that these women are the exception, not the rule in the case of business transactions and laundering efforts. Even more unique is the fact that El Mayo's sons are not involved in these companies or their operations (El Universal, 2020). Of the various companies owned by these women, 10 are registered in the Public Registry of Commerce of the state of Sinaloa, and as of June 2020, these companies were still operating (Infobae, 2020). Very little is known about the lives of these women outside their relationship with El Mayo. We determined this minimal presence is relevant to not only El Mayo's success but the overall success of the Sinaloa cartel.

Luz Irene Fajardo Campos

Arguably one of the most powerful women in the cartel business in the early 2010s was Luz Irene Fajardo Campos. She is regarded as the leader of a sophisticated drug trafficking organization that frequently worked with the Sinaloa cartel on the distribution of narcotics and other illegal substances into the United States (Bonello, 2021a). She was known by a few monikers such as *La Comadre, La Madrina,* and *La Donna*. Little is known about Campos' life before the cartel, which is a testament to the low profile she kept, until her arrest in 2017 (U.S. Department of Justice Office of Public Affairs, 2021). According to the DOJ, she had been running her operation since approximately 1997, and had successfully amassed a cartel with international connections in Colombia, Ecuador, Panama, and Honduras, as well as within Mexico and the United States. Campos grew up in the mountains of Sinaloa in Cosala, where poppy and marijuana farming was prevalent (Zocalo Group, 2021). She attended college and after her tenure at law school, was awarded a law degree. She began her business in trafficking shortly after (Bonello, 2021a).

Luz Irene Fajardo Campos was a very intelligent DTO leader, who handled much of the organization's business herself. Campos' operation focused on marijuana, methamphetamines, and cocaine (Bonello, 2021a). She personally traveled to Colombia and Honduras to organize the manufacturing and distribution of cocaine from Colombia to Mexico and Honduras to Mexico. She also facilitated the smuggling of chemical precursors into Mexico for her methamphetamine lab just outside of Hermosillo. She personally negotiated the acquisition of jets and pilots to transport the drugs and chemical precursors and paid off authorities and relevant officials in Colombia, Mexico, and the United States (Asmann, 2020). She also paid off public officials to arrest rival drug kingpins. Her close connections with El Chapo and the Sinaloa cartel allowed her to distribute Colombian cocaine to the United States. She managed her own smuggling networks from her methamphetamine lab, and according to the DOJ indictment against her, these networks spanned from Arizona to Mississippi (Asmann, 2020).

Campos' arrest in 2017 resulted in the death of her two sons, who participated in the business, by cartel associates in an effort to convince her not to divulge information about the criminal network she managed and collaborated with. Campos was extradited to the United States and found guilty of conspiracy to transport thousands of kilograms of cocaine and methamphetamines to the U.S. and received a 22-year sentence for her crimes (Bonello, 2021).

Hypothesis 2: Coercion

We assessed a correlative link between coercion in the drug industry by analyzing domestic violence statistics, records of femicide, and female incarceration rates. These statistics in conjunction with anecdotal evidence allowed us to analyze this theory more accurately.

Domestic Violence and Femicide

Women working in the drug trade come from a wide variety of backgrounds, but all tend to have one thing in common: their method of introduction into cartels. Whether they are rich or poor, or from a rural or urban area, they are likely to have been introduced to the drug trade by a male, whether that be their partner or members of their family (Olivi, 2018). While the vast majority of women involved in the drug trade come from a low socio-economic background and either marginal areas of cities or small communities, there are some exceptions, most frequently with higher-ranking females (Borders, 2022).

Male partners are often a woman's first introduction to working for DTOs. Many women engage in criminality to perform their expected duties as a "good" wife or girlfriend in accordance with the patriarchal structures consistent with narco-culture, where a woman is submissive. Beatriz Estrada, who works with female victims of violence for the government of Sinaloa, noted that the typical answer when she asks women with violent partners why they do not leave is that "they would not know how to take care of themselves or their children," (Bonello, 2021b). Due to their low social standing and lack of economic mobility, many of these women simply have no choice but to comply with their partner's wishes or suffer the consequences.

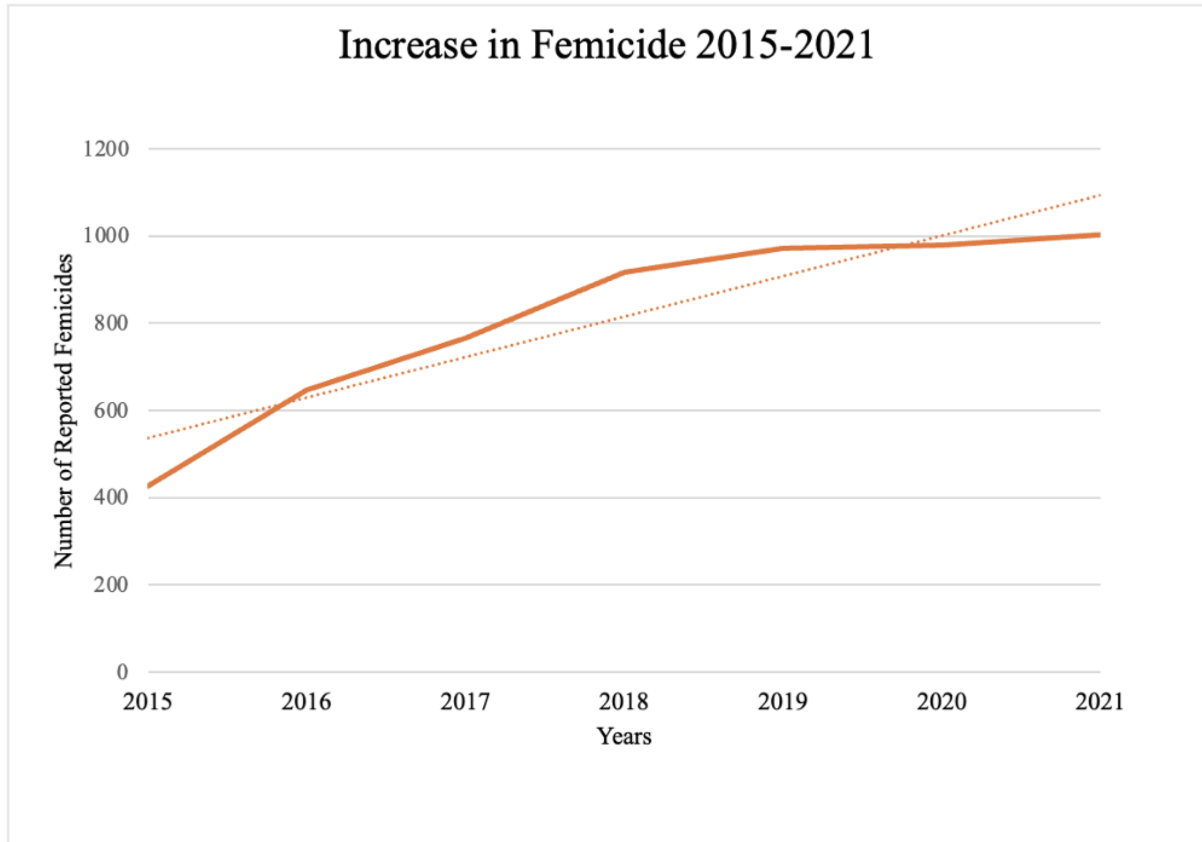
Mexico's National Institute of Statistics and Geography, INEGI, conducted a study that of the 50.5 million women and girls in Mexico, 70% have experienced some form of violence in their lifetime. This statistic has increased by 4% since 2016. This study also reported that 35% of women reported experiencing physical abuse and 52% had experienced psychological abuse (Reuters, 2022). Dr. Corina Giacomello of the Autonomous University of Chiapas in Mexico, when discussing female participation in cartels said,

> "Without wanting to dismiss the agency of women in the perpetration of crimes—which is often framed in contexts of gender victimization and adverse socio-economic

situations— it is predominantly patriarchal structures and gender-based violence that condition women's participation in criminal activities." (Borders, 2022)

In addition to increasing violence against women, femicide has seen alarming increases in recent years. It wasn't until 2012 that Mexico clearly defined femicide in its Federal Penal Code. From 2015 to 2021, there has been a 135% increase in the number of femicides in Mexico (Adams, 2022). The UN also reported that women and girls are more likely to be killed by people known to them. Nearly 1 in 5 women are killed in the home (Adams, 2022). Considering that many women are introduced to the drug industry through male figures in their life, fear of violence and abuse could prompt women to agree to participate in its operations out of concern for their own safety or even their life. We observed this coercion as an aggravating factor for women being forced into the trade.

FIGURE 6: Femicide in Mexico from 2015 to 2021



Incarcerated Women

Since women involved in DTOs typically perform low-skill level, high-risk operations where they are likely to get caught, such as smuggling, they are frequently subject to the full weight of punitive drug policy (Garsd, 2018). These women have little access to strategic plans that could impact the future of the DTO, meaning their lives are viewed as expendable. It is not worth the cartel's time to try to prevent them from being caught. While men are imprisoned in higher numbers for drug offenses, the number of women incarcerated for drug offenses in most Latin American countries is increasing at a greater rate (Youngers et al., 2020).

Women imprisoned due to drug offenses are disproportionately subject to pre-trial detention and lengthy sentences, (Borders, 2022). For the most part, nobody is there to support and fight for their freedom. They are a marginalized group, targets of both cartel recruitment and law enforcement prosecution. These women come from disadvantaged backgrounds and are frequently subject to extortion (Youngers et al., 2020). Women who buy, sell, and transport small amounts of drugs experience harsh punitive measures that contribute to a vicious cycle of violence and poverty, the exact struggles which led these women to participate in the drug business (Garsd, 2018). Prisons often create severe emotional and psychological trauma for incarcerated women, mothers especially. Being imprisoned does not just negatively impact the woman charged— "on average, women in Latin American prisons are more likely to be parents, have more than three children, have become parents as an adolescent, and around 39% have incarcerated partners," Borders, 2022). A mother's incarceration can contribute to their children joining the cartel or suffering from social stigma.

Chapter 6: RESULTS

To answer the question, *why, despite narco culture's highly patriarchal influences and the historically dominant role of men in society and in the workforce, are more women participating in decisive roles in DTO operations,* we hypothesized that the increased participation of women in DTOs was due to a desire for economic mobility or through coerced participation. After further examining our second hypothesis, we believe that the term, "exploitation" characterized by the expendable nature of women in low-level positions, would be better suited to describe the forced participation of women in these organizations. While coercion does occur, we assess that the term does not accurately encompass the data we presented in our analysis.

While our data shows that women are often resourceful in utilizing the major presence of the cartels to their benefit, a large majority are still seen as tools for the organization as a whole, even in the higher echelons of participation. While a single mother might elect to begin selling drugs, she is still not awarded the same avenues of latitude within the cartel compared to her male counterparts, parallel to women's limited level of self-determination in Mexican society as a whole. It is also important to note that women who begin at lower levels of cartel operations rarely "rise within the ranks" and make it to higher-priority positions.

A major data point we elected to highlight in this conclusion is the increasing rate of incarceration for drug-related offenses for women. WOLA, an advocacy group for Human Rights in the Americas, published a report in 2020 detailing the increase in the number of women behind bars in Latin America. The number of women in prison in Mexico has increased by 55.5% between 2000 and 2018, compared to a 20% increase for men. The most common crime a woman was arrested for was possession with intent to sell (Youngers et al., 2020).

While our case studies note key exceptions to this conclusion, we have determined from the data we collected that the majority of women are still subjected to long-standing, male-dominated societal norms within the cartel. Emma Coronel Aspirio was married at the age of 17 to a man over twice her age, a union that was organized by her father. While she was able to gain agency and business opportunities through her position as El Chapo's wife, she was still forced into the narco world through the manipulation of men. Her ability to thrive, however, has proven to be a major factor in our understanding of women maintaining power and should be explored further.

A consideration we made while analyzing the results of our research is our ignorance of certain queenpins and other high-ranking women due to the covert nature of their participation. Claudia (pseudonym) described how the low profile "true queens" have, and their measured successes are not as verbose as that of their male counterparts (Cisneros Guzman, 2018). In addition to this, Luz Irene Fajardo Campos, and Guadalupe Fernandez Valencia were relatively unknown until their arrests, even after decades of operation. In summation, we could be missing an entire aspect of women's participation because they maintain agency and power by sustaining a conservative presence in the media and in the organization as a whole. Our thesis can be developed by those who seek to explore the question of participation through more in-depth ethnographic research within Mexico, as we were limited in our scope of primary research.

Another notable trend is the method of introduction into cartel operations. Many of the personal anecdotes and ethnographic materials indicated that women began participating through the guidance or force of male family, friends, and partners. Even for those women who profit and have developed their own sphere of influence within the DTO, still found their start through men.

Our profiles detailed below illustrates the factors and considerations that contribute to a woman's decision to enter the drug world.

FIGURE 7: Low-Level Participation in Mexico's Drug Cartels

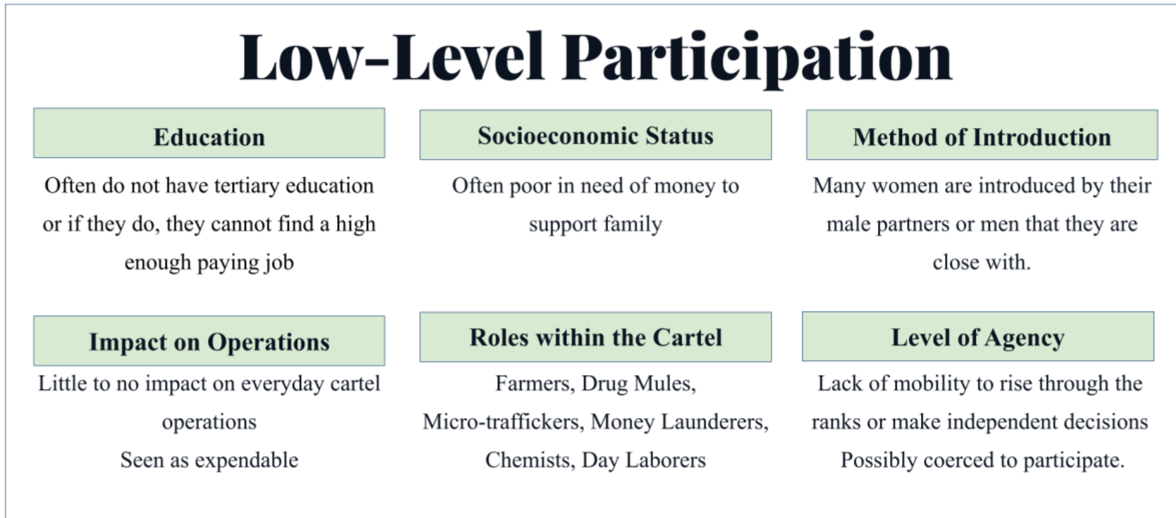
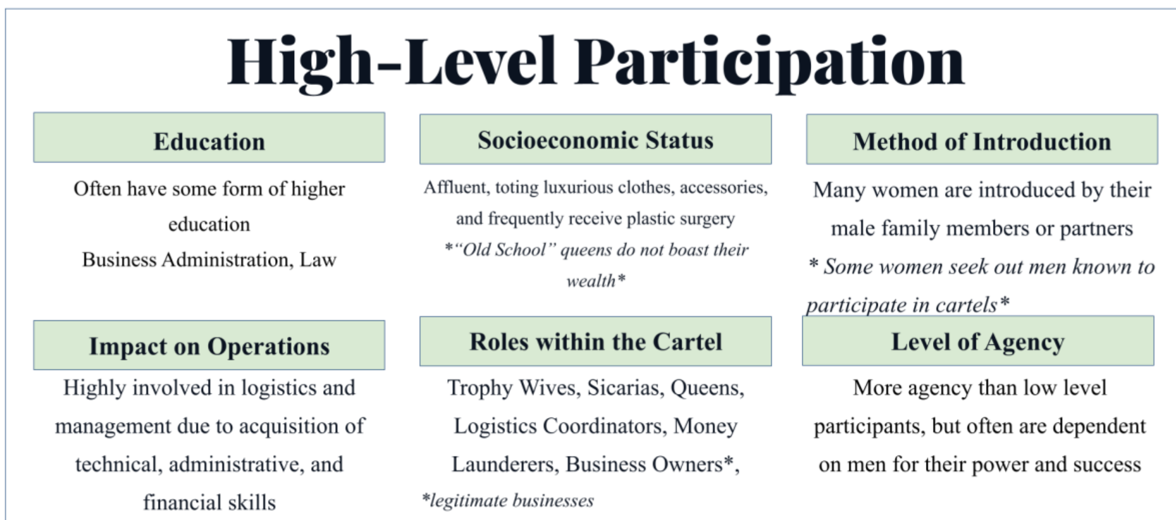


FIGURE 8: High-Level Participation in Mexico's Drug Cartels



CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

Women can be found participating in virtually all positions in the drug trade; the more you look for them, the more you see them. Though we attempted with our analysis and subsequent profiles to create a “checklist” for women likely to be involved in the Sinaloa cartel, we are aware we cannot afford to stereotype women in the drug trade.

Women have gone into drug trafficking for very diverse reasons: some have been forced, others have been in it to solve different economic needs and deprivations, while still, others have been seeking a life of luxury (Carey, 2014). The factors that correlate to poverty, such as single-mother households, unemployment, and the wage gap partly explain why a woman may decide to engage in organized crime, to provide for herself and her family. Though involvement in DTOs can offer women certain degrees of autonomy and financial dependence, their decision to join is frequently a product of socioeconomic needs, which are a result of patriarchal structures present in Mexican society. When a woman chooses to be in a cartel in order to gain economic affluence, she must navigate and gain respect in a male-dominated field where women are typically looked down upon. Through the use of their wits, sexuality, and family connections, many women in the Sinaloa cartel have been able to make a name for themselves in the drug world. Modern-day narco culture has influenced the lifestyle of women in Sinaloa in almost every respect, from relationships to family structures to work opportunities.

This thesis is an extension of the previous literature, which reviewed women’s observable evolution in the drug trade and how it is relevant to depict an accurate picture of the modern DTO landscape we witness today. This research can serve to stimulate the examination of female agency within Mexico’s premier drug trafficking organizations and be used as a guide for evaluating areas

in which these women's lives can be improved. Many of the economic hardships that push women to enter the drug world are the product of poor governmental protections, an issue that can be solved by illuminating these concerns. Some women believe that the drug world allows them to have more independence. We recommend that future analysis should be conducted through the lens of governmental programs that would be beneficial to better characterize the need for change. As mentioned, it is always necessary to consult the women being discussed to gain an accurate understanding of the factors that play a role in their decision-making process. Many women in Mexico want a better life and are willing to take the chance of entering the drug world to attain it.

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