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Female Drug Smugglers on the U.S.-Mexico Border: Gender, Crime, and Empowerment

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Abstract

Women's involvement in drug trafficking in recent years has expanded dramatically. Yet there are few studies of female drug smugglers, the causes of female involvement in smuggling, and the impact of smuggling on women's lives specifically. In this article, I provide in-depth ethnographic interviews and observations of a broad spectrum of female drug smugglers on the U.S.-Mexico border. Moving beyond stereotypes, I examine how drug trafficking affects women's relationships with men and their position in society.

Economic and cultural factors strongly shape women's involvement in drug smuggling and the effects of smuggling on their lives, but these factors and effects vary significantly, depending on women's social class position and place within drug organizations. High-level female drug smugglers may be attracted to the power and mystique of drug trafficking and may achieve a relative independence from male dominance. Middle-level women in smuggling organizations obtain less freedom vis-à-vis men but may manipulate gender stereotypes to their advantage in the smuggling world. Low-level mules also perform (or subvert) traditional gender roles as a smuggling

strategy, but receive less economic benefit and less power, though in some cases some independence from male domestic control. A fourth category of women do not smuggle drugs but are negatively impacted by the male smugglers with whom they are associated.

I argue that drug smuggling frequently leads to female victimization, especially at the lowest and middle levels of drug trafficking organizations. However, it is also, in the case of high-level and some low-level and middle-level smugglers, a vehicle for female empowerment. [Keywords: female drug smugglers, *Cártel de Juárez*, U.S-Mexico border, victimization, empowerment]

Introduction

Rosa María had never seen marijuana before. She only picked up the package of “green fibers” from the El Paso motel because her sister said the police were coming to get her nephew and it was necessary to hide the evidence. On the bus home she was in a panic. The plastic bag emitted a spicy vegetable smell. Rosa María knew nothing about drugs but had to protect the nephew even though he was an addict and marijuana seller. Florinda, however, did it for the money. It was just \$50, but that was plenty for a high school girl and all she had to do was walk across the Paso del Norte Bridge from Juárez with the stuff strapped to her body. The second time she crossed a load she got caught.

Zulema smuggled tons of cocaine for the Medellín Cartel but eventually went independent. She said the best transactions were those involving heroin because they involved a quick exchange where one party said, “here’s the smack, fucking asshole,” and the other party replied, “here’s the money, asshole” [*aquí está la chiva, pinche güey...aquí está el dinero, güey*].¹ These are three of the fifty accounts I collected about women and drug smuggling on the border. They demonstrate the complex impact of drug smuggling on women’s lives.

In popular media, the recent film *María Llena de Gracia* [María Full of Grace] dramatically depicts young Colombian women who attempt to smuggle cocaine into the U.S. Yet, the prevailing image and stereotype of drug traffickers in the mainstream imagination is that of the macho Tony Montana character portrayed by Al Pacino in the movie *Scarface*. This movie became a hit, not only with the general public but with Latin

American drug dealers themselves who were reputed to watch the movie repeatedly and imitate Montana/Pacino's style (Marez 2004:9–18). Likewise, the male AK 47-wielding rebel of the *narcocorridos* [drug songs] dominates images of Mexican and border drug smuggling (Edberg 2004). According to Surovell, such images reflect “the notoriously sexist world of the drug cartels” (Surovell 2000:3; McDonald 2005:122). This world, as described by novelist Arturo Pérez-Reverte in bluntly sexist terms in *The Queen of the South*, is one in which the *morrás* [girlfriends of drug traffickers] dye their hair blond and “watch the telenovelas on TV, they listen to Juan Gabriel and norteño music, and then they go on little \$3,000 shopping sprees to Sercha's and Coppel, where their credit's even better than their cash” (Pérez-Reverte 2004:35).

Such essentializing characterizations, though intriguing, do not reflect the diversity and polysemous nature of the phenomenon, and as of yet have been seldom challenged by social science research (Anderson 2005).² Women's involvement in drug smuggling, despite occasional stereotypical cultural references in literature, movies, songs and news reports, remains understudied and not well understood (Denton and O'Malley 1999; Inciardi, Pottieger and Black 1982; Maher and Curtis 1993; Green 1998). To date, complete statistics about the distribution of women drug smugglers across geographic and social space are unavailable.³ Even though the vast majority of U.S.-Mexico border women do not engage in smuggling,⁴ the region's poverty and the increased income drugs provide push thousands into the trade each year. Moreover, border women who are not smugglers themselves are often heavily affected by the drug business, whether as drug consumers or the spouses, lovers or relatives of male smugglers (Dibble 2005).

Anderson (2005) states that women play key roles in drug organizations as providers of sustenance and housing, buyers and sellers of drugs, and subsidizers of dependent males. But, as we will see below, border women's drug roles transcend this model in many ways.⁵ The article's main purpose is to transcend stereotypical images of women in the drug trade and demonstrate that there are a variety of drug trade roles for women shaped by economic, social and personal factors. A secondary purpose is to gauge the impact of these diverse roles on women's relative “victimization” or “empowerment”⁶ vis-à-vis men. Such research is relevant to the lives of women in the informal economy throughout Latin America and globally.⁷

Women, Drugs, and Violence in Ciudad Juárez/El Paso

The Mexican illegal drug business is a multi-billion industry dominated by cartels—large, often family-run, corporate-like organizations—which operate in collusion with elements of the corruption-ridden national state (and corrupt members of U.S. law enforcement) and in violent competition with each other. The cartels transport drugs through territories in which they have bribed politicians, police, military officials and border guards. This arrangement is known as “*la plaza*.” The main cartels include the Chapo Guzmán Cartel, the Tijuana Cartel, the Gulf Cartel, and the Juárez Cartel which controls the El Paso/Juárez *plaza* (Blancornelas 2002; Ravelo 2005; Gómez and Fritz 2005). In the midst of the larger cartels, smaller trafficking organizations and independent operators smuggle smaller quantities of drugs. The often dangerous, trauma-filled lives of drug traffickers result from circumstances spawned by the informal, unregulated, underworld nature of smuggling (Nordstrom 2007b) and the police and military pressures exerted by the U.S. government’s so-called “War on Drugs” and by the Mexican government.

The women analyzed in this article either worked directly for the Juárez cartel (or its precursors in the area) or smaller local networks that in some cases maintained loose connections to the cartel (Bowden 2002). Research on women in Ciudad Juárez/El Paso takes on special urgency because of the infamous femicides of nearly 400 women—that have occurred in Juárez since 1993 (González-Rodríguez 2002; Valdez 2005). This horrifying phenomenon attracted enormous media and scholarly attention to Ciudad Juárez, the largest city in Chihuahua, a major center for international immigration, and the site of more than 300 assembly plants known as *maquiladoras*. The scholarly literature on Juárez emphasizes the fundamental role of the *maquiladora*⁸ industry—which cultivated a predominantly young, migrant female workforce that has not been adequately compensated or protected in neighborhoods or during travel to the workplace—in generating gender inequalities and a sexist social environment (Fernández-Kelly 1983; L. Salzinger 2003; Tiano 1994; Wright 2001). Other observers blame the police, deeply rooted, “traditional” machismo, and serial killers for the violence against Juárez females (Heyman and Campbell 2004:206–209). The femicides issue is too complex to discuss at length here. For the purposes of this article, however, it is important to note that these theories are insufficient without careful analysis of the violent impact of the drug trade on border women (Rodríguez 1995). The rise

of the *Cártel de Juárez* directed by the Carrillo Fuentes family has played a key role in violence against men and women in Juárez since 1990. Thousands of Juarenses have been killed, wounded or disappeared by drug traffickers and their police accomplices (Campbell 2004:ix-xi).⁹

It would be misleading, however, to only focus on gender exploitation in *maquiladoras* and female homicides as an all-encompassing perspective on border women. Such an analysis obscures the recent improvements in Mexican women's access to education and medical services and their expanding opportunities in politics and social life, which, for better or worse, includes openings in the drug world (Gutmann 1996). Narrow victimization perspectives are also limited in their relevance to the lives of high level female drug smugglers. These women's demeanor rather than exuding delicacy, may express the *macha* style of female independence championed in the songs of the famous Mexican ballad singer, Paquita la del Barrio, in whose lyrics men are *inútiles*, *imbéciles* or *ratas de dos patas* [worthless, imbeciles or two-legged rats].¹⁰ As Edberg points out in a study of *narcocorridos*, there is increasing enthusiasm among young women for the role of drug trafficker, a role "in which women are powerful and celebretized for that power via the same or similar persona currently gendered for men" (Edberg 2004:103).

The growing feminization of drug smuggling has complex and contradictory impacts on women's lives. On the negative side, women are subject to drug violence and some male drug traffickers coerce or manipulate lovers, spouses, and relatives into collaborating in the business as mules,¹¹ drivers, and keepers of drug stashes (Fleetwood nd.:20). Women also may be forced to conceal their husband's activities or pay off drug debts incurred by their husbands. In these instances, women take on considerable risk—including arrest, imprisonment (and loss of contact with children), and physical harm—yet often enjoy few of the profits of the trade. In other cases, women may be left with children and no income or emotional support after a husband or significant other is arrested. Inevitably, a drug trafficking lifestyle produces violence, stress and anxiety, though there are a wide range of male and female experiences that vary by race/ethnicity, class and age (on the great diversity of experience that binary gender and other categories elide, see Butler 1990).

Although women may suffer disproportionately from the effects of drug trafficking, there are other scenarios in which engaging in drug smuggling or creating a distribution organization is a vehicle for a degree of female

empowerment and liberation from forms of male control and a source of excitement and adventure (Fleetwood nd.:21–22). Such women can—though not all do—adopt stylized *capo* roles or macho postures but use them for their own ends as women. Individual female “liberation” through trafficking, however, does little to transform a larger patriarchal cultural economy, and may even reinforce it through the promulgation of *macho/a* symbolism. Ultimately, women’s social class position and place within drug smuggling organizations shapes the relative benefits they receive from drug trafficking such that drug smuggling frequently often leads to female victimization, especially at the lowest and middle levels of drug trafficking organizations. However, it is also, in the case of high-level and some low-level and middle-level smugglers, a vehicle for female empowerment.

Women, Crime and Drug Smuggling: Victimization and Empowerment

Historical Perspectives

Existing literature that could shed light on women’s rising involvement in drugs and the gender and cultural dimensions of drug smuggling is sparse (e.g., Anderson 2005; Molano 2004). Histories of Mexican trafficking emphasize the grassroots emergence of black market smuggling organizations without much discussion of their gender dimensions, or focus on large male-dominated cartels (Recio 2002; Lupsha and Schlegel 1980; Shannon 1989; Astorga 2005; Gómez and Fritz 2005). Nonetheless, female participation in drug smuggling in the border region and elsewhere has increased exponentially since the 1970s when Don Henry Ford, author of *Contrabando*, ran a major marijuana smuggling ring along the Texas-Mexico border (Ford 2005). According to Ford, whose deep participation in, and public discussion of, border drug trading is virtually nonpareil: “When I operated, few women were involved...It was a lot more male-dominated, because of their culture, in rural areas women didn’t participate in business...not very much.” When Ford says, “their culture” he means Mexican culture. In the border region discussed by Ford and where this research took place, Mexican cartels dominate the illegal trade.¹² Mexicans and Mexican-Americans—reflecting local demography—comprise the majority of cartel members, though Anglo-Americans, African-Americans and others also participate to a lesser degree.

Ford also notes that the wife of the man who sold him drugs in Durango “knew what was going on, she knew everything about it, but I wouldn’t of dreamed about talking to her about that stuff.” Ford observed, “I never saw any of them [Mexican women], even white women didn’t participate.” Another informant noted that even as late as the early 1980s women drivers were seldom suspected as drug couriers at highway checkpoints near El Paso. They could easily pass carloads of boxes through the checkpoints by saying, “my husband’s in the service and we’re moving.”

These comments, though blunt and unrefined, shed light on the relatively limited involvement of women in cross-border trafficking prior to the advent of large cartels in the late 1980s and early 1990s, such as that of the Carrillo Fuentes family that dominates Ciudad Juárez. They also show that women associated with traffickers were well aware of the trade and that some participated openly, albeit at lower levels. In Ford’s view everything changed in the 1980s with the rise of cocaine. More women joined the trade, he commented jokingly, because, “Women’s lib worked. They too get to go to prison now.”¹³ Such impressions, albeit reductionistic, by a key player and keen observer of early border drug trafficking prompt serious consideration, but also critical evaluation. The ethnographic material presented in this article will examine why greater numbers of women have joined the drug trade, and the ways culturally-rooted gender relations, reduced opportunities or increased social freedoms, and other economic and cultural factors shape their experiences in the drug world.

Drug Ethnography Perspectives

Ethnographic research on drug issues tends to focus on drug use and abuse; anthropological studies of trafficking organizations, because of the dangers such work entails, are limited. The major studies, with some exceptions (Anderson 2005) have little information on women, treat them as secondary and subsidiary to men, or else focus on women’s mostly subordinate, victimized role in street-level crack-dealing in American cities (e.g., Jacobs 1999; Laidler and Hunt 2001; J. Inciardi, D. Lockwood, and Pottieger 1993).

Hoffer’s study of the business and cultural logics of small-scale heroin networks in Denver is mainly concerned with male junkies and dealers (Hoffer 2006). Adler found that smuggling in southern California “was a man’s world” (Adler 1993). Bourgois described New York street-selling culture as highly patriarchal and misogynistic, which made it difficult for him to interview women. However, his in-depth analysis of a female

crackhouse manager shows how women dealers can “invert patriarchy” but ultimately fall prey to and reproduce male-dominant logics and social structures (Bourgois 1995:215). Bourgois’s analysis suggests we conduct ethnographies of female smugglers that evaluate the culturally-embedded, socially cross-cutting, and gender transformative potential of the drug trade. Additionally, Anderson (2005) insists, rightfully, that we focus on the complex interdependence of women and men in the drug world. Building on Bourgois’s and Anderson’s insights, this article examines the differential impact of drug smuggling on women, and moves beyond limiting depictions of one-dimensional female oppression¹⁴ and marginality.

Feminist Criminology Perspectives

The broader study of female criminals and the effects of crime on women is an underdeveloped field by comparison to studies of male criminality (Carlen et al. 1985; Naffine 1987; Chesney-Lind and Pasko 2004; Miller 2000). An emerging feminist criminology constructs a critical analytical framework for explaining women’s patterns of criminal behavior (Anderson 2005; Chesney-Lind 2006; Denton and O’Malley 1999). A feminist approach can allow us to understand the “multiple intersecting inequalities” (Geller and Stockard 2006; Burgess-Proctor 2006:28; Price and Sokoloff 2004; Collins 2000; Resendiz 2001), that push or pull women into drug crime, as well as the ways that women, within specific cultural contexts, exercise agency. Hunnicutt and Broidy (2004), in a recent study that raises key issues for the current article, test the relevance of “liberation” vs. “economic marginalization” models for explaining female offense patterns. “Liberation” refers to social changes providing women with greater rights and freedoms (including more chances to engage in crime).¹⁵ In this article the terms “liberation” and “empowerment” are used cautiously to refer not to permanent possession of absolute power over others (or complete freedom from social controls) but the ability to exercise a degree of independent authority vis-à-vis people and resources in specific settings (Parpart, Rai and Staudt 2002; Allen 1999; Foucault 1979). Thus “empowerment” is an endlessly negotiated, contested process, rather than an essential state of dominance or complete power over individuals and groups, and it is a process that occurs within international, national and local political and economic contexts.

“Marginalization,” as discussed here, concerns the extent to which women live in poverty. The authors argue that the two explanations

should be considered complementary rather than opposed. Hunnicutt and Broidy (2004) demonstrate that impoverishment of women leads to increased female criminal activity. Furthermore, they suggest that enhanced freedoms for some women is also associated with economic deterioration—and greater female crime—when such independence is not coupled with the proper social/infrastructural conditions and means women require to succeed in legal occupations in class and gender-divided societies. Thus, according to Hunnicutt and Broidy, female marginalization, and poverty related to women's "liberation" with limited resources simultaneously lead to female criminality. In their view, the two theories work hand-in-hand.

This thesis, based on statistical data from the U.S., seven European and two Latin American countries (Panama and Chile) is useful to a degree in analyzing female drug offenders on the border. However, it may cause us to overlook the extent to which economic development for women in general is associated with improved nutritional, educational and health levels and concomitantly greater economic options and outcomes, as amply documented in literature on gender and development (Parpart, Rai and Staudt 2002). Nonetheless, to the extent to which cultural change provides some women with greater mobility and freedom in society, yet more economic obligations and few opportunities to meet them in the "legitimate" economy, they may turn to crime such as drug smuggling, especially in regions such as the U.S.-Mexico border where drug-trafficking is rampant.¹⁶ We might call this a case of limited cultural "liberation" under conditions of gendered, structural economic violence. Women's freedoms in the drug trafficking world are "limited" because "men's greater possession of structural power (i.e. 'power-over') in drug markets is, to a considerable extent, made possible by women's agency and the types of relational or transformative power (i.e. 'power-to' and 'empowerment') they wield" (Anderson 2005:373). Moreover, in most cases, women's work in the drug business involves interdependence with (or subordination to) men rather than complete autonomy (Anderson 2005:373).

As illustrated below, the Hunnicutt and Broidy (2004) hypothesis also needs to be modified, through on-the-ground ethnography, to account for differential divorce rates, cultural differences (including family attitudes and practices), class distinctions, non-economic rationales for female criminality, and the specificities of drug smuggling. For Hunnicutt and Broidy, female crime is correlated with liberation which leads to a rising

divorce rate. Yet, the border (in all but one case, Mexican) women who are the subject of the current study have lower divorce rates than the general U.S. rate.¹⁷ A prime vehicle for their entrance into the drug world rather than liberatory divorces (that leave women without adequate economic resources) is staying in marriages with a *narcotraficante* (drug trafficker). In these cases, female drug smuggling careers are less a result of self-sufficiency with inadequate means than of marrying or being in a liaison with males who work in the drug trade (for some women, in fact, marrying a trafficker may be a kind of gendered economic strategy).

Secondly, Hunnicutt and Broidy make no mention of income divisions in the analysis of their statistical data. Women are treated as a generic category, not differentiated by class. Yet the specific smuggling activities women engage in are closely connected to their socioeconomic status and positions inside hierarchies of drug trafficking organizations. Hence women's economic "marginalization" and its relationship to female criminality cannot be understood without reference to the particular social positioning of women in class terms. This is especially important regarding why women engage in drug crimes. According to our authors, "Female crime can be characterized as fundamentally economic in nature" and "much of women's crime is related to economic need" (Hunnicutt and Broidy 2004:131). This is true of low-level female smugglers (generally the most vulnerable and victimized segment of female drug smugglers), but not for middle and upper level females in the drug trafficking world. For upper-level women, drug crime is associated less with putting food on the table than with the ability to gain power or express themselves through style and fashion, factors that combine gender concerns (i.e. obtaining power vis-à-vis men) with aesthetic and consumption issues. Finally, in the case of the female "kingpins" (Surovell's "Queenpins") discussed below, crime is a vehicle for liberation, of a sort, from men rather than its cause.

Thirdly, we cannot understand whether drug trafficking victimizes women or provides means for a degree of "empowerment" without reference to the nature of their family life and kinship relationships. As Mexican culture changes because of migration to the U.S. and greater educational, legal and occupational opportunities for women (González-López 2005; Hirsch 2003), we may see patterns of female criminal behavior that more closely approximate Hunnicutt and Broidy's model. Yet the strength of family and kinship as ideology and social practice is much stronger and more enduring in Mexico than in the U.S. and Western

Europe. Therefore, we must apply to the study of females' criminal behavior in a border setting analyses that account for the specific cultural, familial and class environments in which they operate. Modernization of the Mexican economy has not eliminated the key role played by families in legitimate or clandestine businesses. Instead, large-scale drug organizations (cartels) because of the highly dangerous, secretive nature of their functioning actually require intense family loyalties in order to function successfully more than do businesses in the mainstream economy. Thus I argue, following Hunnicutt and Broidy's general contention, that Mexican women's increasing participation in drug smuggling is connected to particular cultural, class and gender practices, growing social rights for Mexican women, and economic marginalization.

Anthropological Perspectives on Gender and Latin America

Recent anthropological research on gender issues in Latin America and elsewhere can help us transcend the somewhat static, dichotomous dimensions of the Hunnicutt and Broidy model. As Babb (1998:xi-xiv) observes, women's gendered lives can be best understood through an analysis that combines cultural with economic and political issues. Such an analysis emphasizes the "gendered nature of ethnic identity, cultural hybridity and cultural mediation" (Babb 1998:xi-xii) and moves beyond dualistic categories that might impede our understanding of the "border women" discussed here whose personal lives and economic activities straddle two nation-states and cultural traditions. The work of Collier (2000), Lugo (2000) and Díaz-Barriga (2000) can also help us move past essentialized, dichotomized notions of private/public or domestic/public to theorize women's lives in terms of heterogeneous social relations and wider fields of power. Concretely, this means that an analysis of female drug traffickers must examine not only their economic roles in the drug trade, their family lives, their relationships with men, and their insertion in larger structures of cultural and political economic power.

Methodological Issues

The information that follows is based on ethnographic interviews with 50 female smugglers or other knowledgeable sources,¹⁸ conducted along the U.S.-Mexico border primarily in the El Paso/Ciudad Juárez region, and extensive participant observation in border settings where I have resided

and worked over a fifteen-year period. Full disclosure of the conditions and circumstances of research are impossible because I continue to live and work side-by-side with many of the people discussed in this article. However, I will note that in addition to the systematic, structured interviews I conducted (mostly in people's homes and workplaces or in private offices), I also benefited from hundreds of conversations and observations gleaned during daily life, at my university (almost all my students are from the Juárez/El Paso area or nearby regions of Mexico and New Mexico), in social gatherings such as family parties and barroom gatherings on both sides of the border, and explorations of the region on foot and by car. This research took place within a context in which risk and need for confidentiality for informants and ethnographers were high due to the close proximity of smugglers and law enforcement officials in two socially tight and culturally intertwined border cities.

Unless otherwise specified, pseudonyms are used for informants and sources. In some cases, details have been modified to protect informant's confidentiality and safety. The value of ethnographic research on drugs is that it can move our understanding beyond broad statistical generalities and deeply entrenched stereotypes about drug smuggling and women, and help elucidate the gendered factors shaping women's "victimization" and "empowerment" at different levels of the drug business.¹⁹

Some women in the drug life create smuggling syndicates, defying stereotypes about subordinated women. Others run clothing boutiques, jewelry stores, bars and furniture stores that launder drug money. Still others act as go-betweens that connect traffickers with legitimate politicians or with other trafficking organizations. In these cases, women's integration into drug organizations more closely follows the contours of "traditional" roles of Mexican women. Yet others gain power in drug businesses after the deaths of their husbands, exploiting their marital and gender prerogatives. In a few cases, women live comfortably from narcotics trade proceeds while their male significant others, who actually took the risks and generated the wealth, languish in prison. Finally, at the lower levels of the trade, women's involvement in drug smuggling generally derives from and reinforces patriarchal subordination, though "mules" may manipulate gender stereotypes for their benefit, and some women can gain independence from men with the money they earn from smuggling. It should be noted, however, that the various positionings of women within the drug trade are neither mutually exclusive, nor essential; i.e., women may com-

bine several roles, perform “traditional” roles while subverting them, or change social roles over time.

The following typology describes and analyzes the four main levels of female participants in the drug trade: female drug lords, middle-level women, low-level mules, and women whose involvement is minimal but whose connection to the trade is mainly a result of their connections with men. This hierarchy is both rooted in and (re)produces power, prestige and status differentials. Although this typology is derived from data collected on the U.S.-Mexico border, I would argue that it has general relevance to the lives of women smugglers cross-culturally, despite differences in specific political and social conditions.

Female Drug Lords

Here or in China or Rome, I do whatever I want...I was in love with money and I am still in love with money, it is my friend, spouse and lover.
 —Zulema

Women at the highest levels of drug organizations, because of the people and wealth they manage, have the greatest potential of all female traffickers to achieve some “empowerment” vis-à-vis men. Noteworthy Latin female drug lords historically have included “Lola La Chata” and “La Ma Baker”²⁰ in Mexico City, “La Nacha” in Juárez, Griselda Blanco and Mery Valencia of Colombia,²¹ the Arellano Félix sisters of the Tijuana Cartel (especially Enedina, reputed to be the current leader of the cartel), Sandra Ávila of Sinaloa, and Zulema, one of my key informants (Lavín 2004).

Zulema revels in the money, power and independence she reaped from cocaine and heroin smuggling. Although she was raised in an upper-middle-class Catholic household in a small north central Mexican town, as a teenager Zulema left the comforts of her bourgeois home and nun’s school to live with a wild aunt in a poor barrio of Ciudad Juárez on the U.S.-Mexico border. In her words,

You could say that I was born into a well-to-do family. I attended La Salle Jesuit schools as a kid [in the 1960s and 1970s]. My father was a doctor by profession. I was accustomed to good treatment. My mother was very strict, and had me in a school run by nuns. Then,

at the age of fifteen, I went wild [*me despeloté*]. I initially came to Ciudad Juárez on vacation. I had grown up in an atmosphere where everything was chandeliers, propriety and good manners. I guess you could say I was *toda una señorita* [a very proper young lady]. My aunt who lived in Juárez was a whore, a drunk, a crazy woman, and considered the black sheep of the family. She worked in brothels in the Mariscal area and other parts of Juarez. [But, nonetheless, Zulema admired her.]

Contrary to standard interpretations of women's motivation for entry into drug smuggling, Zulema was initially attracted to crime, including drug-selling, by the opportunity it presented for adventure and revolt against bourgeois lifestyles. Consciously rebellious, Zulema discarded the discreet attire of her social class and donned a masculine *chola* outfit—long hair rolled-up and covered with a baseball cap, long white t-shirts, khaki pants and Converse tennis shoes—more appropriate to the working-class Colonia Chaveña. Forging a remarkable *déclassé* trajectory, completely opposite of the stock rag-to-riches morality play of Mexican *telenovelas*, Zulema apprenticed herself to a smuggler and soon became a full-fledged *pasamojados* [immigrant smuggler] and contraband alcohol smuggler, pushing a raft from one bank to the other of the Río Grande/Río Bravo in the late 1970s. Zulema's life and that of other female drug lords, though not typical of average smugglers, sharply contradict cultural stereotypes about Mexican female passivity or that the only role for women in the drug life is that of "trophy wife." To men who would challenge her, Zulema responded, "I don't have what you have hanging there, but I am a real *cabrona*" [hard-ass].

Zulema's remunerative, illegal business led to connections with two of the largest and most legendary drug traffickers in Northern Mexico: "El Flaco"²² and Pablo Acosta. "El Flaco" had contracted for Zulema to cross a load of alcohol, but unbeknownst to her the box actually contained only a few bottles of liquor and the rest of the contents were packets of cocaine. When Zulema and her partner discovered that they had been tricked into crossing coke into the U.S. they stole the load and began to sell it in the bars and streets of El Paso. But "El Flaco" and a Colombian known as "El Mexicano" discovered what they were doing and captured them at gunpoint. In the confrontation that resulted Zulema said to the traffickers "why did you tell me it was alcohol when it wasn't. You tricked me. If

you're going to kill me do it. You're a bunch of cowards with no balls [*son unos deshuevudos*]." Zulema's toughness and integrity impressed the traffickers. Instead of killing her, they invited her into their organization. Thus, Zulema's macho style and determination gained her acceptance in the then male-dominated drug world and allowed her to move upward.

Subsequently, instead of hauling a raft full of contraband Mexican liquor, Zulema began crossing packages of cocaine into El Paso for \$2,000 a load. After her first big payoff, Zulema hired two taxis and went on a wild shopping spree at a Juárez supermarket, returning to her aunt's humble barrio dwelling with boxes of meat, fruit, cereal and household items for her many cousins which they flaunted in front of their jealous neighbors. Zulema's liaison with "El Mexicano" took her to Colombia in the 1980s and eventually a love affair with one of the top South American *capos* but she eventually left him because she wanted to do business, not be a subservient spouse. She returned to "El Mexicano" and resumed cocaine smuggling on the border near Nuevo Laredo until Mexican judicial police stormed her house and gunned him down. Zulema did not allow the death of "El Mexicano" to stop her:

I grabbed the diaper bag, another bag, and the baby carriage and stuffed \$700,000 in cash, and 15 kilos of dope [worth \$400,000 in the U.S. at that time] inside them...As far as my relationship with "El Mexicano" is concerned, more than anything, it was a business relationship.

In Zulema's case, male lovers were also business partners and she did not allow them to dominate her. Drug trafficking profits allowed her to achieve a freedom from male control that was available to few other women of her background. After "El Mexicano's" death Zulema became the leader of her own heroin and cocaine smuggling ring in major Texas cities in the 1990s. Zulema was a serious business woman who criticized men and women smugglers for the sexual weaknesses that led to their downfall: "men take untrustworthy women into their bedroom, their *caleta* [hiding place for drug stash]...the women were just whores, going wild, going to orgies, not me." When her new lover, whom she chose from among the workers in her drug organization, mistreated her Zulema replied, "don't come to me with lies and machismo," and she shot him. According to Bowden, "In her time, she has moved tons of cocaine, she

has had men murdered.”²³ In spite of her tough-mindedness, Zulema always took good care of her children whom she kept absolutely separate from the drug trade. She had one house for drug transactions (and visits by male lovers) and another house for her family. Zulema said she was not very sex-oriented; she didn’t need sex, she was interested in money. When she was busted, she had no regrets, only that she was caught.

Selling drugs allowed Zulema to live her life on her own terms, free from the worst excesses of male dominance for many years. My interpretation of Zulema’s life is, thus, contrary to Bowden’s absurdly sexist allegation that as a girl she “ran off to a beach resort with drug guys fucking, sucking...She worked her way up [in drug trafficking circles], first on her back, then on her feet” (Bowden 2005:24). As a trafficker, Zulema operated in a largely male environment and she adopted the macho ethical, behavioral and verbal style of that milieu. Yet—at least as she recounted her life to me—Zulema since her youth had been a headstrong, rebellious female who cultivated a tough *norteño* attitude and lifestyle and who resisted male control in her family, at school, in the streets and dark byways of Juárez and El Paso, and in the international drug trade.

Though some in that life viewed her negatively as a *marimacha* [derogatory reference to lesbians, roughly “dyke”], she defiantly forged her own career as a woman, mother and, at times, significant other to men. As a tough-minded “*macha*,” Zulema violated traditional gender roles for Mexican women, but her gender identity neither simply mimics male *narcotraficante* models nor fits neat images of politically-conscious feminist heroines. Rather, following Butler’s (1990) innovative analysis that destabilized fixed gender identities, Zulema blended aspects of femininity and masculinity in her life and career as a smuggler (cf., Carlen 1985:9).

Not all women drug lords adopt a *macha* stance—indeed the purpose of this article is to show the great variety of roles and styles of female participation in smuggling—but by doing so, female drug lords or “queenpins” contradict the aforementioned main stereotype of females in the drug world, i.e., that they are passive, appendages of male *traficantes*. Yet it also would be misleading to consider “queenpins” or the other female traffickers discussed here as proto-feminists, who sell drugs in order to promote female solidarity (among other smugglers or women in general). Women, like men, sell drugs for various reasons, especially economic need, although female drug-selling is also connected with women’s efforts to seek independence (*vis-à-vis* men). These motivations may change during a drug

smuggler's career, however, to the degree that women smuggle drugs specifically in order to provide for their families, women smugglers may be said to bear a "gender consciousness" (Kaplan 1982), i.e., smuggling is a strategy women adopt in order to meet specific concerns related to their gender. However, in the case of Zulema and other female drug lords, "empowerment" through smuggling is a narrow kind of gendered consciousness that serves their individual interests and not women generally. Moreover, when female "queenpins" and *sicarias* [hit-women] engage in intimidation and violence it is a kind of empowerment of the self at the expense of others.

Although Zulema's case may seem extreme, there are other similar cases of powerful female drug lords, though they seldom appear in social science literature on drugs which emphasize women's victimization (Anderson 2005:374). Ignacia Jasso, "La Nacha," sold drugs, especially to addicted American soldiers, from a comfortable middle-class home in Ciudad Juárez located near the Paso del Norte International Bridge. She reputedly ordered the murders of 11 Chinese traffickers in Juárez in the 1920s and controlled the heroin trade in the city through the 1970s. Ignacia's descendants ran the business, selling drugs at well-designated intersections in the heart of the Juárez brothel district for some time after her demise. "La Nacha" is a legendary figure about whom I collected numerous verbal accounts. Some considered her a "loving mother" (Linares 2006:1) and others "a sort of Robin Hood figure...because she was an extremely generous woman to her neighbors" (Ibarra nd.:2) One woman who knew her said that "La Nacha" "had a big handbag always on her lap...she would not hesitate to use the gun she kept there." Nuñez states that, "La Nacha" was "discreet" and "respectable," but "undoubtedly the brains of the operation, and the leader of her drug gang." She "formed what could be regarded as the first true 'drug cartel' in Juárez" (Nuñez 2006:3).

In Colombia and the U.S., Mery Valencia ran a largely female-controlled cocaine empire. Surovell describes her as follows: "Not especially pretty or sexy, Valencia's personality has been described by the press as 'severe.' She has been dubbed a 'behind-the-scenes taskmaster,' demanding an exact accounting for every ounce of coke sold, 'a bean-counting boss' who made her own sister pay up for losses due to bounced checks" (2000:2). Apparently, she even intimidated the male members of her organization, one of whom was heard saying on a wire-tapped phone conversation that he "would never do anything without La Senora's permission." Likewise, I learned that a female member of a prominent Juárez drug family repeat-

edly taunted her boyfriend (also a smuggler), only half-jokingly, by saying “I am going to tell my dad to disappear you.” As we have seen, women drug smugglers at the higher levels have been quite capable of violence and intimidation. “La Güera” (“The Blond”), a high-level Juárez trafficker, is responsible for several quite public drug executions.

Women, like men, may obtain excitement, adventure and thrills from engaging in illegal activities such as drug smuggling. We should not assume, as Hunnicutt and Broidy (2004:131) claim, that women’s sole motivation for engaging in crime is narrowly economic or subsistence oriented. Zulema, as described above, loved the life of a powerful drug smuggler, until she was busted. Another female informant, Sonia, the former lover of the founder of the cartel that emerged after the decline of “La Nacha’s” empire, affectionately described to me, “the old AK 47s [a key symbol of Mexican drug traffickers] with wooden handles [which] I like better than the new ones [because] they are easier to handle.”

For these high-level female traffickers, drug smuggling, though an unstable, dangerous pursuit allowed them a pleasurable lifestyle and relative autonomy from men. These women, at least for a time, were able to avoid the twin traps of “liberation” without resources and economic marginalization discussed by Hunnicutt and Broidy. Certainly, few women have the chance to become “queenpins,” yet their mere existence may serve as role models and symbols of female power for common women in the drug trade or those considering such a career.

Women at the Middle Level of Drug Organizations

If Zulema and other “queenpins” represent a kind of *macha* route to gender “liberation” through drug trafficking, an alternate female drug world trajectory is that of the middle-level go-between or diplomat, social figure head, *prestanombre*,²⁴ money launderer, legitimate business owner (of businesses selling legal products but founded with drug money), or supportive female relative in drug families. Unlike Zulema and some high-level traffickers, such women generally “perform” gender within traditional cultural boundaries (Butler 1990), although they may use them ultimately to subvert male power. Likewise, their actions may be vital to the successful functioning of drug organizations. Marcela Bodenstedt, for example, was an elegant former television personality and reputed lover of José Córdoba Montoya (former chief of staff of president Carlos

Salinas), who became a crucial link between Colombian cocaine cartels and prominent Mexican politicians (Bowden 2002:206).

Additionally, Susana is a sophisticated woman who runs an expensive jewelry store in Juárez. Her acquaintances, however, are aware that her business is a front for her husband's illegal drug earnings. Since the execution-style slaying of her husband and her son, Susana has maintained a low profile. Mari, also, is in an intimate relationship with a high-ranking member of the Juárez Cartel. Her *capo* lover made her the owner (on paper, at least) of a warehouse in El Paso, a key staging area for Cartel drug shipments. Mari got into trouble with the *capo*, however, because she attempted to have his name stenciled onto a shirt for their son at a local shopping mall. Cartel bodyguards made her destroy the shirt. The warehouse was eventually confiscated by U.S. authorities.

According to a prominent writer for a Juárez newspaper, who is an expert on drug trafficking, prominent female members of drug cartels in the city typically run high-end, designer clothing boutiques, interior design businesses, money exchange houses and furniture stores carrying sophisticated products. These businesses, though impressive, are primarily a means for laundering drug profits.

The journalist observes that women from the middle strata of drug organizations may move up to the highest level when a male drug lord (spouse, brother, etc.) is killed as occurred in the case of the Arellano Félix sisters of Tijuana. When a drug lord dies, the widow has two options: (1) receive her inheritance and get away or out of the drug business entirely, or (2) take control of the business. The Juárez writer notes that in the many cases he has seen, women almost always choose option two, but maintaining a low-profile and running the business on a more discreet basis or smaller scale than that of the deceased husband. In his view, women are successful in the drug business because they are "more reliable, more trustworthy, more cerebral, less problematical, less emotional, less visceral and violent, and less likely to be addicted to drugs." Though such totalizing explanations do not fit all middle-level drug women, it is evident that traditional gender roles, though sometimes subverted, may also be the vehicle for women's advancement within drug organizations and families.

As in the case of high-level traffickers, females at the middle levels of drug organizations are usually well aware of the details and nuances of the businesses, even if they were not their founders and only got involved through male relatives and associates. Middle strata women generally do not

openly challenge the gender status quo, yet they benefit considerably from drug profits. However, though men are more likely to be killed or injured in drug violence than women, middle-level women and their families are also at great risk of bodily harm. Surprisingly, however, in some Juárez cases, middle-level women have served as *sicarias* who eliminate rivals.

Gender relations through which middle-level women enter the drug world—and the simultaneously empowering and endangering dimensions of trafficking—are well illustrated in the life of Josefina, a Mexican-American woman with family ties to an extensive Chihuahua drug-trafficking network. She described her growing involvement in the family cocaine and heroin business—run primarily by her father, brother and uncles—as follows:

I first found out that my dad was dealing drugs when my female cousin told me. [In the drug world] the parents try to keep the kids in the dark until a certain age. Once that age hits, the children find out. After that I started snooping and found a leather backpack of money with 1000s of dollars in it. My dad owned a tavern in St. Louis where I grew up. Downstairs in the basement of the tavern I found a wrapped plastic bag with about half a kilo of cocaine in it.

I felt kind of empowered because by that time I knew that people in that business get power and it made more sense why even if my dad's business was struggling we were doing okay economically. We were making vacation trips to Mexico that lasted three months. I found out later that on a couple of the family trips my dad had brought heroin across the border in between the doors of our car. As a consequence of my brother and father getting busted, I got involved in the business, because there were loose ends that needed to be tied up. When they went to prison, there was a car sitting on the street outside our house in Las Cruces, New Mexico loaded with pot and coke. I had to deliver it. My brother also had an auto shop. He had left drugs in there. I had to break into the building (by picking the lock) and get the packages of drugs out and deliver them to one of his partners. I also had to steal a truck—we broke into the truck and hotwired it—from a person who had received drugs from my brother and not paid him. We stole the truck and took it to Mexico and sold it in the countryside.

Female smugglers both engage in “non-gendered” strategies and consciously manipulate “traditional” women’s roles as an operational strategy.

In the long run, women's greater involvement in the drug trade, while not transforming it, may make drug organizations even more effective as they expand arrangements for transporting, storing, delivering and selling drugs and the myriad social/political/economic institutions that sustain them.

Overall, however, having drug-based wealth and status in the middle-levels of smuggling organizations does not necessarily translate into gender equality. Without the freedom high-level smuggling women obtain through great wealth and power, middle-level *narcas* are usually still dependent on patriarchal spouses and male partners. Lucía, for example, is a stylish blonde, from a family with a long smuggling tradition, who has spent her entire adult life coordinating drug shipments in the El Paso/Juárez area. Lucía has plenty of money and is well known in the drug underworld. Though middle-aged she has had a series of boyfriends in their twenties. But one of these boyfriends beat her viciously and one of her connections has put out a contract on her life. Thus, the drug world presents possibilities for both victimization and empowerment of women. The higher women rise in the drug-trafficking world, the greater are their chances to negotiate fair treatment from the significant males in their lives. Those, at the bottom of the drug trading world, common smugglers known as “mules,” are the most vulnerable to gender oppression.

Low-level Mules

Drug smuggling organizations take advantage of the border as a liminal space which provides opportunities for concealment and seclusion, comparative economic advantages, transnational movement, cross-border cultural hybridity, and trans-border social and cultural networks. Yet these fluid dimensions of the border context—that facilitate smuggling and other illegal activities—exist simultaneously with U.S. state militarization and vigilance of the frontier which include thousands of Border Patrol agents, permanent walls, fences and other physical obstacles, cameras, infra-red sensing devices and aerial surveillance (Andreas 2000; Nevins 2002). The expansion of female drug smuggling is part of women's attempts at economic advancement and coincides with the efforts of drug cartels to create new and innovative ways to avoid detection and confiscation by U.S. police, immigration, customs and anti-drug agencies.

Women's greatest involvement in the drug trade occurs at the direct smuggling level, i.e. as “mules,” transporters of drugs across the border and

cross-country. The El Paso/Ciudad Juárez newspapers and local oral folklore recount a litany of drug busts of men and women (Campbell 2005). Various border street-level discourses discuss whether men or women make better smugglers, an obviously subjective matter. Although each gender shares a common pool of general smuggling techniques, smuggling tactics often vary by gender, and many female smugglers have refined the ability to “perform” expected gender behaviors in order to trick border inspectors.

For example, both men and women drive loaded cars. Yet, as a female customs inspector put it, women have unique spaces in or on their bodies where they can conceal drugs: vaginally, between breasts, in brassieres, in other distinctively female clothing items, in faked pregnancies or surgically implanted in the buttocks. They may hide drugs in purses (one informant said “you can hide a pound in a purse”) or in diaper bags or wrapped gifts. Women smugglers may also deliberately dress in provocative attire and flirt with male agents and inspectors in order to pass undetected.²⁵ One of my informants, Nancy, described a specific instance in which she and several female friends successfully used flirtation to elude detection:

We were bringing alcohol over in jugs and underage. We put our coats on the alcohol. The [drug detection] dogs stepped all over the jugs but we distracted the agents by flirting. We invited them to the party we were going to and they came to the party. They asked us for dates in the future, but we were going to leave town soon [so the agents never got their dates].

Another informant, a seasoned veteran of the drug trade on both sides of the border, outlined to me how she “dressed like a hooker” and went to sleazy bars in order to set up a bogus deal with another smuggler who had murdered her father. The smuggler fell into the trap and was arrested by U.S. authorities as he drove a loaded car across an international bridge between Juárez and El Paso. The same informant stated that using feminine wiles to trick inspectors at the bridge was simple:

I think women have a big idea for smuggling...Better than men. They have more nerve to do it, especially as drivers. If you offer decent money to a woman they will take it because usually women have kids to support. Women are trusted more by the drug traffickers and by the border inspectors, customs and immigration. You smile and chit-chat

with them. Some of them [inspectors] go so far as to actually hand over their telephone numbers so that makes it a lot easier.

The customs agent will say, "Hurry on home and I'll give you a call later." So you know that person is not going to search your car. You've got to learn to use [them]...unfortunately. Most of them don't realize they are being used....and by the time they do it's, like...it was so easy that...they'll take a bribe then...after the drugs have already gone through. That is all it takes, especially on weekends and at night. You pretend you are one of those ditzy blond drunks and that's it; that will get you across. It is easier when the inspector is a gringo. They have a thing for Mexican women.

Christmas time, that was fun! It used to be nice for the drug runners. You could wrap up five or ten pounds of coke in a present with a big bow. You just say to them [the inspectors], "I'm coming over to see my relatives." Who is going to want to tear down a Christmas present that you wrapped so pretty?

During the day you have all this fun with children in vans. You load up the van. You take your kids. They are already in on it. You tell the children, "As soon as we are going to get near there [the crossing station], you pick a fight with that one over there and you start crying over there. You start throwing things around and you start having fits." By the time the van comes in, it's a lady in a van with the kids in an uproar. All the immigration agent wants to do is get them out of his hair.

Piñatas and stuffed toys. You get the stuffed toys at *ferias*. You stuff them [with drugs]. Teddy bears, hippotamuses, penguins. You just need one or two pounds of coke and bring it in in one of those.

Rather than challenging patriarchal gender stereotypes and social structures, this informant/smuggler preferred to use them to her advantage, thus, in a sense, subverting an unequal system. In this she is not alone. Payán observes: "For some time, the favorite group to cross [loads of drugs in cars] was Hispanic single mothers who were U.S. citizens and sometimes had their children with them to distract the inspection officer" (Payán 2006). Moreover, older women may take advantage of cultural norms regarding the virtuosity of grandmothers and the respectful treatment they are due to smuggle small packages of drugs on their persons. Likewise, pregnant women and women with children may deliberately

“perform” or exaggerate maternal styles, clothing, etc. as they drive loads of cocaine across the international bridges into the U.S. They may also hide drugs under seated children or on their bodies. Diaper bags were mentioned by several informants as primary stash locations.

Women, like men, also invent new ways of smuggling contraband that are not marked by gender. Zulema, in her early career as a low-level mule, devised a method in which a lead car would be thoroughly saturated with marijuana smoke then ventilated such that the upholstery would be impregnated with fumes that were undetectable to a human nose but immediately apparent to a drug detection dog. She would also put on gloves and rub cocaine residue around the car to further insure it would be stopped by the drug dogs. Inevitably the lead car would be stopped and searched—to no avail—which created a distraction that allowed a heavily loaded car that came shortly after it to pass through without being searched.

Women, especially single mothers, make much-needed income by carrying drugs across the border—it is an activity spawned by the feminization of poverty and inequality, but it also may allow them to live without a male partner (Figueroa 2006). These increases in income may give women greater freedom from men in their domestic lives, although they do not usually translate into great power in the drug business, which is heavily male-dominated at the highest levels. Moreover, Fleetwood points out that, “although the opportunity to traffic drugs might appear to offer a sense of empowerment, the actual job of drug mule is a disempowered one” and, though perhaps overstating the case, “many of the women had decided to traffic drugs to take control of the situation, when in fact for all, the reality was the opposite” (nd.:30). But, to the extent that women successfully perform the mule role without being caught, and are paid well for their efforts, they may in some cases transcend the gender stereotype of low-level female drug smugglers dominated by their male supervisors (Fleetwood nd.:32). Nor do the majority of women smugglers adopt “passive roles” as Adler (1993:91) found decades ago. Ultimately, however, as in business in general, a “glass ceiling” prevents most women from moving up the ladder of the drug trafficking industry (Fleetwood nd.:32).

Women Connected with Men in the Drug World

A fourth level of female association with the drug trafficking world involves females who are not smugglers or active in the drug business in

any way; however, their spouses, lovers or male relatives are, and women are heavily impacted by the actions of the significant males in their lives. They are victims of a kind of “gender entrapment” (Richie 1995). Lupita’s husband, for example, was busted in Nebraska when a car loaded with 100 pounds of cocaine that he was driving ran out of gas on the highway. As a housewife from a poor barrio with two small children and few job skills, she faces an uncertain future as she prepares for her husband’s trial and inevitable federal prison sentence. Nayeli, an extremely bright El Paso high school student, wanted nothing to do with drugs but was forced by her abusive older brother to watch his methamphetamine transactions and ingest various drugs with him and his friends. Because Nayeli’s father had abandoned the family and her mother was too busy with work and her own problems to help, she was on her own. She became so desperate she moved out of the family home and lived on the street.

Another woman, an undocumented immigrant from Juárez, worked as a maid at an El Paso home owned by traffickers. Unbeknownst to the maid, the house was actually a drug warehouse (a “stash house”). She finally learned about it when her employers asked her to receive mysterious detergent boxes late at night. The maid accepted the boxes from male couriers without questioning her employers. Eventually, curiosity overcame the maid and she opened one of the boxes and found that it was stuffed with cash—she had unwittingly received the payoffs from drug sales. Soon thereafter, the maid quit her job and escaped from such compromising circumstances.

In another case, Andrea’s father ran a restaurant in a large eastern city and though he was a poorly educated working-class immigrant from Torreón, Mexico, easily provided for all of his family’s needs—until he was arrested for cocaine trafficking and sent to a federal prison in Florida. Abruptly, the whole family uprooted—leaving house, school and jobs—and moved close to the father because “everything revolved around him.” Suddenly poor and with bleak prospects, Andrea felt that “my whole life came apart when my dad got busted...I had to give up everything, my boyfriend, my friends, school, everything, and move.” Andrea’s sister turned to the only readily available supply of cash—smuggling drug packages for their aunts and uncles. She too was caught and imprisoned. Now, Andrea and her mother are embittered. They blame the father for the problems in their lives, but they regularly visit him at the penitentiary and their lives still circle around him.

There are, however, other scenarios in which women are impacted differently by the actions of male traffickers. For example, Nora Sandoval, the young Mexican widow of Castor Alberto Ochoa, a high-level member of the Ochoa Cartel of Medellín, Colombia who was murdered by the Carrillo Fuentes Cartel in Ciudad Juárez (after being acquitted miraculously of charges that he smuggled 6 tons of cocaine into El Paso) inherited some of the wealth (including large amounts of drug profits and houses and properties in Sonora, Quintana Roo and other Mexican states) left by her deceased spouse, married a federal policeman and started a new life. She never claimed the body of her dead husband; it still lies in a morgue in Juárez. Sonia, however, lived well for many years as the lover of one of the founders of the Juárez cartel. They went to the finest restaurants, undisturbed except for the *capos* many bodyguards, and he was kind and sensitive to her needs. But when he was assassinated, Sonia's high life was over. Later, her brother was also killed by the Cartel. Since then she has waged a courageous, single-handed, but unsuccessful campaign to force the Mexican government to find her brother's body and punish the killers. In another case, Elena tried to recover hundreds of thousands of dollars in cash left by her brother (who, along with her father and husband, were high-ranking members of the Juárez cartel before they were arrested) when he went to jail. Elena was able to extract the money from her brother's apartment in Juárez but was caught when she tried to carry it across the Río Grande/Río Bravo into El Paso.²⁶

Although there are some exceptions, the most victimized women among my research subjects were those who were essentially innocent bystanders who often paid dearly for the actions of drug-dealing males. Even though low-level female mules are at the bottom of primarily male-dominated drug smuggling organizations, by becoming smugglers they may reap profits and gain a sense of empowerment in their lives and vis-à-vis males. But the women discussed in this section, to the contrary, are mostly dependent on male actions and therefore the least "liberated" among the types of women I have discussed.

Conclusions

The "War on Drugs," despite its limited results and huge expenditure of resources, continues to be the official American policy regarding drug smuggling. A main reason for the persistence of this ineffective policy is

the emotionalism and misunderstandings that surround the drug issue (Agar 2006). Women are especially vulnerable to the negative effects of demonizing, anti-drug discourses (Marez 2004:8; Anderson 2005:374). The ethnographic research presented here, moving beyond stereotypes, can restore a measure of humanity to a stigmatized population and contribute to a deeper understanding of the motivations of female drug smugglers. It contributes to drug research by illuminating the gendered cultural world of drug smuggling and illustrating the differential impacts of smuggling on women's lives that are linked to their positions within class and gender-stratified trafficking organizations. Further research is needed on the impacts on women in drug smuggling, but this article has shown the great variety of roles women perform in the drug trade.

The growing involvement of women in the drug trade, with some exceptions, can be linked to the interacting effects of greater social freedoms for women and economic marginalization as demonstrated by Hunnicutt and Broidy (although I have criticized their lack of attention to cultural and class differences and their insensitivity to the generally positive impact of female "liberation"). Women in drug smuggling are thus victims of patriarchal class/race/gender structures but also active agents for their own emancipation (although, in some cases, oppressors of others).

The typology of smugglers presented here can help researchers gauge the differential impact of the drug world on women's status in society generally and *vis-à-vis* men specifically. As border women (and women elsewhere) obtain greater mobility and social/economic opportunities, some exercise agency by smuggling drugs to achieve power, a higher income or because they are attracted to the romantic mystique of the outlaw. Another group of women participates in drug smuggling organizations as an extension of their everyday domestic lives and kinship obligations as they would in legitimate businesses. Most, however, enter drug smuggling as a desperate economic measure, given their limited options in the mainstream economy. Still others are forced into the drug trafficking world against their will. They are victimized by the decisions and actions of important males in their lives.

I have argued that the few women who reach the highest levels of contraband businesses may experience unprecedented freedoms from dependence on males, even if for only short periods of time. The image of the *macha* "queenpin" may serve also as an inspiration for future female drug careers. Middle level women in the drug trade often perform

managerial functions and benefit from drug trade profits but without the empowerment vis-à-vis men enjoyed by female drug lords. These women still remain, for the most part, embedded in restrictive, male dominant familial and social networks, though middle-level women also subvert and manipulate them, and some use their increased revenue to achieve greater autonomy from male partners. “Mules,” if they are careful and lucky, may earn more money than previously and perhaps use that wealth to move up in the social structure and consolidate a stronger position in their households in relation to spouses and lovers, or leave them and live separately. However, the penalties for being detected and arrested by border police inspectors are severe and drug profits are sporadic and unpredictable. Moreover, women who are caught smuggling may serve long prison terms and be separated from their children and families. Although men are more likely to be killed in drug violence, they reap the largest share of drug revenues.

Ultimately drug smuggling is no panacea for women who experience victimization in the drug world, but only occasionally greater “empowerment.” The higher women rise in drug organizations, the greater are their chances to achieve agency and a degree of power. Women at the lowest levels of drug smuggling organizations, or who are not smugglers but are associated with low-level male smugglers, are usually victimized the most, although some achieve relative independence from male partners as a result of drug revenues.

ENDNOTES

¹Translations from Spanish are by the author and are indicated by brackets as are other insertions by the author. Most interviews were conducted in Spanish, however, the following informants quoted in the text made their comments in English: Don Ford, Andrea, Josefina, Nancy, and Sonia.

²For example, Nordstrom (2007a:B11), in a review of new books on smuggling, notes that the smuggling world “is not gender neutral.” She concludes the essay by highlighting a quote from one of her key informants: “It’s hard to get a date when you’re into smuggling—most everyone’s male” (Nordstrom 2007:B11).

³According to Solovitch: “Drug arrests have tripled since 1980; as a result, the number of jailed drug offenders in 2000 equaled the total number of inmates in U.S. prisons and jails 25 years ago, according to The Sentencing Project, a research and advocacy group. By most estimates, women have paid the highest price. Between 1977 and 2001, figures from the Women’s Prison Association show a 592 percent increase in the number of women jailed, from 12,279 to 85,031. According to the WPA, the growth ‘corresponds directly to the mandatory minimum sentencing laws in effect since the early

1970s. Since more women are convicted for nonviolent, drug-related crimes than for any other, these sentencing policies have had a particularly profound effect on women.' Though men still far outnumber women in arrests for drug-related crimes, women now represent the fastest-growing prison population nationwide for drug offenses. In 1996, the number of female state and federal inmates in jail for drug crimes grew at nearly double the rate of males" (2006:1).

According to the prison issue advocacy organization, The Sentencing Project, whose statistics come from the Bureau of Justice Statistics, in the U.S., women make up 7 percent of all inmates. Thus, more than 200,000 women are incarcerated in state or federal prisons or local jails. Twenty-five percent of all jail inmates in the U.S. are there for alleged drug offenses (from The Sentencing Project's "Facts About Prisons and Prisoners" available online: www.sentencingproject.org/IssueAreaHome.aspx?IssueID=5, accessed on April 23, 2007). Statistics on women sentenced to prison for drug crimes in the U.S. may also be found at www.amnestyusa.org/womeninprison.html (accessed February 19, 2006). Within Mexico, women currently comprise about half of drug arrests according to a Mexican police source (Dibble 2005). Limited mention of female smugglers and women in drug organizations is found in the work of the top Mexican journalists who research trafficking such as Jesús Blancornelas and Ricardo Ravelo.

⁴Many poor, relatively, unskilled border women instead of entering drug smuggling work as factory laborers in the *maquiladoras*, maids on the American side, street vendors, prostitutes, and other jobs in the informal economy.

⁵Male drug smugglers also present a complex mosaic that belies facile stereotypes. Male roles in the drug trade include purchasing agent/negotiator, political liaison, financial manager/money launderer, accountant, lawyer, transportation specialist (pilot, boat captain, driver, "mule"/pedestrian transporter, etc.), intelligence agent, telecommunications specialist, arms procurer, car thief, enforcer/hitman, packager, warehouse foreman, guard, spotter, distribution agent, and street seller. Space limitations prevent broader discussion of this issue. I plan to deconstruct essentialized views of male traffickers in a future article.

⁶I put these concepts in quotes to indicate that I am not using them uncritically. "Victimization" in this article refers to systematic or structural mistreatment of women by men or a male-dominated society, without precluding the possibility of resistance. A critical discussion of "empowerment" follows later in the text.

⁷This article will emphasize breadth of female experiences as drug smugglers, but it is derived from in-depth oral histories that will be presented in fuller detail in my book in progress entitled "Drug War: Front-line Accounts of Drug Trafficking and Law Enforcement on the U.S.-Mexico Border."

⁸*Maquiladora* plants, also known as "*maquilas*," assemble electronics, automotive parts, clothing and other products for export to the U.S.

⁹The Association of Families of Disappeared Persons of Ciudad Juárez led by Jaime Hervella lists more than 200 people who have "disappeared" in Juárez over the last fifteen years, and that only includes people whose families were willing to publicize their complaints. Hundreds of others abducted by armed commandos—in actions known as "*levantones*"—have not been heard from and are presumed dead. Given the importance of the drug trade as a generator of violence, I would suggest that it be given greater consideration in analyses of the Juárez femicides. Moreover, the ultra-macho image of drug-traffickers—projected in *narcocorridos*, sensationalist drug movies, and frequently the lifestyles of the traffickers themselves—has been pivotal in glorifying and disseminating a violent, masculinist discourse, in addition to the sexist discourse associated with the *maquiladora* industry. Yet male drug traffickers may acquire a degree of admiration from the general public, whereas female traffickers are prone to being viewed as

“pathological deviants.” Nonetheless, more positive images of female traffickers are emerging. Some *narcocorridos*, such as “*Camelia la Tejana*,” “*Contrabando y Traición*” and “*Las Tres Monjitas*,” actually glorify female traffickers and they have attracted a following among young women (Edberg 2004:55–56, 98, 103).

¹⁰Examples of powerful Mexican women adopting a “*macha*” style in popular movies, folklore and politics include the Gertrudis character in *Como Agua Para Chocolate*, the cantina owner in *La Ley de Herodes*, the politician (and former entertainer) Irma Serrano, and the legendary *soldaderas* of the Mexican Revolution. Isthmus Zapotec women of Oaxaca are also often viewed as “*machas*.” In a discussion of similar issues in an Israeli context, Sa’ar (2006:397–430) analyzes how local women embrace “feminine strength” along the cultural borderlines between masculine notions of power and traditional femininity. This interpretation is relevant to female drug smugglers, but I want to stress that the women discussed in this paper who embrace the “*macha*” style of power do not consider it inconsistent with a female gender identity. That is they consider it a female style (or “notion”) of wielding power. Like Sa’ar, I feel that it is critical “to discuss both power and gender as exercised rather than monopolized or absent, without losing sight of the cumulative effects of gross and persistent disparities” (2006:423).

¹¹There have been a number of cases in the El Paso/Juárez area in which women have been tricked by men into driving cars loaded with drugs across the international bridges from Mexico into the U.S. This is what is known colloquially as a “blind mule.”

¹²This article is primarily concerned with female smugglers of heroin, cocaine and marijuana from Mexico into the U.S. It also discusses women involved in drug smuggling organizations who do not actually transport or smuggle drugs across the border, but whose efforts as organizers, money-launderers, etc. make smuggling possible.

¹³Quotations from Don Ford are from a phone interview and e-mail communication with author on February 3, 2006.

¹⁴On the limitations of using case studies to understand structural violence and the victimization of women, see Beckerleg and Hundt (2005).

¹⁵I, of course, support and advocate greater freedom for women. I am also aware that the “liberation” explanation for some types of female crime is controversial (Naffine 1996:32). My point is simply to examine the extent to which women’s greater social and physical mobility allows for—does not cause per se—the possibility of greater participation in drug smuggling.

¹⁶Critics of the liberation thesis, such as Carlen (1985:6-7), argue that this thesis assumes that when women obtain greater freedom’s they will simply mimic men’s patterns of criminal behavior. I am not making that argument. I suggest that women may “take advantage” of (or be pushed by economic necessity into) new opportunities to make money in the drug trade. By doing so they are not simply emulating men, but following their own logics, often related to providing for their children.

¹⁷The general U.S. divorce rate is about 50 percent, i.e., about half of U.S. marriages end in divorce (for details see U.S. government statistics and National Vital Statistics Reports at www.cdc.gov/nhs/data). The Mexican rate is 7 or 8 times less than the U.S. rate (see United Nations data on comparative world divorce rates at Encarta.msn.com/media_701500518/marriage_and_divorce_rates.html)

The divorce rate for El Paso County in 2003 was extremely low. The rate was less than 1.7/1000 people, see the details at www.dshs.state.tx.us/chs/vstat/latest/map23.shtm

¹⁸Interviewees were chosen to reflect as much as possible the range and variety of female involvement in drug trafficking. In most cases the women concerned discussed smuggling in the past tense. In general, I avoided discussing with them activities in the present time, although some undoubtedly continue to engage in illicit behavior. No

interviews were conducted in prison. My interviews are “ethnographic” in the sense that in most cases I maintained an ongoing social relationship with the interviewees in which I was able to observe and, at times, participate (though in no sense engage in illegal activities) in the same cultural world. I was thus able to contextualize interview data vis-à-vis a larger social field. Nineteen of the fifty interviewees were men, including police officers, U.S. Border Patrol agents, journalists, and former participants in drug smuggling. Many of the female smugglers were interviewed on numerous occasions.

¹⁹On the value of ethnographic research on violence and crime in conflictive situations similar to that of the Juárez/El Paso area, see C. Nordstrom and A. Robben, eds., *Fieldwork Under Fire: Contemporary Studies of Violence and Culture* (Berkeley, 1996).

²⁰R. Ravelo, “Pierde el cartel de Neza a una de sus ‘piezas claves,’” Accessed on August 29, 2006 from www.proceso.com.mx/imprnota.html?nid=43498

²¹On Colombian female drug lords, see Surovell 2000:1–11; for “*Lola La Chata*,” see Astorga 2005:4.

²²For security reasons I must use a pseudonym to refer to this prominent former trafficker.

²³In Bowden’s (2005) book, “Zulema” is named “Cosima.” He claims (p. 24) “she has imported 14,000 kilos of cocaine into the U.S.” Bowden notes (p. 16) that “she knows more people in the life than anyone else...she was one of the first people to get Colombian cocaine into Europe, Australia...”

²⁴Someone who lends their name to a drug dealer for use on fraudulent bank accounts, money-laundering, stash warehouses, businesses, etc.

²⁵According to several female inspectors, male traffickers also attempt to flirt with inspectors in order to distract them from searching for drugs.

²⁶The information in this paragraph comes from local journalists with vast experience covering drug trafficking issues.

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