



**UNODC**

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

# COCAINE INSIGHTS 3

Women in the cocaine supply chain

# Cocaine Insights

The cocaine market presents a clear threat at global level. Well-defined locations of production in South America and large consumer markets in the Americas and Europe lead to trafficking routes from a circumscribed origin to specific, even if far-flung, destinations. While some parts of the world play a crucial role as transit regions, the routes, modalities and networks employed by criminal actors continue to evolve, diversify and become more efficient. The increasingly globalized, interconnected, digitalized and technologically sophisticated nature of society, as well as a growing affluent demographic in some regions where cocaine use has traditionally been low, can potentially catalyse and accelerate the dynamism and expansion of the market.

The series Cocaine Insights, developed by UNODC in the framework of the CRIMJUST programme and in cooperation with partners and stakeholders at national, regional and international levels, delivers the latest knowledge and trends on issues related to cocaine markets in an accessible and informative format.

Suggested citation: UNODC, *Women in the cocaine supply chain*, Cocaine Insights 3, UNODC, Vienna, March 2022

## Acknowledgements

Main contributors: Yulia Vorobyeva, Antoine Vella

Content overview: Chloé Carpentier, Angela Me

The authors are especially grateful to the following experts for their input: Alejandro Corda, Ernesto Cortés, Corina Giacomello, Thomas Grisaffi, Zhuyem Molina, Alejandra Mora Mora, Claudia Palma, Isabel Pereira, María Santos, Vera Silva, and Coletta Youngers.

This issue also benefited from invaluable advice from the following UNODC colleagues: Jaqueline García-Yi, Valérie Lebaux, Sven Pfeiffer.

This issue was produced thanks to the financial contribution of the European Union.

## Disclaimer

This publication has not been formally edited. The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of UNODC or any contributory organization, nor does it imply any endorsement.

Comments on the report are welcome and can be sent to:

Drug Research Section  
Research and Trends Analysis Branch  
United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime  
PO Box 500

# Table of Contents

Key findings	3
Policy implications	4
Introduction	7
Roles of women within cocaine trafficking networks	9
Cultivation and production	11
International cocaine trafficking	20
Micro-trafficking	32
Conclusion	37

## Abbreviations

DEVIDA	Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo y Vida sin Drogas (Peru)
DTO	Drug trafficking organization
ELN	National Liberation Army
EMCDDA	European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction
EPL	Popular Liberation Army
FARC	Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia
FIP	Fundación Ideas para la Paz
IDPC	International Drug Policy Consortium
INPE	Instituto Nacional Penitenciario (Peru)
INRA	Instituto Nacional de Reforma Agraria (Plurinational State of Bolivia)
ITTC	Instituto Terra, Trabalho e Cidadania
MPCP	Militarized Communist Party of Peru
PNIS	Programa Nacional Integral de Sustitución de Cultivos Ilícitos
SIMCI	Sistema Integrado de Monitoreo de Cultivos Ilícitos
SISDEPEN	Sistema de Informações do Departamento Penitenciário Nacional
SNEEP	Sistema Nacional de Estadísticas sobre Ejecución de la Pena
TNI	Transnational Institute
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
VRAEM	Valle de los Ríos Apurímac, Ene y Mantaro
WHO	World Health Organization
WOLA	Washington Office on Latin America

## Key findings

### Women fulfil a wide range of roles at all stages of the cocaine supply chain

At the production stage, the most common roles for women are those of coca growers and coca pickers. In international trafficking, women usually participate as “drug mules”. And in national-level drug distribution, women are often involved in smuggling drugs into prisons and in street-level drug dealing. At each stage, roles carried out by women can vary from supporting to managerial, with low-ranking positions prevailing.

### Some roles are more specific to women, while others are performed by both women and men

In most cocaine-related activities, women participate together with men. The exception is smuggling of drugs into prison, which is carried out almost exclusively by women. In the case of women who smuggle small quantities of cocaine internationally and at the national level, gender does not seem to be a decisive factor for their recruitment. Instead, gender matters in choosing a method of concealment and in adopting traditional gendered behaviours to avoid attention of law enforcement.

### Women can play a prominent role in the coca leaf economy

In parts of Bolivia (Plurinational State of), women are primary actors in the commercialization of coca leaf and may occupy prominent positions such as coca leaf merchants or even financiers of the processing chain. These women

occupy a mid-level position in the production ladder and some may have relatively high financial means.

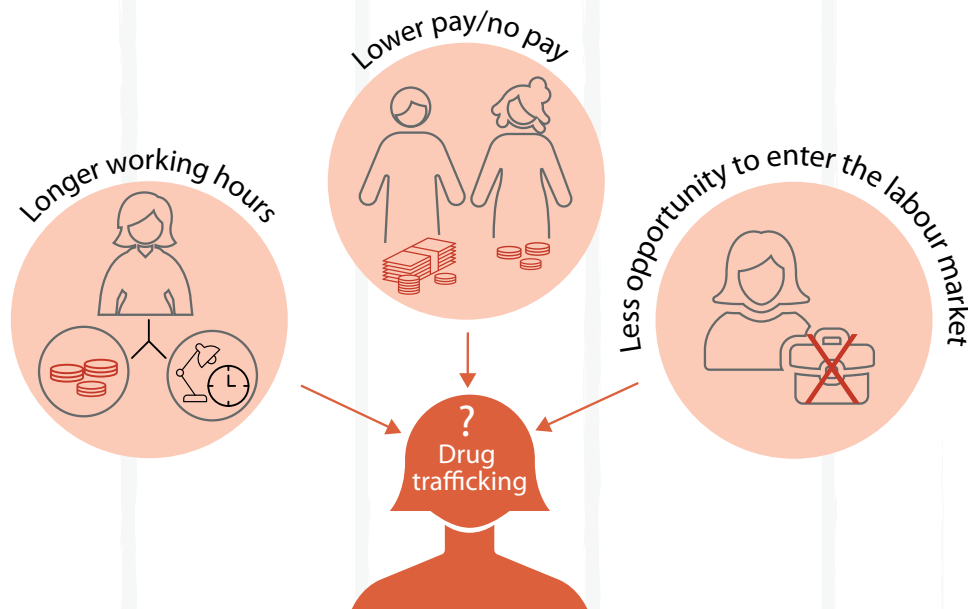
### For most women, the decision to become involved in drug-related activities is shaped by limited choices, even though it is often voluntary

The available evidence indicates that only a minority of women are coerced or deceived into cocaine trafficking. However, women’s decisions to become involved are often shaped by their responses to socio-economic conditions. In Latin American and the Caribbean region, for example, women are less likely than men to participate in the labour market (53 per cent women compared to 77 per cent of men); more likely to work without pay or for lower pay; and on average work more hours than men. Those who have no ability to advance economically are sometimes “pushed” into the cocaine trade by the perceived lack of alternatives.

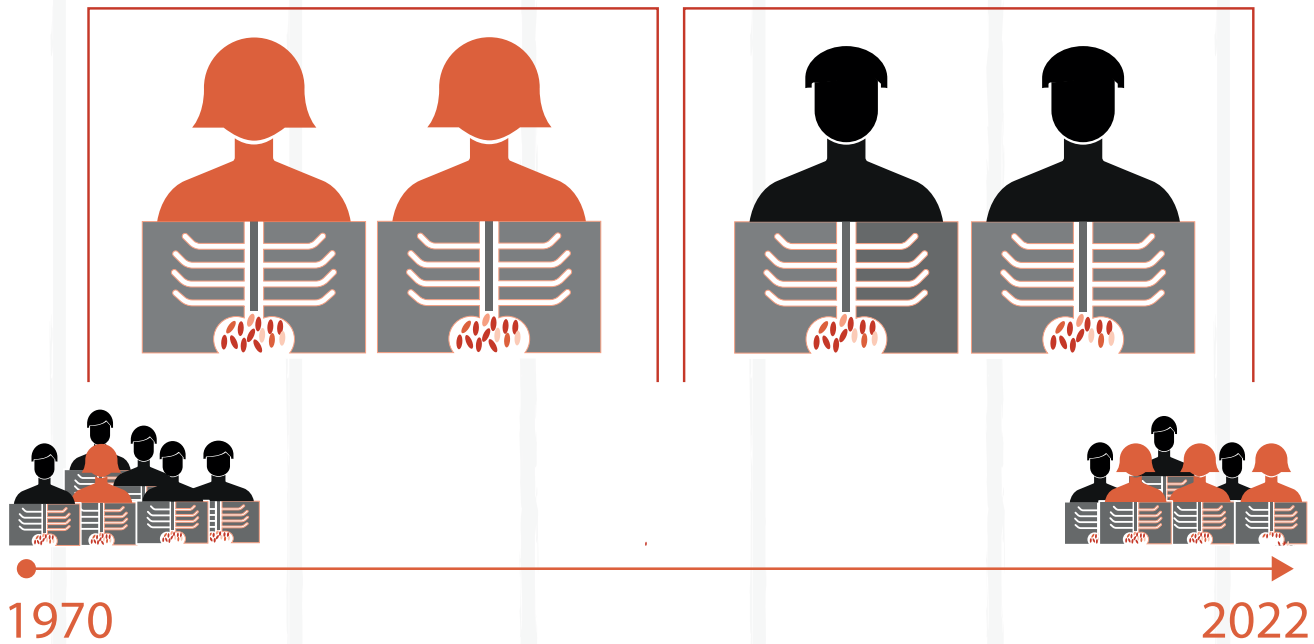
### Reasons for female involvement in cocaine trafficking vary across roles

While female participation in any role can be driven by economic needs, some roles may be driven by other driving factors. Women who smuggle cocaine into prison are often led into it by a male inmate with whom they have romantic or familial ties. For female street-level drug dealers, extreme poverty and the need to provide for the family is often the main push factor to sell drugs. Conversely, a minority of international smugglers (“drug mules”) come from a higher socio-economic background and opt to smuggle cocaine to obtain additional economic benefits or elevate their social

## FOR MOST WOMEN, THE DECISION TO BECOME INVOLVED IN DRUG-RELATED ACTIVITIES IS SHAPED BY LIMITED CHOICES, EVEN THOUGH IT IS OFTEN VOLUNTARY



## WOMEN ARE JUST AS INVOLVED AS MEN IN SMUGGLING COCAINE INSIDE THEIR BODIES



status. Women in leadership positions are likely to pursue a criminal career for the sake of achieving a sense of power and autonomy from men.

### Initial involvement in international smuggling of cocaine is often voluntary but it quickly becomes irreversible

Most women are involved in the low levels of the supply chain without fully realising the potential risks, such as a high probability of arrest, harsh penalties, or health risks in the case of drug swallows. Once they start to smuggle drugs and become “drug mules”, they are typically not allowed to detract.

### Women are just as involved as men in smuggling cocaine inside their bodies

While “body packers” used to be predominantly young men, tightening of airport security and border checks worldwide have led to all demographic groups, including children and pregnant women, becoming involved in body packing. Nowadays, women appear to be involved at the same scale as men, although this varies depending on the geographic region and the drug type smuggled.

### There appear to be regional preferences for male and female involvement in international cocaine smuggling

Some countries along cocaine routes appear to be the origin for predominantly male “drug mules”, while others may be the origin for higher shares of female “drug mules”. Still, for the majority of nationalities, both genders are represented, with men prevailing in absolute numbers over women.

### Working conditions of women compared to men remains an open question

Generally, there seems to be no difference between males and females in the income earned by coca growers and “drug mules”. However, data are scarce. Moreover, more research is needed to better understand the working conditions of women in the cocaine economy and to establish if women are treated differently from men by drug trafficking organizations.

### Involvement in the cocaine supply chain creates a mixed impact on women

For women involved in the lower stages of the cocaine supply chain, income from illicit activities provides short-term benefits. Coca growing activities may become the source of a relatively stable income and contribute to women’s financial independence. However, they do not translate into sustainable livelihoods. Similarly, most of the women who engage in small-scale trafficking or retail of cocaine remain poor. Involvement in the cocaine economy also leads to their greater exposure to a violent environment, threats and stigmatization. And it can lead to incarceration, which has a particular impact on women and their families, especially in the case of foreign nationals who suffer the effects of being incarcerated away from home and who also often encounter additional challenges in the pre-trial stages.

## Policy implications

This brief provides an insight into the dynamics of cocaine markets and the involvement of women; it also highlights gaps in data and analysis that prevent from accurately assessing trends with a view to designing gender-sensitive counterdrug policies more effectively. A deep understanding of the role of women in the cocaine supply chain and of how gender roles may define the activities in which women engage can be achieved by collecting quantitative and qualitative gender-disaggregated data.

Collecting and consolidating information such as breakdowns of persons in contact with the criminal justice system by sex, demographic status, type of a drug-related offence, type of drug, and individual's level of involvement in the drug supply chain will allow national policymakers to understand patterns of involvement among different subgroups of the female population. Analysing these data can provide an important insight into the driving factors for each sub-population group and can assist in developing effective strategies for prevention, interdiction, and prosecution of drug trafficking. Ultimately, it can help design effective interventions to prevent women from participating in drug-related criminal activities by providing viable alternatives.

A comprehensive strategy of drug supply reduction needs to take into account the different sets of enablers and factors that lead women from different backgrounds to become actors in the cocaine supply chain. Beyond this, women living in the context of the supply chain have a strong potential to exert a positive influence, and drug supply reduction strategies need to empower them to achieve this potential. For example, women have the potential to positively influence the life paths of young people. At the cultivation and production stage, women in rural communities can, if sufficiently empowered, play an important role in the decision-making process of farms, for example in relation to the decision to cultivate coca bush or to find alternatives to coca bush, or in relation to management and investment.<sup>1</sup> Providing continuing technical assistance in accordance with women's specific needs and interests, combined with promoting female leadership and empowerment, can contribute to an enabling environment in which communities could sustainably reduce illicit coca cultivation.

To reduce the likelihood of international trafficking and micro-trafficking, it is crucial to address the situation of women in disadvantaged communities, especially those in proximity to drug markets. Policies aimed at the economic inclusion of women in a situation of vulnerability, who are the sole providers for their families, can go a long way in reducing the incentives to become involved in illicit activities. These economic interventions should be

accompanied by extensive social work and psychological assistance programs aimed at empowering women. Targeted and evidence-based interventions to prevent violence against women,<sup>2</sup> as well as to provide access to coordinated, multi-sectoral essential services,<sup>3</sup> could prevent women from finding themselves in situations of domestic and intimate partner violence and the emotional dependence that often serve as enablers of recruitment into drug trafficking activities.

The impact of women's incarceration on themselves and their families and children<sup>4</sup> can be reduced by providing alternatives to incarceration, reducing the use of pre-trial detention, applying sentences proportionate to the individual's scale of involvement in drug-related activities and facilitating the transfer of foreign nationals to serve sentences in their home country. Legal frameworks should distinguish based on "the role and motivation of the women in conflict with the law: serious or organized traffickers; micro-traffickers (low-level dealers or smugglers); women who are dependent on drugs; and women who use drugs occasionally (or 'recreationally')." <sup>5</sup> When designing a proportionate sentencing framework for drug law offences, it is important to take into account the reasons for committing an offence, such as drug dependence (which calls for a health-centred response), physical or psychological pressure from an intimate partner, or meeting basic economic needs, as well as mitigating factors, such as socio-economic vulnerability and being a mother or head of household.<sup>6</sup> Non-custodial sentences for pregnant women and women with dependent children should be preferred where possible and appropriate,<sup>7</sup> and incarceration of female juvenile offenders should be avoided to the extent possible.<sup>8</sup>

For women who use drugs—many of whom come into contact with the law for drug law offences—and need access to treatment, rehabilitation and aftercare, the provision of these services should be gender-sensitive, made available to the extent possible both in the community and during periods of detention, and also considered as an alternative to incarceration. This may include women-only, trauma-informed treatment programmes.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, all women in contact with the law should be offered gender-sensitive essential services such as social reintegration and education.

<sup>1</sup> UNODC, *World Drug Report 2015* (United Nations publication, 2015), Chapter II, p. 109.

<sup>2</sup> WHO and others, *RESPECT women: Preventing violence against women* (Geneva, World Health Organization, 2019).

<sup>3</sup> UN Women and others, *Essential Services Package for Women and Girls Subject to Violence: Core Elements and Quality Guidelines* (UN Women, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> See Corina Giacomello (ed.), *Childhood that matters: The impact of drug policy on children with incarcerated parents in Latin America and the Caribbean* (CWS – Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean, 2019).

<sup>5</sup> UNODC, *Toolkit on gender-responsive non-custodial measures* (United Nations, 2020), p. 71.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>7</sup> UNODC, *The Bangkok Rules*, Rule 64, [https://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/Bangkok\\_Rules\\_ENG\\_22032015.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/Bangkok_Rules_ENG_22032015.pdf), p. 19.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, Rule 65.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, Rule 62.

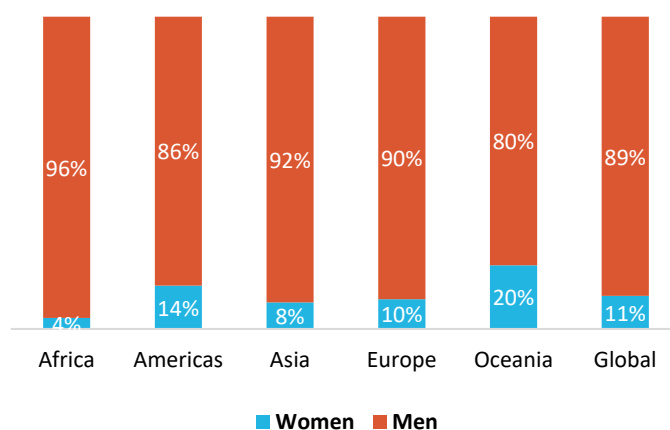
In the case of women deprived of their liberty, who often face stigmatization from their families and society for being a female with a criminal record, it is critical to support them after release. The ongoing support will help avoid recidivism in a context where recruiters often expect women leaving prison to return to their previous activities.



## 1. Introduction

Research on the role of women in drug trafficking is at best limited. In part this may be due to the fact that drug trafficking has been so far a largely male-dominated activity. Globally, women represent approximately one tenth of all people brought into contact with the criminal justice system for drug trafficking offences (which exclude offences related to drug use and possession for use), although this proportion varies significantly across regions (Figure 1). Meanwhile, the global female prison population has been rising fast, increasing by one third between 2000 and 2019, compared with an increase of one quarter in the global male prison population, and 21 per cent in the global general population, over the same period.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, a higher proportion of women (35 per cent) than men (19 per cent) are in prison for drug-related offences.<sup>2</sup> In some regions, especially in Latin America, drug-related offences are one of the leading causes of female imprisonment.<sup>3</sup> Some estimates suggest that 70 per cent of women incarcerated in Latin America are in prison for non-violent offences related to small-scale distribution and retail selling of drugs.<sup>4</sup>

**Fig. 1** Share of women and men in people brought into formal contact with the criminal justice system on suspicion of drug trafficking offences (any drug), by region and at global level, 2019



Source: UNODC, responses to the annual report questionnaire.

Note: Data reported from 56 countries worldwide, distributed as follows: Africa, 5 countries; Americas, 12 countries; Asia, 10 countries; Europe, 27 countries; Oceania, 2 countries.

Cocaine trafficking in particular relies on a complex supply chain whose links affect multiple segments of the population across different world regions. From planting coca seeds to selling cocaine products to individual consumers, women are part of this chain. Compared to other regions, the Americas show the highest share of women (19 per cent) among people brought into contact with the criminal justice system for cocaine trafficking offences in the period of 2015-2019 (Figure 2). With cocaine manufacture currently expanding and signs of growth also in cocaine use,<sup>5</sup> more people, including women, may become involved

<sup>1</sup> UNODC, Data matters 1, 2021,

[https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/statistics/DataMatters1\\_prison.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/statistics/DataMatters1_prison.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> UNODC, World Drug Report 2019, booklet 2, “Global Overview of Drug Demand and Supply” (United Nations publication, 2019), p. 32.

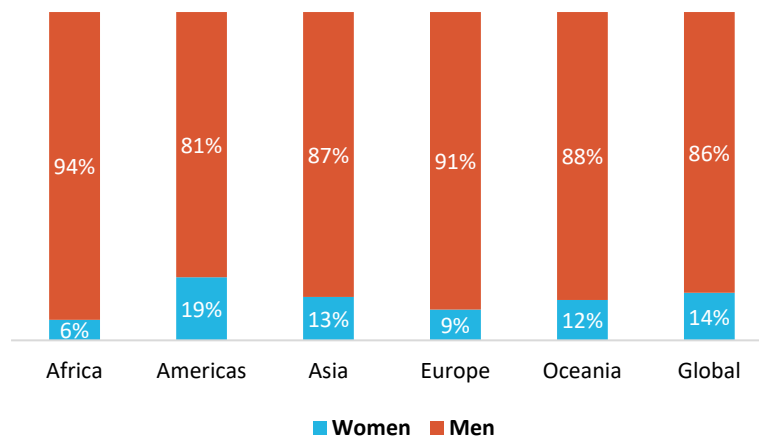
<sup>3</sup> Coletta Youngers, Teresa Garcia Castro, and Maria (Kiki) Manzur, *Women behind bars for drug offenses in Latin America: What the numbers make clear* (WOLA, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> Inter-American Commission of Women, *Mujeres y drogas en las Américas: un diagnóstico de política en construcción* (Organization of American States, 2014), p. 27.

<sup>5</sup> UNODC, *World Drug Report 2021* (United Nations publication, 2021).

in its supply chain at global level. Consequently, even more women may end up entangled in the criminal justice system. With drug-related offences constituting a leading driver of incarceration of women in many countries and global cocaine manufacture reaching record levels, it is imperative to understand the extent, dynamics and consequences of women's involvement in the cocaine industry.

**Fig. 2** Share of men and women brought into formal contact with the criminal justice system on suspicion of cocaine trafficking offences, by region and at global level, 2015-2019



Source: UNODC, responses to the annual report questionnaire

Note: The data come from 50 countries, including 18 countries from Europe, 15 countries from the Americas, 10 countries from Africa, 5 countries from Asia and 2 countries from Oceania. Persons brought into contact with the criminal justice system for drug offences include people arrested, suspected or cautioned for drug law offences.

Women involved in organized crime are often considered passive members of a male-dominated criminal world, such as wives or romantic partners of male leaders; or victims coerced by men into participation in criminal activities.<sup>6</sup> This view, even if true in part, may bring incentive to involve women in a range of roles because they are less likely to raise the suspicion of law enforcement.<sup>7</sup>

This analysis reviews the role of women in the global cocaine supply chain, including their participation in coca bush cultivation and cocaine manufacture, trafficking, and distribution. In particular, it examines the drivers behind female participation; the different roles women fulfil in the trade; and the impact of such involvement on their lives. As this analysis shows, women engage in an array of activities within the cocaine industry; their reasons for involvement vary across the roles they fulfil in the drug supply chain; and their experiences are heavily shaped by socio-economic circumstances.

<sup>6</sup> Arlene Tickner and others, *Women and Organized Crime in Latin America: Beyond Victims or Victimizers* (Colombian Observatory of Organized Crime, 2020).

<sup>7</sup> Cecilia Farfán Méndez, "Women's Involvement in Organised Crime and Drug Trafficking: A Comparative Analysis of the Sinaloa and Yamaguchi-gumi Organisations" in Julia Buxton and others (eds), *The Impact of Global Drug Policy on Women: Shifting the Needle* (Emerald Publishing Limited, 2020), pp. 159–168.



## Research methods

This study is based on a number of sources including: the available research literature or assessment reports produced by national authorities, non-governmental organizations, international organizations and academia on participation of women in drug supply; media articles; quantitative data on female incarceration from open-source governmental reports; data on drug trafficking offences from Annual Report Questionnaires submitted by Member States to the UNODC; as well as qualitative data from interviews. Ten interviews with key informants and two semi-structured in-depth interviews with former offenders released from prison (one male and one female) were conducted in the period from January to June 2021. Key informants included subject matter experts, such as academic researchers, members of civil society, criminal justice professionals, and public defenders. They were selected based on their experience of working directly with women with a record of involvement in drug-related activities. As data available do not always disaggregate drug-related offences by type of drug, most interviews were conducted with experts based in countries alongside major cocaine routes, in particular in Latin America.

This study focuses primarily on women in the cocaine supply chain. Although information on men is also provided where relevant and where data are available, a systematic gender comparison is beyond the scope of this study.

As data disaggregation by the type of drug and gender is very limited, the text often refers to drugs in general. Where specific information on cocaine is available, it is stated explicitly in the text.

## 2. Roles of women within cocaine trafficking networks

Women can occupy a wide range of positions within drug trafficking networks, with varying degrees of agency. Recent studies recognize the complexity of women's roles in organized crime that cannot be reduced to simple categories of victims and victimizers.<sup>8 9</sup> These roles often overlap, ranging from subordinate actors to active protagonists with multiple nuances in between. Evidence from the Latin American context suggests that most women incarcerated for drug-related crimes occupy lower-ranking positions in criminal networks<sup>10 11 12</sup> and tend to perform more risky tasks than men, which expose them to a greater likelihood of being arrested.<sup>13</sup> For example, a study of women incarcerated on drug-trafficking charges in Panama found that only 3 per cent of them occupied leadership roles in international or domestic criminal groups.<sup>14</sup> Still, as discussed in subsequent sections, some women reach the higher echelons of the criminal hierarchy, sometimes facilitated by their relationship with a male leader of the group.

Expert interviews conducted for this study show that women typically assume a single role in the cocaine supply chain, such as drug smuggling into prison, national or international drug trafficking or retail drug dealing. However, there have been documented cases of female street dealers engaging in cross-border

<sup>8</sup> Arlene Tickner and others, *Women and Organized Crime in Latin America: Beyond Victims or Victimized* (Colombian Observatory of Organized Crime, 2020).

<sup>9</sup> Julia Buxton and others (eds), *The Impact of Global Drug Policy on Women: Shifting the Needle* (Emerald Publishing Limited, 2020).

<sup>10</sup> Luisina Castelli and others, *Desarmando tramas: Dos estudios sobre consumo de drogas y delito en población privada de libertad* (Uruguay, Secretaría Nacional de Drogas, 2019), p. 107.

<sup>11</sup> Ana Safranoff and Antonella Tiravassi, *Incarcerated Women in Latin America, Characteristics and Risk Factors Associated with Criminal Behavior*, IDB Technical Note 1409, April 2018.

<sup>12</sup> Coletta Youngers, Teresa Garcia Castro, and Maria (Kiki) Manzur, *Women behind bars for drug offenses in Latin America: What the numbers make clear* (WOLA, 2020).

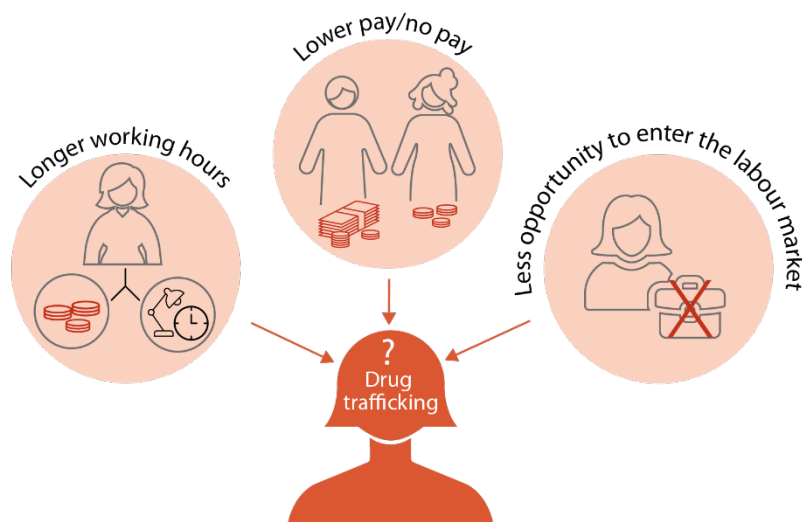
<sup>13</sup> Corina Giacomello, "Women, drug offenses and penitentiary systems in Latin America", International Drug Policy Consortium, October 2013.

<sup>14</sup> The data do not allow to draw definitive conclusions about this number. The proportion of 3 per cent is likely a result of a lower apprehension rate at the higher echelons of criminal hierarchy. See Nelly Cumbreira Díaz and Eugenia Rodríguez Blanco, *Personas Privadas de Libertad por Delitos de Drogas en Panamá. Enfoque socio-jurídico del diferencial por género en la administración de la Justicia Penal* (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2017), p. 110.

smuggling of cocaine.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, coca farmers, independently of gender, may be involved in multiple activities, such as taking care of coca plants, preparing the coca paste, transporting it for sale to cocaine laboratories or, to a lesser degree, processing coca paste into cocaine.<sup>16 17</sup>

Women become involved in drug-related activities through various channels and for various reasons. Existing research points out that the main drivers for women to become involved in a criminal activity, like for many men, stem from poor socio-economic conditions.<sup>18</sup> For example, in a nationwide survey of over 2,000 female prisoners in Colombia conducted in 2018, almost 59 per cent of participants said they had committed a drug-related crime to cover their household needs.<sup>19</sup> Most female prisoners in Latin America come from an economically disadvantaged background, have children and are often the main caregiver of their family.<sup>20</sup> It should be borne in mind that, in the Latin American and the Caribbean region, women are less likely than men to participate in the labour market (53 per cent women compared to 77 per cent of men);<sup>21</sup> more likely to work without pay or for lower pay; and on average work more hours than men.<sup>22</sup>

### FOR MOST WOMEN, THE DECISION TO BECOME INVOLVED IN DRUG-RELATED ACTIVITIES IS SHAPED BY LIMITED CHOICES, EVEN THOUGH IT IS OFTEN VOLUNTARY



<sup>15</sup> Jennifer Fleetwood, *Drug Mules: Women in the International Cocaine Trade* (Palgrave McMillan, 2014).

<sup>16</sup> Irina Cuesta, Genica Mazzoldi Diaz, and Aura Maria Duran, *Mujeres y la economía cocalera en el Putumayo: roles, prácticas y riesgos* (Fundación Ideas para la Paz, 2017).

<sup>17</sup> Sistema Integrado de Monitoreo de Cultivos Ilícitos - UNODC, *Informe de monitoreo de territorios afectados por cultivos ilícitos 2017* (SIMCI-UNODC, 2018).

<sup>18</sup> Claudia Palma, *Me puse a jugar de narco. Mujeres, tráfico de drogas y cárcel en Costa Rica* (Editorial de la Universidad de Costa Rica, 2018).

<sup>19</sup> UNODC, *Caracterización de condiciones socioeconómicas de mujeres relacionadas con problemas de drogas: las mujeres privadas de la libertad por delitos de drogas* (UNODC and Ministerio de Justicia y del Derecho, 2019), p. 75.

<sup>20</sup> Arlene Tickner and others, *Women and Organized Crime in Latin America: Beyond Victims or Victimizers* (Colombian Observatory of Organized Crime, 2020), p. 10.

<sup>21</sup> World Bank, Gender Data Portal, 2019, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/data/datatopics/gender/country/Latin%20America%20&%20Caribbean>.

<sup>22</sup> United Nations, *The World's Women 2020: Trends and Statistics* (Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2020), <https://worlds-women-2020-data-undesa.hub.arcgis.com/>.

<sup>23</sup> Rosangela Bando, "Evidence-based gender equality policy and pay in Latin America and the Caribbean: progress and challenges", *Latin American Economic Review*, vol. 28, No. 10 (2019).

Other factors include family ties or sentimental relationships with male members of a criminal group.<sup>24 25</sup> Several of the experts interviewed noted that women often accept the “job” without fully understanding the consequences of being caught, such as the severity of the prison sentence. The above-mentioned survey in Colombian prisons also suggested that the majority of women sentenced for drug-related crimes would not have committed the crime had they understood the extent of the sanctions incurred in case of arrest and conviction.<sup>26</sup>

Still, the driving factors for women’s involvement and the conditions of their work vary across the contexts in which they operate. Each stage of the cocaine supply chain presents numerous opportunities for involvement, with each role characterized by specific levels of decision-making power, varying levels of income obtained, and different working conditions. Overall, when women’s roles in cocaine trafficking are analysed in detail, important differences between their profiles emerge.

While most of the roles in the cocaine supply chain are not exclusive to women, they constitute a significant share of people involved. Like men, women can perform work in coca fields and cocaine production sites. In international trafficking of cocaine they often act as “drug mules” and, in a lesser degree, carry out managerial activities. At the national level, women smuggle cocaine into prisons (an almost exclusively female role), sell the drug to consumers at the retail level or act in supporting roles for drug smuggling across the country.

## 2.1 Cultivation and production

Coca leaf, which has a long history of traditional use among the Andean indigenous populations,<sup>27</sup> is nowadays cultivated mainly in certain regions of Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia (Plurinational State of).<sup>28</sup> As of 2020, Colombia accounted for 61 per cent of the estimated global area under coca bush cultivation, followed by Peru (26 per cent) and the Plurinational State of Bolivia (13 per cent).<sup>29 30 31</sup> Unlike in Colombia, cultivation of coca bush within designated areas and production of coca leaf for domestic consumption are permitted in Peru and Bolivia (Plurinational State of), but an illegal coca leaf market for processing into cocaine also exists, fed in varying proportions by unauthorized cultivation or diversion.<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> Mariana Barcinski, *Women in drug trafficking: the identity construction of Brazilian reformed criminals* (VDM Verlag, 2008).

<sup>25</sup> Chontit Chuenurah and Samantha Jeffries, “An Analysis of Thai Women’s Roles and Involvement in Cross-Border International Drug Trafficking”, *Social Science Asia*, vol. 5, No. 2 (2019): pp. 45-55.

<sup>26</sup> UNODC, *Caracterización de condiciones socioeconómicas de mujeres relacionadas con problemas de drogas: las mujeres privadas de la libertad por delitos de drogas* (UNODC and Ministerio de Justicia y del Derecho, 2019), p. 88.

<sup>27</sup> Anthony Henman, *Mama Coca* (Hisbol, 1992).

<sup>28</sup> UNODC, *Coca bush cultivation surveys in Bolivia (Plurinational State of), Colombia and Peru, 2020*.

<sup>29</sup> UNODC and Colombia, *Colombia: Monitoreo de territorios afectados por cultivos ilícitos 2020* (Bogotá, Sistema Integrado de Monitoreo de Cultivos Ilícitos, 2021).

<sup>30</sup> UNODC and Plurinational State of Bolivia, *Estado Plurinacional de Bolivia: Monitoreo de Cultivos de Coca 2020* (La Paz, 2021).

<sup>31</sup> DEVIDA, “Producción estimada de hoja de coca en el Perú, 2020”, Report, No. 3 (Lima, Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo y Vida sin Drogas, October 2021), p. 2.

<sup>32</sup> It is estimated that about 98 per cent of coca leaf produced in Peru nationally is diverted to illicit markets. See DEVIDA, *Análisis de compra-venta de hoja de coca en el Perú*, Cuadernos de Política Nacional Contra las Drogas No. 01 (Lima, Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo y Vida sin Drogas, 2021), p. 24. In Bolivia, coca was cultivated on 25,500 ha in 2019, compared with a maximum of 22,000 ha permitted under the Law 906. See UNODC and Plurinational State of Bolivia, *Estado Plurinacional de Bolivia: Monitoreo de Cultivos de Coca 2019*.

Most coca-producing regions of Colombia and Peru are rural areas,<sup>33</sup> typically characterized by a combination of factors hindering development and sustainable livelihoods, including low literacy rates compared to the national average, lack of secure land tenure, absence of adequate infrastructure, and poor access to education and health services.<sup>34</sup> <sup>35</sup> In Bolivia (Plurinational State of), coca bush is cultivated in areas neighbouring the cities of La Paz and Cochabamba.<sup>36</sup>

In all three countries, coca bush is often cultivated by individual farmers as part of the subsistence agriculture to provide a relatively stable cash income for their household needs.<sup>37</sup> <sup>38</sup> <sup>39</sup> The average size of a plot under illicit coca cultivation is typically under 2.0 hectares per family.<sup>40</sup> While some coca growers sell coca leaf itself, others process the leaf into coca paste on their farms<sup>41</sup> by extracting the alkaloid from the leaf.<sup>42</sup> Coca paste is then sold to actors specializing in refining it into cocaine base for further manufacturing of cocaine hydrochloride; the latter typically takes place in specialized “laboratories”, known as *crystalizaderos*.<sup>43</sup> Both women and men from coca-growing communities perform tasks that span the lifecycle of the coca leaf and its initial processing. Women are commonly found among growers, day labourers, and

<sup>33</sup> In 2020, coca bush cultivation was found in 20 of Colombia’s 32 departments, with 84 per cent of cultivation concentrated in five departments: Norte de Santander, Nariño, Putumayo, Cauca and Antioquia. See UNODC and Colombia, *Colombia: Monitoreo de territorios afectados por cultivos ilícitos 2020* (Bogotá, Sistema Integrado de Monitoreo de Cultivos Ilícitos, 2021), p. 25. Coca bush cultivation in Peru occurs mostly in the valley of the rivers Apurímac, Ene and Mantaro (VRAEM), that accounts for about 70 per cent of national coca leaf production. See DEVIDA, “Monitoreo de la superficie cultivada con arbusto de hoja de coca en producción: Perú–2019”, Report, No. 2 (Lima, Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo y Vida sin Drogas, November 2020), p. 5.

<sup>34</sup> Klaas Grimmelmann and others, “The land-drugs nexus: how illicit drug crop cultivation is related to access to land”, *Bulletin on Narcotics*, vol. 61, No. 1 (2017), pp. 75-104.

<sup>35</sup> Miguel Serrano López, *Cultivos ilícitos de coca y bienestar en las regiones productoras: Un análisis desde el enfoque de capacidades* (Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 2014).

<sup>36</sup> In Bolivia, as of 2020, 64 per cent of coca bush was cultivated in areas neighbouring the capital city of La Paz, while the Trópico de Cochabamba region accounts for 36 per cent of cultivation area. See UNODC and Plurinational State of Bolivia, *Estado Plurinacional de Bolivia: Monitoreo de Cultivos de Coca 2020* (UNODC-SIMCI, 2021). <sup>37</sup> UNODC and Fundación Ideas para la Paz ¿Quiénes son las familias que viven en las zonas con cultivos de coca? (UNODC; FIP, 2018).

<sup>37</sup> UNODC and Fundación Ideas para la Paz ¿Quiénes son las familias que viven en las zonas con cultivos de coca? (UNODC; FIP, 2018).

<sup>38</sup> Thomas Grisaffi, “Why Is the Drug Trade Not Violent? Cocaine Production and the Embedded Economy in the Chapare, Bolivia”, *Development and Change* (2021).

<sup>39</sup> Álvaro Pastor, “Los cultivos de coca en el Perú”, Working Paper, Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, 2020.

<sup>40</sup> In Colombia, the latest national level data estimates place an average size of a coca plot at 1.07 ha. See UNODC-SIMCI, *Monitoreo de territorios afectados por cultivos ilícitos 2018*, p. 43. In many parts of Colombia, plots larger than 3 ha also exist. See SIMCI-UNODC, *Informe de monitoreo de territorios afectados por cultivos ilícitos 2017* (SIMCI-UNODC, 2018), p. 72. There are no exact estimates for Peru, but some evidence suggests that most of coca plots are also under 2 ha. See Alvaro Pastor, “Los cultivos de coca en el Perú”, Working Paper, Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, 2020. In Bolivia, the maximum permitted size can range up to 0.25 ha depending on the region. See UNODC and Plurinational State of Bolivia, *Estado Plurinacional de Bolivia: Monitoreo de Cultivos de Coca 2020*, p. 47.

<sup>41</sup> According to evidence from Bolivia, some landowners process coca leaf on their own farms, while others prefer to rent land from someone else. See Thomas Grisaffi, “The white factory: coca, cocaine and informal governance in the Chapare, Bolivia”, in D. Arias and T. Grisaffi (eds.) *Cocaine: From Coca Fields to the Streets* (Duke University Press, 2021), p. 54.

<sup>42</sup> According to studies of illicit crop monitoring in Colombia, it is estimated that at the national level, as of 2020, 43 per cent of coca growers sell coca leaf and 57 per cent produce coca paste. Since 2019, the refinement of coca paste into cocaine base has mostly moved away from coca farms into specialized sites. See UNODC and Colombia, *Colombia: Monitoreo de territorios afectados por cultivos ilícitos 2020* (Bogotá, Sistema Integrado de Monitoreo de Cultivos Ilícitos, 2021), p. 54.

<sup>43</sup> UNODC and Government of Colombia, *Monitoreo de Territorios afectados por cultivos ilícitos 2019* (UNODC-SIMCI, 2020).

chemists.<sup>44</sup> Some of them combine various activities or transition from one role to another throughout their life.<sup>45</sup>

### Growers<sup>46</sup>

Economic reasons appear to be the leading motivation behind farmers' involvement in coca cultivation in all three coca-producing countries.<sup>47</sup> For example, according to a survey of Colombian coca-growing families who participate in the crop substitution program (Programa Nacional Integral de Sustitución de Cultivos Ilícitos (PNIS)), more than half of the households live in poverty and a third live in extreme poverty.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, women account for almost half of the population in these regions (compared to 36 per cent in other rural areas of the country),<sup>49</sup> with one third of them being head of the household.<sup>50</sup> The survey also found that nine in ten families suffer from food insecurity, with female-led households more likely to experience severe food insecurity than male-led households.<sup>51</sup> In addition, the average income for female-led households is 24 per cent less than for male-led households; but this gap may reach 45-49 per cent in some departments.<sup>52</sup> Thus, women in coca-growing regions experience higher economic vulnerabilities than men, which may prompt them to become involved in coca cultivation and related activities.

Women perform a wide range of activities in the coca cultivation economy. In addition to taking care of other crops and of the household, female coca growers, like men, may perform administrative tasks related to coca bush cultivation, including overseeing the harvest or coca pickers, paying them wages, and feeding the workers (the last being an exclusively female task).<sup>53</sup>

In the Bolivian region of Chapare, women have historically dominated informal commerce, including trade in coca leaf.<sup>54</sup> According to anthropological studies of the region, coca merchants – who are predominantly female and who are members of a local coca growing union<sup>55</sup> – collect sacks of coca leaf from coca growers at nearby informal markets.<sup>56</sup> From there, some of the merchandise is transported to the legal market, while

<sup>44</sup> Luz Piedad Caicedo Delgado and Catalina Gil Pinzón, *Mujeres y política de drogas* (Corporación Humanas - Centro Regional de Derechos Humanos y Justicia de Género, 2019), p. 7.

<sup>45</sup> Ana Jimena Bautista Revelo and others, *Voces desde el cocal: mujeres que construyen territorio* (Dejusticia, 2018), p. 77.

<sup>46</sup> The terms “growers” and “farmers” are used interchangeably throughout this text.

<sup>47</sup> UNODC and Fundación Ideas para la Paz ¿Quiénes son las familias que viven en las zonas con cultivos de coca? (UNODC; FIP, 2018), p. 14.

<sup>48</sup> The survey was conducted in across 12 departments in 2018. See UNODC and Fundación Ideas para la Paz ¿Quiénes son las familias que viven en las zonas con cultivos de coca? (UNODC; FIP, 2018), pp. 10-11.

<sup>49</sup> In this case, the data refer to female agricultural producers (who live on a productive plot of land) and include women 10 years old and older, according to the National Agricultural Census (3er Censo Nacional Agropecuario DANE-CAN 2014).

<sup>50</sup> UNODC and Fundación Ideas para la Paz ¿Quiénes son las familias que viven en las zonas con cultivos de coca? (UNODC; FIP, 2018), p. 9.

<sup>51</sup> UNODC and Colombia, Programa Nacional Integral de Sustitución de Cultivos Ilícitos – PNIS, Informe No. 23, 2020, p. 3.

<sup>52</sup> Dirección de Sustitución de Cultivos Ilícitos, *Protocolo para la incorporación del enfoque de género en el diagnóstico, elaboración, implementación y seguimiento del PNIS* (Consejería Presidencial para la Estabilización y la Consolidación, 2020), p. 9.

<sup>53</sup> Irina Cuesta, Genica Mazzoldi Diaz, and Aura Maria Duran, *Mujeres y la economía cocalera en el Putumayo: roles, prácticas y riesgos* (Fundación Ideas para la Paz, 2017).

<sup>54</sup> Oliver Alvarado, “Transportando coca y poder: Las chhakas en la construcción territorial del Trópico de Cochabamba (Bolivia)”, *Temas Sociales*, vol. 46 (2020), pp. 10– 33.

<sup>55</sup> Only members of the union are allowed to work as coca merchants. See “Why Is the Drug Trade Not Violent? Cocaine Production and the Embedded Economy in the Chapare, Bolivia”, *Development and Change*, (2021), ISSN 1467-7660.

<sup>56</sup> Oliver Alvarado, “Transportando coca y poder: Las chhakas en la construcción territorial del Trópico de Cochabamba (Bolivia)”, *Temas Sociales*, vol. 46 (2020), pp. 10– 33.



another part is sold for manufacturing of coca paste.<sup>57</sup> These female merchants represent an important link between farmers and the market (both legal and illegal), as bringing coca leaf to a nearby collection point reduces transportation costs for individual coca growers.<sup>58</sup> In addition, female coca merchants may issue credit to the farmers in need, who can pay back the loan with coca leaf collected during the following harvest.<sup>59</sup> These women occupy a mid-level position in the production ladder and the community, as they possess land and relatively high financial means.<sup>60</sup> <sup>61</sup> In some cases, they may even provide part of the capital to build a coca paste production site, typically located away from coca farms.<sup>62</sup>

In Colombia, women may also be directly involved in the processing of coca leaf into coca paste, hire “chemists” to do so, and be in charge of selling the coca paste.<sup>63</sup> Some evidence from female coca growers in Putumayo, Colombia, suggests that, in 2017, more female coca growers were compelled to become involved in production of coca paste to supplement their income from selling coca leaf, due to decreasing prices of coca leaf during that year.<sup>64</sup>

In southern Colombia, some women from rural areas who typically sell coca paste within the country may become involved in international trafficking by crossing the border with Ecuador to sell the product for further processing there.<sup>65</sup> This development might be linked to decreases in price of coca paste in Colombia, which might have pushed many women involved in coca growing to seek additional ways to provide a basic income for their households.<sup>66</sup>

The daily lives of female coca growers, akin to those of women in rural areas in general, present challenges stemming from gender-based division of labour. Civil society reports show that female coca growers of Colombia, Peru and Bolivia (Plurinational State of) typically have a disproportionate load of domestic labour compared to men.<sup>67</sup> In some cases, women talk about a “triple workday” that consists of taking care

<sup>57</sup> It is estimated that about 94 per cent of coca leaf produced in Chapare is diverted to illicit markets. See UNODC, “El 94 per cent de la coca de Chapare no pasa por el mercado legal” (La Paz, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2018).

<sup>58</sup> Thomas Grisaffi, “Why Is the Drug Trade Not Violent? Cocaine Production and the Embedded Economy in the Chapare, Bolivia”, *Development and Change*, (2021), ISSN 1467-7660.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> UNODC interview with an expert on Bolivia (Plurinational State of).

<sup>61</sup> Thomas Grisaffi, “Why Is the Drug Trade Not Violent? Cocaine Production and the Embedded Economy in the Chapare, Bolivia”, *Development and Change*, (2021), ISSN 1467-7660.

<sup>62</sup> UNODC interview with an expert on Bolivia (Plurinational State of).

<sup>63</sup> Irina Cuesta, Genica Mazzoldi Diaz, and Aura Maria Duran, *Mujeres y la economía cocalera en el Putumayo: roles, prácticas y riesgos* (Fundación Ideas para la Paz, 2017).

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 28-29. Similar dynamics may have been observed among male coca growers; in 2017, prices of coca leaf in Colombia registered a decrease of 28 per cent, which may have led to an increase in its transformation into coca paste at the farms. See Sistema Integrado de Monitoreo de Cultivos Ilícitos - UNODC, *Informe de monitoreo de territorios afectados por cultivos ilícitos 2017* (SIMCI-UNODC, 2018), pp. 85, 95.

<sup>65</sup> Irina Cuesta, Genica Mazzoldi Diaz, and Aura Maria Duran, *Mujeres y la economía cocalera en el Putumayo: roles, prácticas y riesgos* (Fundación Ideas para la Paz, 2017), p. 34.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid. Coca crop monitoring surveys in Colombia reported a downward trend in prices for coca paste from 2015 to 2018. For example, in 2017, an average price of coca paste in Colombia fell almost 14 per cent compared to the previous year. See SIMCI-UNODC, *Informe de monitoreo de territorios afectados por cultivos ilícitos 2017* (SIMCI-UNODC, 2018), p. 95; and UNODC-SIMCI, *Monitoreo de territorios afectados por cultivos ilícitos 2018* (UNODC-SIMCI, 2019), p. 76. A similar dynamic was observed in March-June 2020, when COVID-19-related measures led to the shortage of buyers for coca leaf and intermediate products of the cocaine supply chain in some parts of Colombia. As a result, prices for coca paste fell from 30 to 50 per cent in some regions, driving some coca growers to leave their farms in order to sell coca leaf or coca paste in nearby municipalities. See UNODC and Colombia, *Colombia: Monitoreo de territorios afectados por cultivos ilícitos 2020* (Bogotá, Sistema Integrado de Monitoreo de Cultivos Ilícitos, 2021), pp. 16-17.

<sup>67</sup> Luz Piedad Caicedo Delgado and Catalina Gil Pinzón, *Mujeres y política de drogas* (Corporación Humanas - Centro Regional de Derechos Humanos y Justicia de Género, 2019), p. 5.



of children and the household; cultivating coca or taking care of workers in coca fields; and sometimes participating in community activities.<sup>68</sup> However, unlike other rural women whose heavy workload is not remunerated, growers of illicit crops receive payment for their work.<sup>69</sup>

Coca farming has had a mixed impact on women involved. As studies of female coca growers in the Colombian regions of Putumayo and Nariño show, they primarily use income from coca leaf to meet basic household needs, such as sending children to school, buying clothes, repairing the house, paying rent, accessing healthcare and buying food.<sup>70 71 72</sup> Notably, women coca growers report investing up to 33 per cent of their income in children's schooling, compared to 23 per cent of income invested by men.<sup>73</sup> Similarly, coca bush cultivation has provided some Peruvian growers, including women, with a stable income and facilitated their access to food, education and healthcare.<sup>74</sup> In Bolivia (Plurinational State of), farmers participating in the cooperative cultivation programme under which licit trade in coca leaf is monitored and managed by coca growers' unions (which have both male and female membership) have been able to achieve stability of income and livelihoods while experimenting with substitution crops and thus diversifying their income sources.<sup>75</sup> Despite these economic benefits, illicit coca cultivation does not typically generate sufficient income for small-scale farmers, independently of gender. In Colombia, for example, coca cultivating communities largely lag behind other rural areas in economic terms.<sup>76</sup> In addition, in the long run, coca-based economy erodes the rule of law, generates violence and insecurity, undermines socio-economic development,<sup>77</sup> and may foment the use of drugs and alcohol among residents.<sup>78</sup>

Small-scale studies by civil society organizations suggest that the participation of women in growing coca can contribute to a shift in power balance between male and female coca growers. Men and women seem to receive equal payment for the product sold.<sup>79</sup> A survey conducted in 2019 among 412 coca growers in the Colombian departments of Putumayo and Nariño found that female coca growers had an income

---

<sup>68</sup> Ana Jimena Bautista Revelo and others, *Voces desde el cocal: mujeres que construyen territorio* (Dejusticia, 2018), p. 120.

<sup>69</sup> Luz Piedad Caicedo Delgado and Catalina Gil Pinzón, *Mujeres y política de drogas* (Corporación Humanas - Centro Regional de Derechos Humanos y Justicia de Género, 2019), p. 5.

<sup>70</sup> Irina Cuesta, Genica Mazzoldi Diaz, and Aura Maria Duran, *Mujeres y la economía cocalera en el Putumayo: roles, prácticas y riesgos* (Fundación Ideas para la Paz, 2017).

<sup>71</sup> Ana Jimena Bautista Revelo and others, *Voces desde el cocal: mujeres que construyen territorio* (Dejusticia, 2018).

<sup>72</sup> Margarita Marín Jaramillo, Diana Machuca Pérez, and Camilo Acero Vargas, *El PNIS en terreno: Voces del campesinado cocalero* (Observatorio de Restitución y Regulación de Derechos de Propiedad Agraria, 2020), p. 17.

<sup>73</sup> María Mónica Parada Hernández and Margarita Marín Jaramillo, "Mujeres y coca: una relación agrícolal", *Análisis Político*, vol. 97 (2019), p. 59.

<sup>74</sup> Alvaro Pastor, "Los cultivos de coca en el Perú", Working Paper, Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, 2020.

<sup>75</sup> T. Grisaffi, L. Farthing and K. Ledebur, "Integrated Development with Coca in the Plurinational State of Bolivia: Shifting the Focus from Eradication to Poverty Alleviation", *UNODC Bulletin on Narcotics*, vol. 51, No. 17 (2017), pp. 131–157.

<sup>76</sup> In Colombia, an average monthly income from 1 hectare of coca bush equals about one half of the minimum salary. See UNODC and Fundación Ideas para la Paz *¿Quiénes son las familias que viven en las zonas con cultivos de coca?* (UNODC; FIP, 2018), pp. 10–11.

<sup>77</sup> SIMCI-UNODC, Informe de monitoreo de territorios afectados por cultivos ilícitos 2017 (SIMCI-UNODC, 2018), pp. 121–122.

<sup>78</sup> For example, researchers point out at a disproportionate increase in bars in municipalities whose economies are based on income from coca. See Christoph Heuser, "The Effect of Illicit Economies in the Margins of the State – The VRAEM", *Journal of Illicit Economies and Development*, vol. 1, No. 1 (2019), pp. 23–36; Irina Cuesta, Genica Mazzoldi Diaz, and Aura Maria Duran, *Mujeres y la economía cocalera en el Putumayo: roles, prácticas y riesgos* (Fundación Ideas para la Paz, 2017), p. 43.

<sup>79</sup> Luz Piedad Caicedo Delgado and Catalina Gil Pinzón, *Mujeres y política de drogas* (Corporación Humanas - Centro Regional de Derechos Humanos y Justicia de Género, 2019), p. 7.

similar to male coca growers.<sup>80</sup> In the same survey, women cite greater decision-making power and independence in managing their time as a result of obtaining income from coca cultivation.<sup>81</sup>

There are also indications that a relatively steady income has allowed some female coca growers to achieve financial independence and play a more active role in community life. As reported by Colombian women from Putumayo, women-led community organizations use part of the proceeds from coca farming to invest in rural infrastructure by building schools, fixing roads or repairing the water supply.<sup>82 83</sup> However, gender divisions within traditionally patriarchal rural households may persist, with male partners tending to control family finances and manage income from coca sales.<sup>84</sup> According to civil society organizations, men in Colombia often retain land titles despite the existence of a legal framework for shared property rights between male and female members of the household.<sup>85</sup> In addition, Colombian women who live with a husband may not benefit directly from government assistance through crop substitution programs because payments are usually transferred to the male head of the household.<sup>86 87</sup>

Similarly, Bolivian female coca growers have been traditionally vocal participants in community and human rights organizations striving to close the gender gap in community decision-making.<sup>88 89</sup> The cooperative cultivation programme aiming at regulating coca cultivation through rationing and control by local coca growing unions in rural areas of Bolivia (Plurinational State of) since 2004, for example, appears to have helped reduce the gender gap in access to land tenure.<sup>90</sup> As of 2018, 35 per cent of titles for *cato* (land plot designated for coca crops) belonged to women, providing them with a stable income source and access to

---

<sup>80</sup> Margarita Marín Jaramillo, Diana Machuca Pérez, and Camilo Acero Vargas, *El PNIS en terreno: Voces del campesinado cocalero* (Observatorio de Restitución y Regulación de Derechos de Propiedad Agraria, 2020), p. 24.

<sup>81</sup> Francisco Gutiérrez Sanín, “Tensiones y dilemas de la producción cocalera”, *Análisis Político*, No. 97 (2019), pp. 83-84.

<sup>82</sup> Irina Cuesta, Genica Mazzoldi Diaz, and Aura Maria Duran, *Mujeres y la economía cocalera en el Putumayo: roles, prácticas y riesgos* (Fundación Ideas para la Paz, 2017).

<sup>83</sup> Ana Jimena Bautista Revelo and others, *Voces desde el cocal: mujeres que construyen territorio* (Dejusticia, 2018).

<sup>84</sup> Irina Cuesta, Genica Mazzoldi Diaz, and Aura Maria Duran, *Mujeres y la economía cocalera en el Putumayo: roles, prácticas y riesgos* (Fundación Ideas para la Paz, 2017), p. 30.

<sup>85</sup> Luz Piedad Caicedo Delgado and Catalina Gil Pinzón, *Mujeres y política de drogas* (Corporación Humanas - Centro Regional de Derechos Humanos y Justicia de Género, 2019), p. 6.

<sup>86</sup> Ana Jimena Bautista Revelo and others, *Voces desde el cocal: mujeres que construyen territorio* (Dejusticia, 2018).

<sup>87</sup> Instancia Especial de Mujeres para el Enfoque de Género en la Paz, *Enfoque de género y paz territorial “Balance a tres años de la firma del Acuerdo de Paz”* (2019), p. 32.

<sup>88</sup> Ara Goudsmit Lambertín and Sara Aliaga Ticona, “Mujeres Cultivadoras de Coca: Historias de Lucha y Resiliencias”, University of Reading, 17 February 2021, <https://research.reading.ac.uk/coca-cocaine-bolivia-peru/mujeres-cultivadoras-de-coca-historias-de-lucha-y-resiliencias/>.

<sup>89</sup> Luis Felipe Cruz Olivera and others, *Movilización de mujeres cultivadoras de coca y amapola para el cambio social* (WOLA; IDPC; Dejusticia, 2020).

<sup>90</sup> Data on land tenure by gender in Bolivia are very scarce. According to limited information by Instituto Nacional de Reforma Agraria (INRA), during 1997-2007, only 17 per cent of land titles were issued to women, while men received 45 per cent. See Viceministerio de Género y Asuntos Generacionales, *Plan Nacional para la igualdad de Oportunidades “Mujeres construyendo la Nueva Bolivia para Vivir Bien”* (Ministerio de Justicia, 2008), p. 58. In 2003, women in Cochabamba department, where most coca leaf is cultivated, held three times less of land titles than men. See INRA, *Derecho de las mujeres a la tenencia legal de la tierra* (La Paz, 2003), p. 41. In 2016, female share of land titles in Cochabamba increased to 48 per cent. See UNDP, *Development Dimensions of Drug Policy: Innovative Approaches* (United Nations Development Program, 2019), pp. 8-9.

credit.<sup>91</sup> However, despite progress in access to land and leadership roles within coca growing unions, in some cases, inequalities in decision-making power remain.<sup>92</sup>

Major risks for coca cultivating communities in Colombia and Peru stem from the presence of non-state armed groups who seek territorial control over illicit economies.<sup>93</sup> In Colombia, clashes among illegal armed actors, and between them and state security forces, create complex scenarios that disproportionately affect coca growing communities by generating violence and causing internal displacement.<sup>94 95</sup> Work on coca fields exposes residents to interaction with illegal armed actors who control drug trafficking corridors, which results in some families migrating to escape violence or threats.<sup>96</sup> For example, 54 per cent of the families participating in the national crop substitution program (PNIS) from 2017 to 2020 had moved from another department.<sup>97</sup> As reported by civil society organizations, some families may choose to migrate in order to protect their children from forced recruitment by criminal groups to undertake work in coca fields as their only source of income.<sup>98</sup>

Female residents of these communities face even bigger threats. Out of 54 early warnings related to armed conflict that were issued by the Colombia's Ombudsman office in 2020, 66 per cent alerted about the risks to female community leaders and activists across 25 departments.<sup>99</sup> In addition, the presence of illegal armed actors exacerbates the risk for women to suffer from sexual abuse.<sup>100 101</sup>

In Peru, remnants of the Shining Path insurgent group (known as the Militarized Communist Party of Peru (MPCP)), in alliance with drug traffickers, continue to control strategic drug-trafficking routes in the

<sup>91</sup> UNDP, Development Dimensions of Drug Policy: Innovative Approaches (United Nations Development Program, 2019), p. 9.

<sup>92</sup> Even in the Chapare region, where female-led coca growing organizations have been traditionally stronger than in Cochabamba, union leadership is still predominantly male, and women may not be viewed as equal when participating in union meetings. See Thomas Grisaffi, "Enacting democracy in a de facto state: coca, cocaine and campesino unions in the Chapare, Bolivia", *The Journal of Peasant Studies* (2021), p. 12.

<sup>93</sup> In the case of Colombia, coca-growing areas are heavily affected by the National Liberation Army (ELN), the Popular Liberation Army (EPL), and dissidents from the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC-EP) who refused to disarm after the 2016 peace accords with the government. In addition, multiple criminal gangs seek to consolidate their control over coca bush cultivation areas, cocaine production sites and drug trafficking routes.

<sup>94</sup> Defensoría del pueblo, Informe especial: economías ilegales, actores armados y nuevos escenarios de riesgo en el posacuerdo (Defensoría del Pueblo de Colombia, 2018), pp. 37, 69.

<sup>95</sup> UNODC and Colombia, *Colombia: Monitoreo de territorios afectados por cultivos ilícitos 2020* (Bogotá, Sistema Integrado de Monitoreo de Cultivos Ilícitos, 2021), pp. 43-44.

<sup>96</sup> According to the Colombia's register of victims, decades of the armed conflict between left-wing insurgencies (largely replaced by their dissidents since 2017), right-wing paramilitaries (replaced by criminal gangs known as *bacrim* since mid-2000s) and the Colombian security forces left over 8 million of internally displaced people since 1985 (Unidad para la atención y reparación integral a las víctimas, <https://www.unidadvictimas.gov.co/es/registro-unico-de-victimas-ruv/37394>).

<sup>97</sup> Dirección de Sustitución de Cultivos Ilícitos, *Protocolo para la incorporación del enfoque de género en el diagnóstico, elaboración, implementación y seguimiento del PNIS* (Consejería Presidencial para la Estabilización y la Consolidación, 2020), p. 8.

<sup>98</sup> Irina Cuesta, Genica Mazzoldi Diaz, and Aura Maria Duran, *Mujeres y la economía cocalera en el Putumayo: roles, prácticas y riesgos* (Fundación Ideas para la Paz, 2017), p. 25.

<sup>99</sup> Defensoría del Pueblo, *XXVIII Informe del Defensor del Pueblo al Congreso de la República. Parte II - Informe de gestión 2020*, July 2021, <https://www.defensoria.gov.co/public/pdf/XXVIII-INFORME-GESTION.pdf>, p. 61.

<sup>100</sup> Defensoría del pueblo, Informe especial: economías ilegales, actores armados y nuevos escenarios de riesgo en el posacuerdo (Defensoría del Pueblo de Colombia, 2018), pp. 37, 69.

<sup>101</sup> UNODC and Government of Colombia, "Análisis de la participación de las mujeres en la cadena de valor del narcotráfico", Convenio de Cooperación Internacional No. 0341, 2018, p. 25.

VRAEM.<sup>102</sup> They occasionally clash with security forces<sup>103</sup> or carry out brutal attacks on local communities, including women and children.<sup>104</sup> However, further research is needed to understand the specific consequences of their presence for women in Peruvian coca-growing communities.

To reduce the economic dependence of small-scale farming families on illicit crop cultivation in the long term, a framework based on alternative development was developed by the international community in the 1960s.<sup>105</sup> Some of the existing interventions highlight the need for a gender-differentiated approach in addressing the enablers of coca bush cultivation among farmers. For example, the Peace Agreement between the Colombian government and the FARC-EP signed in 2016 formally incorporated a gender perspective into the National Program of Crop Substitution (PNIS) aimed at solving the problem of illicit drugs in the country. In particular, the PNIS recognizes the disproportionate effects of the armed conflict on women in coca growing regions; and the need to address economic, social and cultural interests of women who live in coca cultivation areas.<sup>106</sup> The programme incorporates people who cultivate coca bush, those who pick coca leaves and those who live in territories affected by coca bush cultivation.<sup>107</sup> Some evidence from alternative development projects in Colombia (such as PNIS, Forest Warden, and Land Formalization projects) shows that female farmers (both coca-growers and non-coca-growers) in particular tend to improve their income from participation in these projects. The positive impact is often observed among female beneficiaries who were not generating income on their own before participating in the projects, due to a lack of economic resources or technical knowledge to invest in their own income-generating activities. The projects offered female beneficiaries both economic and technical assistance, so they could access to income-generating opportunities that otherwise would have been out of reach for them.<sup>108</sup>

### *Day laborers and coca pickers*

Farmers who cultivate coca bush usually hire itinerant workers (*raspachines*) to perform seasonal tasks on coca fields, such as preparing the soil for sowing, picking coca leaves during the harvest time, or processing them into coca paste. These workers do not own land and make their living by travelling between different coca farms.<sup>109</sup> In Peru, for example, itinerant workers travel in teams of 10-20 from rural communities neighbouring coca bush cultivation areas.<sup>110</sup> <sup>111</sup> Others can commute from the nearest urban centres and stay for 5-8 days in the farm, as recounted by an interviewed former female day labourer from Colombia

<sup>102</sup> Ministerio de Defensa, *Memoria institucional 2021*, Memoria de gestión, November 2020-July 2021, p. 27-28.

<sup>103</sup> Michael Machacuay and Iván Atilano, “Vraem: Feroz fue el ataque de senderistas en el que fallecieron tres militares”, *Peru 21*, 29 June 2019, <https://peru21.pe/peru/vraem-feroz-ataque-senderistas-fallecieron-tres-militares-487383-noticia/>.

<sup>104</sup> Dan Collyns, “Peru: Shining Path splinter group kills 14 in pre-election jungle massacre”, *The Guardian*, 24 May 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/may/24/peru-shining-path-jungle-massacre>.

<sup>105</sup> UNODC, *World Drug Report 2015* (United Nations publication, 2015), pp. 77-118.

<sup>106</sup> Dirección de Sustitución de Cultivos Ilícitos, *Protocolo para la incorporación del enfoque de género en el diagnóstico, elaboración, implementación y seguimiento del PNIS* (Consejería Presidencial para la Estabilización y la Consolidación, 2020), p. 5.

<sup>107</sup> UNODC and Colombia, Programa Nacional Integral de Sustitución de Cultivos Ilícitos – PNIS, Informe No. 23, 2020.

<sup>108</sup> UNODC, Under which conditions alternative development creates sustainable income and livelihoods for farmers? Lessons learnt from Afghanistan and Colombia (Forthcoming).

<sup>109</sup> UNODC and Ministerio de Justicia y Derecho, Características agropecuarias de los cultivos de coca en Colombia 2005-2010 (UNODC/SIMCI, 2012), p. 22.

<sup>110</sup> Thomas Grisaffi and others, “From criminals to citizens: The applicability of Bolivia’s community-based coca control policy to Peru”, *World Development*, vol. 146 (2021), p. 6.

<sup>111</sup> MINAGRI, Un enfoque sostenible en el VRAEM. Situación Actual y Perspectiva de la Reconversión Productiva Agrícola (Ministerio de Agricultura y Riego, 2016), p. 28.

who visited rural areas periodically to stomp on coca leaves.<sup>112</sup> According to the literature reviewed and the experts interviewed, itinerant workers appear to be predominantly young people with no children, because seasonal work requires frequent travel between different farms.<sup>113</sup> Nevertheless, some women adapt and bring their children to the coca fields.<sup>114</sup>

Women may account for about 20-30 per cent of day labourers.<sup>115</sup> Besides harvesting coca leaves, women perform domestic tasks, such as cooking for other workers or taking care of their own family. According to some accounts, women in coca bush cultivation areas are typically paid less than their male co-workers.<sup>116</sup> However, studies from the Colombian departments of Putumayo, Nariño and Caquetá point out that coca picking is paid based on the amount of leaves collected, which implies that women and men work on equal terms and the payment depends on each individual's efficiency.<sup>117 118</sup> Different accounts of a gender gap in payment may be explained by regional variations or by differences in productive capacity between male and female workers. Indeed, as some women explain, "men usually get paid more because their work requires more physical strength".<sup>119</sup> Still, female labour also implies significant physical effort and spending long hours in the field while collecting coca leaves carries a toll on women's health.<sup>120</sup>

### **Chemists and cooks**

According to a study in Putumayo, Colombia, besides smaller sites where coca paste is produced, women can also work as "chemists" in cocaine laboratories (known as *crystalizadores*) that convert cocaine base (obtained from coca paste) into cocaine hydrochloride.<sup>121</sup> Similar to men, women tend to become involved in overseeing the crystallization process of cocaine after having participated in related activities and having learnt the process.<sup>122</sup> Allegedly, women possess valuable skills for processing of the intermediate products (coca leaf, coca paste and cocaine base), as they are believed to be more precise than men in their calculations, both during the initial processing of coca leaf<sup>123</sup> and the manufacturing of cocaine hydrochloride.<sup>124</sup> In addition, some women seem to also earn their living by cooking food for workers at

<sup>112</sup> Stomping on coca leaves in a maceration pit is an old method that has been largely replaced by a mechanized technique (see Thomas Grisaffi, "Can you get rich from the Bolivian cocaine trade? Cocaine paste production in the Chapare", *Andean Information Network*, 10 March 2014, <https://ain-bolivia.org/2014/03/can-you-get-rich-from-the-bolivian-cocaine-trade-cocaine-paste-production-in-the-chapare/>).

<sup>113</sup> UNODC and Dirección Nacional de Estupefacientes, *Características agroalimentarias de los cultivos de coca en Colombia* (UNODC/SIMCI, 2006), pp. 69-70.

<sup>114</sup> María Mónica Parada Hernández and Margarita Marín Jaramillo, "Mujeres y coca: una relación agrídulce", *Análisis Político*, vol. 97 (2019), p. 63.

<sup>115</sup> Estefanía Ciro Rodríguez, *Levantados de la selva: Vidas y legitimidades en los territorios cocaleros del Caquetá* (2020), p. 133.

<sup>116</sup> Sarah David and others, *Raising voices: Empowering female farmers in drug crop cultivation areas* (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit – GIZ), p. 3.

<sup>117</sup> María Mónica Parada Hernández and Margarita Marín Jaramillo, "Mujeres y coca: una relación agrídulce", *Análisis Político*, vol. 97 (2019), pp. 62-63.

<sup>118</sup> Estefanía Ciro Rodríguez, *Levantados de la selva: Vidas y legitimidades en los territorios cocaleros del Caquetá* (2020), p. 132.

<sup>119</sup> Luz Piedad Caicedo Delgado and Catalina Gil Pinzón, *Mujeres y política de drogas* (Corporación Humanas - Centro Regional de Derechos Humanos y Justicia de Género, 2019), p. 6.

<sup>120</sup> Ministerio de Justicia y del Derecho and UNODC, "Análisis de la participación de las mujeres en la cadena de valor del narcotráfico", Convenio de cooperación internacional No. 0341, September 2018, p. 25.

<sup>121</sup> Irina Cuesta, Genica Mazzoldi Diaz, and Aura Maria Duran, *Mujeres y la economía cocalera en el Putumayo: roles, prácticas y riesgos* (Fundación Ideas para la Paz, 2017), p. 31.

<sup>122</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>123</sup> María Clara Calle, "Coca: un negocio familiar que marca a la mujer", in *Mujeres tras el telón de la guerra* (Verdad Abierta; UN Women, 2016), p. 10.

<sup>124</sup> Irina Cuesta, Genica Mazzoldi Diaz, and Aura Maria Duran, *Mujeres y la economía cocalera en el Putumayo: roles, prácticas y riesgos* (Fundación Ideas para la Paz, 2017), p. 31.



the cocaine crystallization sites, where they are paid more compared to smaller sites that produce coca paste.<sup>125</sup> *Cristalizaderos* are typically controlled by criminal networks and illegal armed groups.<sup>126</sup> Thus, information about work and (gender) dynamics inside these sites is very limited and requires more research.

## 2.2 International cocaine trafficking

### “Drug mules”

The term “drug mule”, or “drug courier”, typically refers to someone who illicitly transports drugs internationally<sup>127</sup> for someone else —usually by land or by air— by concealing the drugs in personal belongings, attaching them to the body or hiding them inside one’s body. Body concealment, or “body packing”, includes ingesting (swallowing) and vaginal or rectal insertion (sometimes referred to as “body pushing”) of small drug-filled packets.<sup>128</sup> On rare occasions, these modalities may be used simultaneously by one person.<sup>129</sup> Some assessments by medical professionals,<sup>130</sup> as well as an analysis of drug smuggling techniques in Europe and beyond,<sup>131</sup> suggest that cocaine might be the most common drug smuggled by body packers, followed by heroin.<sup>132 133</sup>

The role of a “drug mule” is one of the lowest positions in the drug supply chain; it posits multiple risks to those involved. Crossing international borders implies scrutiny by customs officials and thus results in a higher risk of apprehension than trafficking at national level. Independently of gender, drug swallows in particular are likely to be detected if they present physical signs of carrying foreign objects in their bodies —such as feeling unwell or being suspiciously nervous— thereby alerting and raising suspicion among the flight crew or at airport security.<sup>134</sup> They are also exposed to health risks derived from ingesting drug packages; they may develop complications, such as intoxication or intestinal obstruction, following a package rupture or leakage inside the body.<sup>135 136</sup> Such cases require immediate medical intervention and may result in death.<sup>137</sup>

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Defensoría del pueblo, 2018. Informe especial: economías ilegales, actores armados y nuevos escenarios de riesgo en el posacuerdo, p. 36.

<sup>127</sup> The terms “drug mule” and “drug courier” may also refer to people who transport drugs within the national boundaries of a country or smuggle them into prison. For analytical purposes, this study refers to the latter modalities as “micro-trafficking”, while the term “mule” is reserved for the international trafficking of drugs.

<sup>128</sup> S. J. Traub, R. S. Hoffman and L. S. Nelson, “Body packing—The internal concealment of illicit drugs”, *New England Journal of Medicine*, vol. 349, No. 26 (2003), pp. 2519–2526.

<sup>129</sup> Vishwajit Kishor Wankhade and B.G. Chikhalkar, “Body packing and intra-vaginal body pushing of cocaine: A case report”, *Legal Medicine*, vol. 31 (2018), pp. 10–13.

<sup>130</sup> Jane Prosser, “Internal concealment of xenobiotics”, in Lewis Nelson and others (eds.) *Goldfrank’s toxicologic emergencies*, 9th edition (McGraw Hill, 2006), p. 1103.

<sup>131</sup> European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, *A definition of ‘drug mules’ for use in a European context* (EMCDDA, 2012), p. 24.

<sup>132</sup> Body packers can swallow about 1 kg of tightly-wrapped drug capsules of 5–10 grams each (N. Bulstrode, F. Banks, and S. Shrotria, “The outcome of drug smuggling by ‘body-packers’—the British experience”, *Annals of the Royal College of Surgeons of England*, vol. 84 (2002), pp. 35–38).

<sup>133</sup> Annette Hübschle, “Of bogus hunters, queenpins and mules: the varied roles of women in transnational organized crime in Southern Africa”, *Trends in Organized Crime*, vol. 17 (2014), p. 43.

<sup>134</sup> S. J. Traub, R. S. Hoffman and L. S. Nelson, “Body packing—The internal concealment of illicit drugs”, *New England Journal of Medicine*, vol. 349, No. 26 (2003), pp. 2519–2526.

<sup>135</sup> Dabor Resiere, Hossein Mehdaoui, and Bruno Megarbane, “Cardiac arrest in the airport revealing cocaine body packing: A case report”, *Case Reports in Medicine*, 6 January 2019.

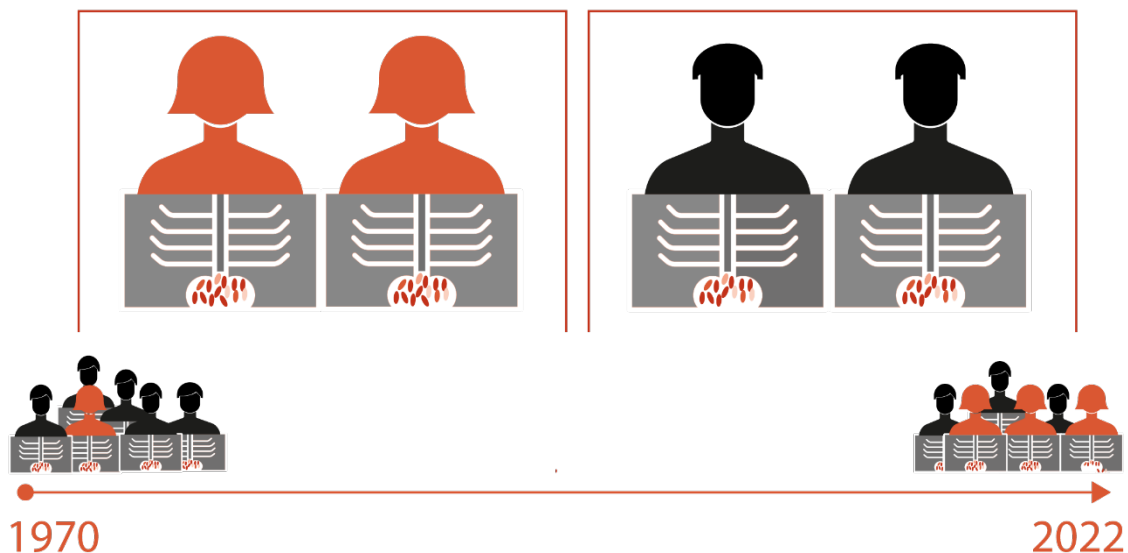
<sup>136</sup> A. Pinto et al. “Radiological and practical aspects of body packing”, *The British Journal of Radiology*, vol. 87, No. 1036 (2014).

<sup>137</sup> Glenn Wilcher, “Drug-related deaths with evidence of intracorporeal drug concealment at autopsy”, *The American Journal of Forensic Medicine and Pathology*, vol. 32, No. 4 (2011), pp. 314–318.



Demographic characteristics of “drug mules” may vary across time and geographical regions. Some reports from medical professionals in the United States suggest that early body packers (the first case was reported in 1973) were predominantly young men.<sup>138</sup> In Jamaica in the early 2000s, 80 per cent of the cocaine body packers detained while intending to board outbound international flights, were young males.<sup>139</sup> However, with the tightening of airport security and control measures worldwide, all demographic groups have become involved in body packing, including children and pregnant women.<sup>140 141</sup>

### WOMEN ARE JUST AS INVOLVED AS MEN IN SMUGGLING COCAINE INSIDE THEIR BODIES



The share of women and men among “drug mules” is not uniform across regions. In the case of Canada, for example, media reports, citing 2012-2015 police data, suggest that more men (287) than women (223) smuggled cocaine through the country’s international airports, although women carried larger quantities of cocaine overall.<sup>142</sup> Other studies reveal an equal participation of women in this type of trafficking; among 4,660 cocaine body packers detained at the Paris and Frankfurt/Main international airports from 1985 to 2002, half were female.<sup>143</sup> Similarly, in a smaller study of 20 cocaine body packers admitted to an Israeli hospital in 2010-2012, ten were women of South American origin.<sup>144</sup> Women also make up almost half of the “drug mules” detained each year at Brazilian international airports, according to police data for the period 2017-2020.<sup>145</sup> And according to data from Panama for 2016, women are overrepresented among people detained at Panama’s international airports for drug trafficking in small quantities, while men

<sup>138</sup> Stephen Traub and others, “Body Packing — The Internal Concealment of Illicit Drugs”, *The New England Journal of Medicine*, vol. 349, No. 26 (2003), p. 2519.

<sup>139</sup> S. Cawich and others, “The Changing Demographics of Cocaine Body Packers in Jamaica”, *The Internet Journal of Forensic Science*, vol. 3, No. 2 (2008).

<sup>140</sup> Simone Cappelletti et al. “Systematic review of the toxicological and radiological features of body packing”, *International Journal of Legal Medicine*, vol. 130, No. 3 (2016), pp. 693–709.

<sup>141</sup> M. I. Greenberg and M. Shrethra, “Management of the pregnant body packer”, *Journal of Toxicology: Clinical Toxicology*, vol. 38 (2000), pp. 176–177.

<sup>142</sup> Andrew Russell and Adam Miller, “Women surpass men as largest smugglers of cocaine at Canada’s airports: CBSA”, *Global News*, July 24, 2017.

<sup>143</sup> Andreas Schaper and others, “Surgical treatment in cocaine body packers and body pushers”, *International Journal of Colorectal Disease*, vol. 22 (2007), pp. 1531-1535.

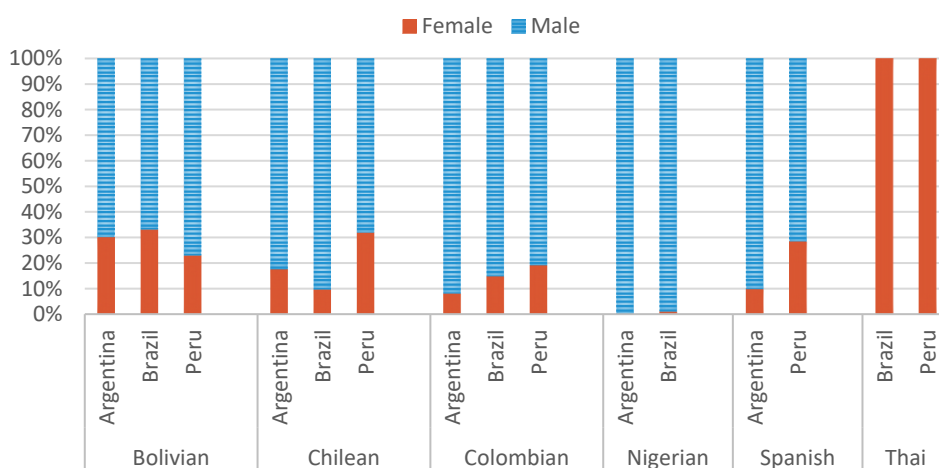
<sup>144</sup> Noa Markovits and others, “Body packers’ in Israel: A case series”, *The Israel Medical Association Journal*, vol. 15 (2013), pp. 639-645.

<sup>145</sup> Data from the Federal Police of Brazil.

represent the largest group among those imprisoned for international trafficking in large quantities by sea.<sup>146</sup> Yet, in other contexts, male “drug mules” may significantly outnumber female “drug mules”, such as in the case of opiates trafficking in the Islamic Republic of Iran.<sup>147</sup> These differences suggest that geography, law enforcement measures, and the type of drug may influence the relative share of men and women taking part in the cross-border drug trafficking across regions.

Whether more women than men smuggle cocaine globally is not clear. Data on incarceration only include individuals who have been apprehended by law enforcement, but the number of “drug mules” who have successfully crossed the border remains unknown. Although penitentiary systems rarely disaggregate data by gender, drug type and drug offence, the number of foreign nationals incarcerated in countries along cocaine routes can provide an insight into the relative numbers and nationalities of male and female cocaine “mules”. Such data, available for three countries in South America (Figure 3), shows a relative consistency in the share of women vis-à-vis men of each nationality across countries of imprisonment. On the one hand, these data would suggest that, in most cases, less women than men smuggle cocaine internationally. On the other hand, women might be detected to a lesser degree than men. However, given the consistency across different jurisdictions regarding any given nationality, it is likely that the numbers are not much affected by variations in apprehension rates and thus might reflect the share of potential “mules”. Moreover, the data suggest that in some cases, potential “mules” coming from some specific countries belong to one gender. For example, almost all Nigerian prisoners in Argentina and Brazil were men; and all incarcerated Thai nationals in Brazil and Peru were women.

**Fig. 3** Share of female and male foreigners in prisons in Argentina, Brazil and Peru, by nationality and country of incarceration, 2019



Sources: UNODC calculations based on national prison data as follows: Argentina – SNEEP, 2019; Brazil – SISDEPEN, 2019; Peru – INPE, 2019.

Note: Data from Argentina and Peru refer to foreigners in prison for drug-related offences. Data from Brazil refer to foreigners incarcerated for all types of offences.<sup>148</sup> The absence of a bar means there were no prisoners of a given nationality in the country.

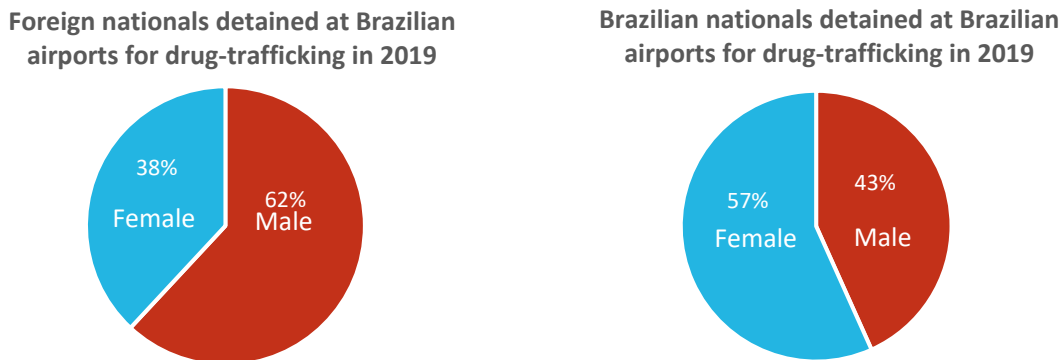
<sup>146</sup> Nelly Cumbreira Díaz and Eugenia Rodríguez Blanco, *Personas privadas de libertad por delitos de drogas en Panamá: Enfoque socio-jurídico del diferencial por género en la administración de la Justicia Penal* (UNODC, 2017), p. 64.

<sup>147</sup> In a study of 303 body packers – who transported mostly opiates – admitted to a hospital in the Islamic Republic of Iran from 2010 to 2017, the majority of patients were male (95 per cent). See Esmail Hajinasrollah and others, “Demography and mortality of body packers; An extended experience from a referral center”, *Archives of Iranian Medicine*, vol. 23, No. 8 (2020), pp. 542-547.

<sup>148</sup> As Brazil is a major transit country for cocaine, it is likely that a large portion of foreigners are in prison for international drug trafficking.

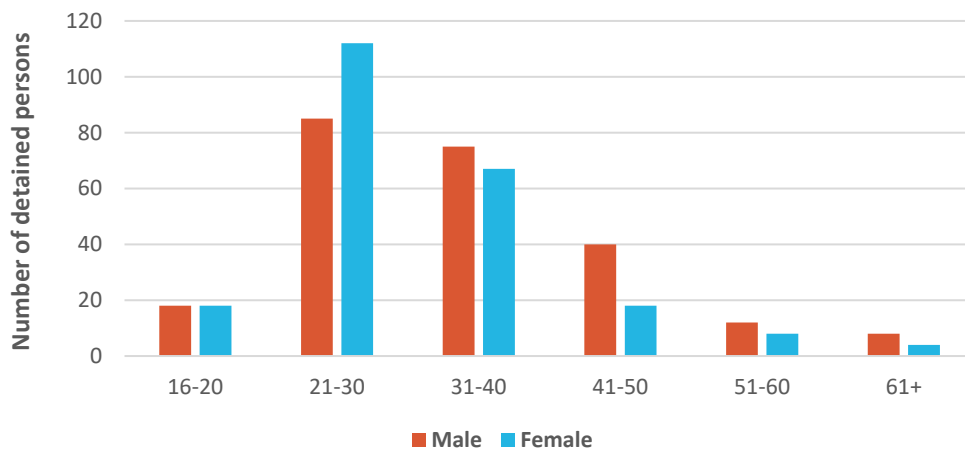
Some gender differences can be also observed when comparing national and foreign populations of “drug mules”. For example, although male and female travellers are detained for drug smuggling in Brazilian airports in similar numbers, women account for slightly more than half of Brazilian nationals, but a clear majority of foreign detainees are male (Figure 4).<sup>149</sup> Conversely, female “drug mules” are more likely to be Brazilian nationals than male detainees.<sup>150 151</sup> Moreover, female “drug mules” tend to be slightly younger than their male counterparts (Figure 5). Further research should be conducted to discover causal factors that lead to different patterns of involvement between male and female “drug mules”.

**Fig. 4** Share of females and males among foreign and Brazilian nationals detained at Brazilian airports for drug trafficking, 2019



Source: Federal Police of Brazil

**Fig. 5** Number of men and women detained at Brazilian airports for drug trafficking, by age range, 2019



Source: Federal Police of Brazil

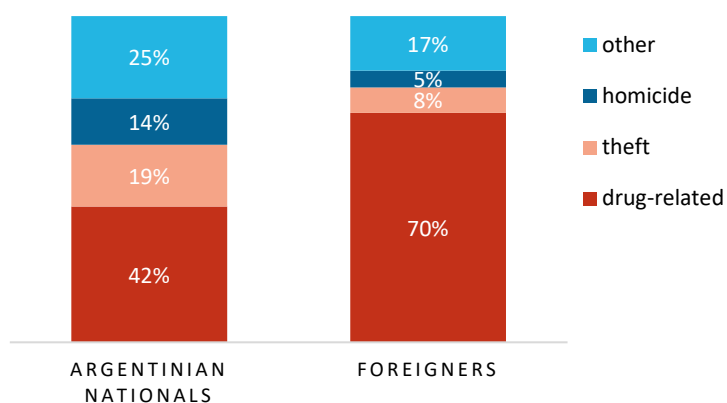
<sup>149</sup> The latter may include a proportion of individuals who are not resident in Brazil and are “recruited” abroad in order to fly into Brazil, “pick up” the drug and fly back to the country of destination of the drug. However, this female/male breakdown could also be influenced by the gender distribution of the “pool” of foreign nationals present in Brazil, which, unlike the population of Brazilian nationals, may potentially be strongly skewed towards one gender.

<sup>150</sup> Among females detained at Brazilian airports in 2019, 67 per cent were Brazilian nationals, versus 49 per cent of males.

<sup>151</sup> Data from the Federal Police of Brazil.

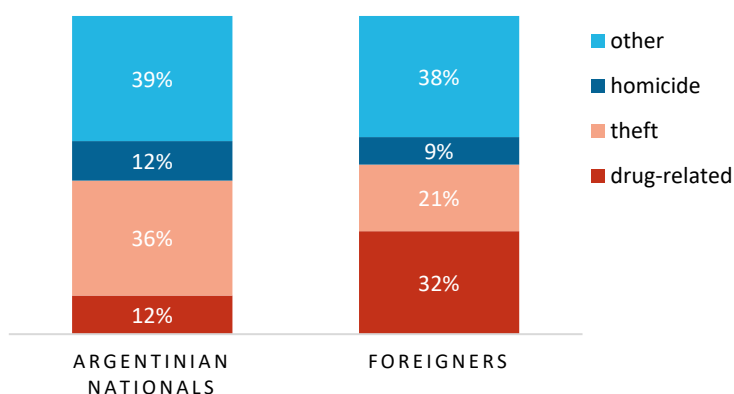
Data on the prison population in Argentina from 2019 show that drug-related offences are the leading cause of women's incarceration in Argentina, especially among foreign nationals, and the corresponding share of the prison population is much more pronounced than for men (Figures 6 and 7). In absolute numbers, however, fewer foreign women than men were in prison for drug-related offences (379 to 1651). Many foreign women detained for drug-related offences are likely in prison for cross-border drug smuggling.<sup>152</sup>

**Fig. 6** Breakdowns of national and foreign women incarcerated in Argentina, by type of offence, 2019



Source: UNODC calculations based on Instituto Nacional Penitenciario, SNEEP, 2019.

**Fig. 7** Breakdowns of national and foreign men incarcerated in Argentina by type of offence, 2019



Source: UNODC calculations based on Instituto Nacional Penitenciario, SNEEP, 2019.

In the gender distribution of people in prison for drug-related offences, women were more represented among foreign nationals than Argentinian nationals (19 per cent versus 13 per cent). Given that foreign nationals are generally more likely to be involved in cross-border trafficking (and in particular to be “drug mules”) than nationals of the country of arrest, this suggests that the role of “drug mule” is one segment of the supply chain where women are more highly represented, in comparison with other roles.

<sup>152</sup> Data from 2011 on women in prison in Argentina found that among female foreigners, the most common drug offence was smuggling of drugs, while among female Argentinian nationals, selling of drugs at retail level prevailed. See Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales (CELS), *Mujeres en prisión: los alcances del castigo* (Ministerio Público de la Defensa de la Nación; Procuración Penitenciaria de la Nación; Siglo Veintiuno, 2011), p. 31.

“Drug mules” in general come from very diverse backgrounds. While economic needs are typically the leading factor that pushes people into becoming a “drug mule” and assuming the risks entailed<sup>153</sup>, reasons for their involvement seem to vary across socio-economic environments. Experts point out a series of enabling factors, often present among women in greater degree than among men, such as being the primary caretaker for the family, lacking financial resources<sup>154</sup>, and having suffered from failed relationships in the past.<sup>155</sup>

Some evidence points out that women detained for international drug trafficking may have higher levels of education compared to women detained for national-level drug offences. For example, a study of 230 women in prison for drug-related offences in Ecuador in 2005 found that those detained for micro-trafficking have lower levels of education than those in prison for international trafficking offences.<sup>156</sup> A similar evidence was found in 2011 in Spain among Latin American women in prison, 81 per cent of whom were there on drug trafficking charges.<sup>157</sup> They tended to have a slightly higher level of education and present significantly less history of drug use disorders than their Spanish counterparts.<sup>158</sup> Likewise, as of 2019, foreign nationals in female prisons in Argentina detained for drug-related offences had a slightly higher education and had more employment or professional training experience compared to Argentinian nationals (see Table 1).<sup>159</sup>

**Table 1** Educational and employment characteristics among female Argentinian and foreign nationals detained for drug-related offences in Argentina, 2019

	Argentinian nationals	Foreign nationals
<b>Total women in prison for drug-related offences</b>	<b>1596</b>	<b>379</b>
<b>Of whom:</b>		
Unemployed (percentage)	57%	40%
No vocational/professional training (percentage)	71%	61%
Secondary school finished (percentage)	11%	20%

Source: UNODC calculations based on Instituto Nacional Penitenciario, SNEEP, 2019.

<sup>153</sup> Coletta Youngers, Teresa Garcia Castro, and Maria (Kiki) Manzur, *Women behind bars for drug offenses in Latin America: What the numbers make clear* (WOLA, 2020).

<sup>154</sup> Alejandro Corda, “Encarcelamientos por delitos con estupefacientes en Argentina”, Intercambios Asociación Civil, May 2010.

<sup>155</sup> Chontit Chuenurah and Samantha Jeffries, “An analysis of Thai women's roles and involvement in cross-border international drug trafficking”, *Social Science Asia*, vol. 5, No. 2 (2019).

<sup>156</sup> Andreina Torres Angarita, *Drogas, cárcel y género en Ecuador: La experiencia de mujeres “mulas”* (Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales, 2008), p. 48, 52.

<sup>157</sup> Spain is one of the major destinations for cocaine in Europe.

<sup>158</sup> Francisco Jiménez Bautista, “Seguridad y migraciones: las mujeres extranjeras en las prisiones españolas”, *Revista Internacional de Ciencias Sociales*, vol. 4, No. 2 (2015), pp. 199-202.

<sup>159</sup> In terms of their family situation, foreign nationals seem to have a similar profile to that of Argentinian nationals. Over 80 per cent were neither married nor had a partner, and 2 per cent were accompanied in prison by their children.

These differences suggest that women's involvement in international drug-related activities may be driven by factors different from those prevalent among women involved in national-level activities. Some experts note that, to be a "drug mule", a certain degree of experience in international travel is required, as well as possessing a travel document. Therefore, "drug mules" may typically have slightly more financial means than those caught for selling or smuggling drugs at the national level.<sup>160 161</sup> According to an expert from Costa Rica, most female cocaine smugglers detained in the country while in transit to North America or Europe are predominantly young attractive women, often working in the beauty sector, often having no children. In this case, cocaine is likely to be smuggled in pursuit of additional economic benefits, rather than for economic survival.<sup>162 163</sup> Such was also the case of a Colombian model incarcerated in China in 2015 who accepted to smuggle 610 grams of cocaine in a laptop to allegedly collect money for participation in a beauty pageant.<sup>164</sup> Similarly, in 2016, two Canadians attempted to smuggle about 30 kilograms of cocaine to Australia on a luxury cruise ship while enjoying a high-end vacation.<sup>165</sup> It is not known if similar differences exist between men who smuggle or sell drugs nationally and male "drug mules".

To recruit a "drug mule", drug trafficking organizations tend to target individuals who do not conform to the typical profile of a drug smuggler and may not raise suspicion of law enforcement<sup>166</sup>. There are media reports of models<sup>167</sup>, athletes<sup>168</sup>, university students<sup>169</sup>, and children<sup>170</sup> who have smuggled cocaine internationally. Some research suggests that the gender of the "mule" does not seem to be the defining criterion; recruiters target people who would draw the least attention of the police, independently of gender.<sup>171 172</sup>

Women are one of such least "detectable" groups. Besides common methods of concealment (luggage or hidden compartments in a vehicle) used by both male and female "drug mules", there are gender-specific smuggling tactics that women use to decrease the risk of being detected. For example, female drug smugglers have additional hiding places on their bodies, including the vaginal cavity, female clothing items, breast or buttocks implants, or a fake pregnancy.<sup>173</sup> They can also conceal drugs in purses, diaper bags, stuffed toys, or wrapped gifts.<sup>174</sup> As research on female cocaine smugglers at the U.S.-Mexico border shows, some women take advantage of gender stereotypes by adopting expected gender behaviours, such as flirting

---

<sup>160</sup> UNODC interviews with criminal justice experts from Costa Rica and Mexico.

<sup>161</sup> Andreina Torres Angarita, *Drogas, cárcel y género en Ecuador: La experiencia de mujeres "mulas"* (Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales, 2008), p. 55.

<sup>162</sup> UNODC interview with a criminal justice expert from Costa Rica.

<sup>163</sup> See also Zhuyem Molina Murillo, *Las extranjeras privadas de libertad por delitos de drogas, en el Centro Institucional El Buen Pastor de Costa Rica* (Universidad Para La Cooperación Internacional Universidad de Barcelona, 2016).

<sup>164</sup> *Infobae*, "El drama de la modelo colombiana presa en China por tráfico de droga", 28 May 2019.

<sup>165</sup> Associated Press in Canberra, "Canadian drug mule 'risked life sentence to take Instagram selfies'", *The Guardian*, 18 April 2018.

<sup>166</sup> Redacción El Tiempo, "Las mulas famosas", *El Tiempo*, 10 June 2001.

<sup>167</sup> Aitor Sáez, "Las 'narco-modelos', un mito muy real", *El Confidencial*, 14 August 2016.

<sup>168</sup> Redacción Judicial, "Hasta 10 años de cárcel podría pagar joven nadador detenido por 'mula'", *El Espectador*, 15 May 2015.

<sup>169</sup> Andrew Seymour, "From honours student to drug mule", *Ottawa Citizen*, 30 June 2014.

<sup>170</sup> Pablo Herraiz, "Mulas' infantiles para la droga en Barajas", *El Mundo*, 18 August 2008.

<sup>171</sup> Jennifer Fleetwood, *Drug Mules: Women in the International Cocaine Trade* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2014).

<sup>172</sup> This is not to say that "drug mules" are always targeted specifically. In many cases, potential drug smugglers themselves search for an opportunity to earn living pushed by an extreme financial hardship or other circumstances. See Connectas, "Los eslabones más débiles de la cadena del narcotráfico", *Connectas*, 2019.

<sup>173</sup> Howard Campbell, "Female Drug Smugglers on the U.S.-Mexico Border: Gender, Crime, and Empowerment", *Anthropological Quarterly*, vol. 81, No. 1 (2008), pp. 233-267.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*



with male border inspectors.<sup>175</sup> Older women, women with children, and pregnant women may also use gender and cultural stereotypes to avoid detection when smuggling cocaine.<sup>176</sup>

Methods of recruitment of “drug mules” vary, but social connections seem to play a key role in most cases.<sup>177 178</sup> According to the experts interviewed, women become involved frequently through female friends or male romantic partners. Some smuggle drugs knowingly, others do it unaware of what they transport, but usually still suspecting that the task involves some risks and is illegal.<sup>179</sup> While cases of deception do exist,<sup>180 181</sup> transporting cocaine unknowingly does not seem typical. Experts who study “drug mules” find only a handful of cases where women were tricked into smuggling cocaine.<sup>182 183</sup> An exception is a study of 10 Thai women imprisoned for international drug trafficking (including smuggling of cocaine) in Cambodian prisons, many of whom claimed to have been deceived by their partner. For most of them, the journey into drug trafficking began after forming a romantic relationship with an African male, whom some of them met online. Others were approached by a male foreigner while working in the tourist industry, and still others were introduced to him by a friend. Eventually, independently on how they met, they typically built trust and intimacy, travelled abroad at the initiative of their male companion, received drugs to be smuggled back into Thailand and were then arrested.<sup>184</sup>

Interviews with key informants from Argentina indicate that female cocaine smugglers from rural areas of Peru and Bolivia (Plurinational State of) incarcerated in the country are sometimes unaware of the contents of their consignment. In this case, they accept to deliver a bag or a suitcase for an extremely low fee, disproportionate to the risk involved. According to media sources, in reference to cases where the smuggling occurs with knowledge of the smuggler, some women from Bolivia (Plurinational State of) smuggle cocaine to Chile by land (typically by bus) for 1,500 United States dollars per kilogram, an approximate equivalent of six months of work in Bolivia (Plurinational State of).<sup>185</sup>

On the contrary, it would seem that female cocaine smugglers from Eastern Europe and Spain are often offered a significant payment, an approximate equivalent of 1-2 years of work, and they are typically aware that the “job” is illegal. They are often recruited by a female friend or an acquaintance who might have done the transatlantic “journey” before.<sup>186</sup> When knowingly accepting to smuggle cocaine internationally, many women see this as a one-time venture that is worth the risk as it can provide a significant source of income to maintain their families.<sup>187 188</sup> Generally, there seems to be no difference in compensation between

<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

<sup>177</sup> Jennifer Fleetwood, *Drug Mules: Women in the International Cocaine Trade* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2014).

<sup>178</sup> Sentencing Council, “Drug ‘mules’: Twelve case studies”, Analysis and research bulletins, United Kingdom, March 2011.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid.

<sup>180</sup> Fabio Teixeira, “Criminal or victim? Female drug mules trapped as ‘legal zombies’ in Brazil”, *Reuters*, 19 December 2019.

<sup>181</sup> TNI/WOLA, Video Profiles: The Human Cost of the Drug War, *Wola.org*, 1 January 2017.

<sup>182</sup> Jennifer Fleetwood, *Drug Mules: Women in the International Cocaine Trade* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2014).

<sup>183</sup> UNODC interviews with criminal justice experts from Costa Rica and Mexico.

<sup>184</sup> Chontit Chuenurah and Samantha Jeffries, “An Analysis of Thai Women’s Roles and Involvement in Cross-Border International Drug Trafficking”, *Social Science Asia*, vol. 5, No. 2 (2019), pp. 45-55.

<sup>185</sup> As of 2017, a third of Bolivian nationals in prison in Chile were women and 92 per cent of them had been detained on drug-trafficking charges. See Connectas, “Los eslabones más débiles de la cadena del narcotráfico”, *Connectas*, 2019.

<sup>186</sup> UNODC interview with a criminal justice expert from Argentina.

<sup>187</sup> It was reported by a criminal justice expert in Argentina (UNODC interview) for Spanish women imprisoned in Argentina for an attempt to smuggle cocaine to Europe.

<sup>188</sup> Jennifer Fleetwood, *Drug Mules: Women in the International Cocaine Trade* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2014), p. 122.

male and female “drug mules”.<sup>189</sup> However, the data on working conditions of women vis-à-vis men are scarce and more research is needed to establish if female cocaine smugglers receive less money than their male counterparts.

Smuggling of drugs may sometimes present characteristics of trafficking in persons that are not gender-specific but may affect women more than men due to the increased frequency of certain types of socio-economic vulnerability among women, such as being primary caretakers for their family. The recruitment process of female “drug mules”, often includes elements of psychological coercion through threats and intimidation.<sup>190</sup> <sup>191</sup> While experts agree that most women make a conscious choice to meet with a trafficker and accept an offer to earn money,<sup>192</sup> they note that, once the offer is accepted, the women feel trapped in their decision.<sup>193</sup> According to key informants, recruiters often conduct preliminary intelligence work by gathering information on the family members of their target. Retaining her passport prior to explaining the details of the operation is also a strategy used by recruiters to prevent a woman from detaching after she realizes the level of risk involved. When a woman intends to desist, recruiters may try to persuade or intimidate her by threatening to harm her family or to keep her passport. One study on female “mules” in Ecuador, however, suggests that small criminal groups factor in the possibility of a prospective “mule” to back out at the last moment and provide her with as little information as possible for this reason.<sup>194</sup>

An overlap with trafficking in persons may also occur in cases where drug traffickers trick men or women into carrying drugs across borders, or simply abuse of their position of vulnerability to induce them into this type of activity.<sup>195</sup> That is, “drug mules” who smuggle drugs unknowingly among their belongings are potentially victims of trafficking in persons. In some cases, fraud is present, when a potential migrant is promised an employment in a destination country and then coerced into smuggling drugs.<sup>196</sup> However, in most cases, recruiters exploit a situation of extreme socio-economic vulnerability and do not have to resort

---

<sup>189</sup> David Bjerk and Caleb Mason, “The market for mules: Risk and compensation of cross-border drug couriers”, Discussion Paper No. 8224, Germany, Institute for the Study of Labor, May 2014.

<sup>190</sup> Fabio Teixeira, “Criminal or victim? Female drug mules trapped as 'legal zombies' in Brazil”, *Reuters*, 19 December 2019.

<sup>191</sup> While male “drug mules” are also likely to be subject to this kind of pressures, more research is needed to establish if women are more vulnerable during the recruitment process.

<sup>192</sup> UNODC interviews with criminal justice experts from Argentina and Mexico.

<sup>193</sup> Jennifer Fleetwood, *Drug Mules: Women in the International Cocaine Trade* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2014).

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 131.

<sup>195</sup> This presupposes that the three core elements of “act”, “means” and “purpose” in the definition of trafficking in persons are all present. “Trafficking in persons” includes the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons (the “act”), by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person (the “means”), for the purpose of exploitation (the “purpose”). Exploitation includes, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs. When any of the means listed above have been used, the consent of a victim of trafficking in persons to the intended exploitation is irrelevant. See *Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime*, Article 3 (United Nations, 2000).

<sup>196</sup> Estimates from Instituto Terra, Trabalho e Cidadania (ITTC), a civil society organization in Brazil, suggest that 12 per cent of migrant female “mules” in Brazil are victims of human trafficking, including a fraud situation. See Fabio Teixeira, “Criminal or victim? Female drug mules trapped as 'legal zombies' in Brazil”, *Reuters*, 19 December 2019.

to deceit to persuade their victims to carry drugs.<sup>197</sup> These examples are part of a global trend towards an increase in trafficking in persons for exploitation in criminal activities.<sup>198</sup>

Intimidation tactics are usually sufficient to ensure the smuggler's compliance throughout the itinerary. Monitoring of drug mules tends to be conducted by phone with minimal interaction between the traffickers and the "mule".<sup>199</sup> However, as reported by media sources, Bolivian female cocaine smugglers travelling by bus to Chile are sometimes accompanied by a member of a criminal network.<sup>200</sup> And one case documented by a court in Argentina describes two women from Bolivia (Plurinational State of) who smuggled cocaine capsules in their stomachs from Bolivia (Plurinational State of) to Argentina while being accompanied by the trafficker's wife as a means of controlling them.<sup>201</sup> It is unknown if male "drug mules" are controlled by the same means as female drug smugglers.

"Drug mules" —both men and women—are usually provided little details and have little control over the logistics of the cross-border travel. According to the existing literature and expert interviews, in most cases, "drug mules" do not decide where to pack the drugs, when to leave or which travel route to use.<sup>202</sup> Moreover, they are often not provided with full details of their route to avoid revealing the information in case of an arrest. They are typically instructed to travel to a specific location but may not know if the destination is final or a transit point. In some cases, traffickers plan the "mule's" trip as lasting from five days to two weeks in order to make it appear as tourism or business travel.<sup>203</sup> In other cases, "mules" are misguided regarding the route and duration of their journey; their destination can change at the last moment or the itinerary may result more complex than expected. For example, despite having been promised to make a round trip to South America within a week, some Eastern European women incarcerated in Argentina reckon that they were made to wait for about a week in each transit location, extending their trip to about a month.<sup>204</sup>

In addition, women may be used as decoys, distracting law enforcement attention from larger drug shipments. In such cases, a member of a criminal group usually tips off security services who detain one courier, while others travelling on the same flight pass through security controls undetected.<sup>205 206</sup> In other cases, a "drug mule" can be detained as a result of last-minute changes in the planning of a smuggling operation. As described in a case of a female "mule" in a Spanish prison, after a sudden change of her boarding gate, she had to pass through security controls different from those on which her recruiters had

---

<sup>197</sup> Escritório das Nações Unidas sobre Drogas e Crime; Ministério da Justiça e Segurança Pública (2022). Tráfico de pessoas para fins de exploração no cometimento de delitos: estudo sobre vítimas de tráfico de pessoas traficadas para transporte de drogas.

<sup>198</sup> "About 6 per cent of total victims detected globally are exploited for the commission of crime, ranging from pickpocketing to drug cultivation or drug trafficking", compared to about 1 per cent of such cases detected in 2016. See UNODC, *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2016* (United Nations publication, 2016), p. 72; and UNODC, *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2020* (United Nations publication, 2021), p. 34.

<sup>199</sup> UNODC interviews with key informants.

<sup>200</sup> Connectas, "Los eslabones más débiles de la cadena del narcotráfico", *Connectas*, 2019.

<sup>201</sup> Tribunal Oral en lo Criminal Federal, Catamarca, "Sentencia número ciento ochenta s/Infracción a la Ley 23.737", 30 November 2015.

<sup>202</sup> Jennifer Fleetwood, *Drug Mules: Women in the International Cocaine Trade* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2014).

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 122.

<sup>204</sup> UNODC interview with a criminal justice expert from Argentina.

<sup>205</sup> Annette Hübschle, "Of bogus hunters, queenpins and mules: the varied roles of women in transnational organized crime in Southern Africa", *Trends in Organized Crime*, vol. 17 (2014), pp. 31-51.

<sup>206</sup> Nelly Cumbreira Díaz and Eugenia Rodríguez Blanco, *Personas Privadas de Libertad por Delitos de Drogas en Panamá. Enfoque socio-jurídico del diferencial por género en la administración de la Justicia Penal* (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2017), p. 108.

agreed with corrupt members of the airport security. As a result, drugs in her suitcase were detected by another security official.<sup>207</sup>

### Smuggling money and cocaine via Costa Rica

Experts from Costa Rica described a typical scenario of cross-border trafficking of cocaine and its proceeds. In this scenario, 7-8 passengers of the same flight from North America carry about 9,000 United States dollars each to be used by traffickers to acquire drug shipments. Once landed, they deposit the money in the same location. They stay in Costa Rica for about 2-3 days and often accept to carry cocaine on their way back to earn extra income. In one such case, a woman of Guatemalan origin was planning to smuggle cocaine to Spain by ingesting the drug. However, while in transit in San Jose, Costa Rica, a packet broke in her stomach and she was left by her accomplices to die in a hotel room. Having been saved by medical personnel, she was detained by the police who also found 10,000 dollars of cash among her belongings. In another case, Costa Rican authorities detained a female flight attendant of a Mexican airline company who was transporting over 100,000 dollars for the Sinaloa Cartel to buy cocaine in Costa Rica.<sup>208</sup>

As professionals working with female “drug mules” pointed out during interviews, women almost always plead guilty and are careful not to reveal any information about their accomplices after detention. According to one expert, a drug trafficking organization (DTO) may hire a lawyer for a detained woman in the first days in order to create an appearance of protection for her, to control her and prevent from disclosing information to law enforcement authorities. The lawyer subsequently abandons the case after ensuring that the woman remains silent. At this stage, it is typically too hard for a public defender to assist the case. Besides, some detained female “drug mules” feel monitored even inside the prison and may be reminded that the DTO knows whereabouts of their loved ones.<sup>209</sup> It is not known if the same situation applies to male drug smugglers or if it is relevant for other countries.

The experience of being incarcerated in a foreign country, which is the case of many “drug mules”, has an especially heavy impact on women. The isolation of imprisonment is exacerbated by being separated from their families, who typically remain in their home countries and for whom these women are often the sole providers.<sup>210</sup> Foreign women in contact with the law often lack legal assistance due to language and cultural barriers; they may suffer from discrimination and economic marginalization.<sup>211</sup> These women tend not to receive visitors and lack any support from their relatives.<sup>212</sup> For foreign nationals, it is also harder to access non-custodial measures at the pretrial stage as they may not meet formal requirements, such as a fixed abode in the country.<sup>213</sup>

### Leadership and managerial roles

It is less common to see women in leadership positions in drug trafficking; high- and mid-level roles are typically occupied by male members. Still, some women play key roles in the drug business, as illustrated by high-profile cases from Latin America, such as Griselda Blanco from Colombia<sup>214</sup>, Sandra Avila Beltran

<sup>207</sup> Francisco Jiménez Bautista, “Seguridad y migraciones: las mujeres extranjeras en las prisiones españolas”, *Revista Internacional de Ciencias Sociales*, vol. 4, No. 2 (2015), p. 201.

<sup>208</sup> UNODC interview with a criminal justice expert from Costa Rica.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid.

<sup>210</sup> Corina Giacomello, “Women, drug offenses and penitentiary systems in Latin America”, International Drug Policy Consortium, October 2013, p. 15.

<sup>211</sup> UNODC, Toolkit on gender-responsive non-custodial measures (United Nations, 2020), p. 66.

<sup>212</sup> Corina Giacomello, Género, drogas y prisión. Experiencias de mujeres privadas de su libertad en México (Tirant lo Blanch, 2013).

<sup>213</sup> UNODC, Toolkit on gender-responsive non-custodial measures (United Nations, 2020), p. 66.

<sup>214</sup> *United States of America v. Griselda Blanco*, 861 F.2d 773 (United States Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit, 1988).

(known as the “Queen of the Pacific”)<sup>215 216</sup> and Enedina Arellano Felix from Mexico.<sup>217</sup> Female drug leaders are often romantic partners or relatives and wives of DTO leaders, who sometimes take on managerial responsibilities or even substitute their partners in the leadership role when they are imprisoned or killed.<sup>218 219</sup>

In some cases, women lead criminal groups dedicated to retail-level cocaine sales without apparent support from a male partner. For example, Delia Patricia Buendía Gutierrez, also known as “Ma Baker,” formed a clan-based organization – which included her daughters and other relatives – in Mexico City in the late 1990s and early 2000s. She is credited for transforming the domestic drug market in Mexico City by making cocaine and “crack” widely accessible to consumers. Her organization bribed local police and judges, eliminated rivals, and laundered drug proceeds.<sup>220</sup> In a more recent case, two young women (aged 19 and 24) were leading a criminal group that sold coca paste and cannabis in a poor neighbourhood of Buenos Aires, Argentina.<sup>221</sup> Several male members of the group were providing security by guarding the street corner where the drug was sold. Finally, a woman known as “La Paca” was leading a clan-based trafficking network that introduced and distributed cocaine and heroin in Mallorca, a popular tourist destination in Spain, when she was arrested in 2008, after which her daughter (later imprisoned as well) continued leading the clan.<sup>222</sup>

Cocaine trafficking in larger quantities, which typically involves international operations, also can be managed by women. In a case investigated by Spanish law enforcement, a Madrid-based Colombian woman, known as “La Negra”, was heading a network of at least 38 individuals when they were all arrested in 2019; most of them were Colombian nationals, and received cocaine shipments from Colombia which they then trafficked by mail or using “mules” from Madrid to the Canary Islands.<sup>223</sup> Another court document from Spain describes a woman-led criminal group that specialized in remitting proceeds from drugs sales to their clients in Colombia and Ecuador. The female boss’s right hand was also a woman, while her husband was responsible for providing security.<sup>224</sup>

More frequently, however, female members of drug trafficking networks can be found participating in logistics coordination, laundering of drug profits, and recording of financial transactions. Examples include a DTO whose members were arrested and later sentenced in Spain as a result of a police operation conducted in 2018.<sup>225</sup> This network of criminal groups had a presence in several major Spanish cities and organized large shipments of cocaine from South America to the Iberian Peninsula and the island of

<sup>215</sup> United States Attorney’s Office, Southern District of Florida, “Alleged international narcotics trafficker extradited from Mexico on cocaine conspiracy charges”, 10 August 2012.

<sup>216</sup> Elaine Carey, *Women Drug Traffickers: Mules, Bosses, and Organized Crime* (Albuquerque, United States, University of New Mexico Press, 2014).

<sup>217</sup> United States, Department of the Treasury, Office of Foreign Assets Control, “What you need to know about U.S. sanctions against drug traffickers: an overview of the Foreign Narcotics Kingpin Designation Act (21 U.S.C. ‘1901-1908, 8 U.S.C. ‘1182) and Executive Order 12978 of October 21, 1995” (Washington, D. C.).

<sup>218</sup> Corina Giacomello, “Women, drug offenses and penitentiary systems in Latin America”, International Drug Policy Consortium, October 2013.

<sup>219</sup> Arlene Tickner and others, *Women and Organized Crime in Latin America: Beyond Victims or Victimizers* (Colombian Observatory of Organized Crime, 2020), p. 16.

<sup>220</sup> Elaine Carey, “A woman formed the first cartel? Historical imaginations and realities of the US-Mexico drug war”, *Social History of Alcohol and Drugs*, vol. 31 (2017), pp. 25-41.

<sup>221</sup> Mauricio Luna, “Cayó la banda narco liderada por “Mily” y “La Flaca”, que recaudaba más de \$200 mil por día”, *Infobae*, 14 February 2019.

<sup>222</sup> Marcos Ollés, “Piden 15 años de prisión para la Guapi y el Ico por liderar un clan de narcotraficantes”, *Diario de Mallorca*, 27 November 2018.

<sup>223</sup> Raquel Duva, “Cae la banda de la Negra, la reina de la cocaína en Canarias”, *Nius*, 23 December 2019.

<sup>224</sup> Poder Judicial de España, SAN 700/2021.

<sup>225</sup> Poder Judicial de España, SAP IB 919/2021, Audiencia Provincial, Palma de Mallorca, 24 February 2021.



Mallorca for further distribution among retail drug dealers. Among the 29 members – most of them of Colombian origin – mentioned in court sentencing proceedings, ten were women. Most of these women occupied low-ranking positions in the DTO or carried out *ad hoc* supporting activities without being part of the criminal group. For example, they collected money from retail drug sales; stored small quantities of drugs; or accompanied male members transporting cocaine in vehicles to avoid police attention.

However, several women within that DTO had more decision-making power. For example, one woman managed a Barcelona-based branch of the network that regularly supplied cocaine to Mallorca. She was “deputy” to the group’s male leader and conducted negotiations with suppliers in South American and clients in Mallorca. Her role included establishing contacts with South American and European counterparts to organize the logistics of cocaine shipments in commercial containers. During her travels to meet cocaine suppliers in South America, a male member of the group was substituting her and negotiated deals in Europe on her behalf. Another example shows another woman of the same criminal branch substituting the male leader and making decisions during his absence, although her regular tasks involved storing drugs and precursors in her properties. Finally, a Madrid-based branch of the network had among its ranks a woman in a mid-level position who, together with her male accomplice, was in charge of supplying cocaine to Mallorca.<sup>226</sup> The available data does not allow to analyse these women’s background or what relationship they had with their male accomplices, but it does show that they had significant decision-making power while assisting male leaders or substituting them during their absence.

In another example, two prominent members of the Sinaloa cartel in Mexico employed their wives and daughters to hide the illicit proceeds of cocaine trafficking through multiple money laundering activities. Far from being used as fronts, the women actively managed companies, including real estate, gas station and event venues, and were able to maintain operations under the radar for several years after the male members were detected by law enforcement.<sup>227</sup>

Evidence from studies on cocaine trafficking across the border between the United States and Mexico suggest that women who occupy leadership and mid-level positions in the criminal hierarchy are driven mostly by the desire to obtain power and autonomy vis-à-vis men. The higher these women climb the criminal ladder, the easier it is for them to obtain recognition from their male counterparts. In contrast, low-level participants of the cocaine supply chain, such as “drug mules” and micro-traffickers, are the most vulnerable to unfair treatment by male traffickers.

## 2.3 Micro-trafficking

The term “micro-trafficking”, as used in this report, includes illicit transportation of drugs within a country’s national boundaries over short distances, drug smuggling into prisons, or small-scale drug selling to consumers. Like other lower-level roles in the supply chain, micro-traffickers face a high risk of arrest, lower chances to move up within the hierarchy and have minimal impact on a DTO’s operations.<sup>228</sup> Reportedly, involvement in small-scale drug activities constitute one of the main causes of female imprisonment in Latin America for drug-related offences.<sup>229</sup> Among women incarcerated for micro-trafficking in the region, many come from backgrounds characterized by extreme poverty, social exclusion,

---

<sup>226</sup> Ibid.

<sup>227</sup> Cecilia Farfán Méndez, “Women’s Involvement in Organised Crime and Drug Trafficking: A Comparative Analysis of the Sinaloa and Yamaguchi-gumi Organisations” in Julia Buxton and others (eds), *The Impact of Global Drug Policy on Women: Shifting the Needle* (Emerald Publishing Limited, 2020), pp. 159–168.

<sup>228</sup> Corina Giacomello, “Women, drug offenses and penitentiary systems in Latin America”, International Drug Policy Consortium, October 2013.

<sup>229</sup> Inter-American Commission of Women, *Mujeres y drogas en las Américas: un diagnóstico de política en construcción* (Organization of American States, 2014), p. 27.



and low levels of education.<sup>230</sup> The need to take care of their families generally constitute a major “push” factor that contributes to their involvement in illicit activities; it often provides an opportunity for women to obtain an income faster than through legal economic activities, while fulfilling their caretaking responsibilities.<sup>231</sup>

### *Smuggling drugs into prison*

Drugs are widely consumed inside Latin American prisons, both male<sup>232</sup> and female<sup>233 234</sup>, where they are often introduced by visitors through body concealment or in parcels destined for inmates.<sup>235</sup> For example, during 2019, Costa Rican prison authorities registered about 10 drug seizures daily.<sup>236</sup> In 80 per cent of the cases, drugs were seized inside prison facilities, suggesting a high influx despite controls at entry points.

Introducing drugs into prison in Latin America appears to be an activity perpetrated overwhelmingly by women while visiting male inmates. When incarcerated themselves, women receive significantly less visits than men and are often abandoned by their families and/or partners.<sup>237</sup> A prison-based survey in Panama found that among the 141 male and female participants, only women were incarcerated for smuggling drugs into prison, while other drug-related offences were distributed in similar proportions among male and female prisoners.<sup>238</sup> In Uruguayan prisons, coca paste was the second most seized drug in 2015 after cannabis.<sup>239</sup> In most cases, the drugs were seized from visitors, 77 per cent of whom were women.<sup>240</sup> Women typically hide small packages of cocaine, or other cocaine products such as “crack” or coca paste, in the vagina to hand it over during visits to male prisoners.<sup>241</sup>

Women who smuggle drugs into prison are often mothers or romantic partners of incarcerated men.<sup>242 243</sup> As explained by a criminal justice expert interviewed, in a common scenario, a male prisoner in need of financial resources exerts psychological and emotional pressure on his female partner or another family

<sup>230</sup> Luz Piedad Caicedo, *Mujeres En Prisión Por Delitos de Drogas: Espejo de Las Fisuras Del Desarrollo* (Corporación Humanas, 2017), p. 27.

<sup>231</sup> Corina Giacomello, “Women, drug offenses and penitentiary systems in Latin America”, International Drug Policy Consortium, October 2013.

<sup>232</sup> Instituto Costarricense sobre Drogas, *Consumo de drogas y relación droga/delito en el Sistema Penitenciario Nacional para hombres adultos en condición de sentenciados* (ICD, 2015).

<sup>233</sup> Beatriz Murillo Paz and others, *Relación entre el delito y el consumo de drogas en mujeres sentenciadas en el Centro Penal Buen Pastor* (Instituto Costarricense sobre Drogas, 2014) p. 32.

<sup>234</sup> UNODC, *Valoración del impacto social de la privación de la libertad a mujeres por delitos de drogas, y diseño de recomendaciones de política pública* (United Nations, 2020), pp. 69-73.

<sup>235</sup> Marcelo Bergman and Gustavo Fondevila, *Prisons and Crime in Latin America* (Cambridge University Press, 2021).

<sup>236</sup> Instituto Costarricense sobre Drogas, *Incautaciones de Drogas en Centros de Atención Institucional del Sistema Penitenciario Costarricense. Anuario Estadístico 2019* (Observatorio Costarricense sobre Drogas, 2020).

<sup>237</sup> UNODC, *Valoración del impacto social de la privación de la libertad a mujeres por delitos de drogas, y diseño de recomendaciones de política pública* (United Nations, 2020), p. 136.

<sup>238</sup> Nelly Cumbreira Díaz and Eugenia Rodríguez Blanco, *Personas privadas de libertad por delitos de drogas en Panamá: Enfoque socio-jurídico del diferencial por género en la administración de la Justicia Penal* (UNODC, 2017), p. 64.

<sup>239</sup> Caras y Caretas, “INR incautó más de 21 kilos de drogas en cárceles”, *Caras y Caretas*, 13 January 2016.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid.

<sup>241</sup> Andrea Bermúdez Castillo, “Ser-para-otros: Mujeres que introducen droga a cárceles costarricenses”, *Revista de Ciencias Sociales (Cr)*, vol. 3, No. 157 (2017): pp. 129-147.

<sup>242</sup> Nelly Cumbreira Díaz and Eugenia Rodríguez Blanco, *Personas privadas de libertad por delitos de drogas en Panamá: Enfoque socio-jurídico del diferencial por género en la administración de la Justicia Penal* (UNODC, 2017), p. 65.

<sup>243</sup> Andrea Bermúdez Castillo, “Ser-para-otros: Mujeres que introducen droga a cárceles costarricenses”, *Revista de Ciencias Sociales (Cr)*, vol. 3, No. 157 (2017): pp. 129-147.

member while convincing her to supply him with drugs.<sup>244</sup> Similarly, ethnographic research from Uruguay stresses that the emotional need to fulfil the role of a good wife or mother often outweighs the considerations of the risk involved in smuggling drugs into prison.<sup>245</sup>

In other cases, women are recruited in their neighbourhoods or outside of a prison by a recruiter who is often a female.<sup>246</sup> <sup>247</sup> As pointed out by a key informant, the recruiters, who usually belong to a criminal group in charge of drug distribution in the area, identify women in need, offer them money, prepare drug packets, help them insert the drug in their body, organize their transport to the prison complex and monitor them while in line for prison visitation. Recruiters seldomly end up in prison, while female smugglers are easy to replace after they are caught. Women smugglers often agree to become involved to cover the most basic needs, such as paying a monthly rent or buying food.<sup>248</sup> They are typically single mothers, with unstable partners and a very low level of education, who live in a context of social exclusion and extreme poverty. Notably, female recruiters tend to come from the same background of extreme poverty as the women they recruit.<sup>249</sup> Interviews with key informants suggest that, in contrast to women detained for smuggling drugs internationally, most of those who are incarcerated for introducing drugs into prison had done so on multiple occasions.

### **Street-level drug dealing**

Evidence from Latin America points out that women who are involved in retail drug dealing mainly come from disadvantaged sectors of the society.<sup>250</sup> In most cases, women sell small quantities of drugs – typically, cannabis, “crack” cocaine or coca paste – for economic reasons.<sup>251</sup> Experts interviewed note that, sometimes, the whole family participates in the distribution and sale of drugs as it becomes their only source of income. In these cases, women perceive selling drugs as the only available means of survival allowing them to earn their living and take care of their children at the same time.<sup>252</sup> Alternatively, as illustrated by an example from Peru, some women (most of whom are mothers responsible for childcare) become involved in drug dealing as a result of pressure from their male partners or other family members.<sup>253</sup> It has

---

<sup>244</sup> As pointed out by experts interviewed, prisoners with higher social status within the prison context, who are often members of criminal groups, can distribute drugs and generate debts among inmates by providing them with favours or gifts. See also Rose Marie Acha, *Los chivos expiatorios: Control de drogas y cárceles en Bolivia* (February 2017).

<sup>245</sup> Serrana Mesa Varela, “Mujeres privadas de libertad por tráfico y transporte de drogas en Uruguay: un análisis antropológico y de género” in Natalia Montealegre Alegría (ed.), *El tiempo quieto. Mujeres privadas de libertad en Uruguay* (Universidad de la República, 2016), p. 234.

<sup>246</sup> UNODC interview with a criminal justice expert from Costa Rica.

<sup>247</sup> Corina Giacomello, “Women, drug offenses and penitentiary systems in Latin America”, International Drug Policy Consortium, October 2013, p. 6.

<sup>248</sup> Claudia Palma, *Me puse a jugar de narco. Mujeres, tráfico de drogas y cárcel en Costa Rica* (Editorial de la Universidad de Costa Rica, 2018).

<sup>249</sup> UNODC interview with a criminal justice expert from Costa Rica.

<sup>250</sup> Corina Giacomello and Coletta Youngers, “Women incarcerated for drug-related offences: A Latin American perspective” in Julia Buxton and others (eds), *The Impact of Global Drug Policy on Women: Shifting the Needle* (Emerald Publishing Limited, 2020), pp. 103-111.

<sup>251</sup> Sergio Chaparro Hernández and Catalina Perez Correa, *Sobredosis carcelaria y política de drogas en América Latina* (Centro de Estudios de Derecho, Justicia y Sociedad, Dejusticia, 2017).

<sup>252</sup> Corina Giacomello and Coletta Youngers, “Women incarcerated for drug-related offences: A Latin American perspective” in Julia Buxton and others (eds), *The Impact of Global Drug Policy on Women: Shifting the Needle* (Emerald Publishing Limited, 2020), pp. 103-111.

<sup>253</sup> Inter-American Commission of Women, *Mujeres y drogas en las Américas: un diagnóstico de política en construcción* (Organization of American States, 2014), p. 43.

been reported however that the earnings from the retail sale of drugs may be also extremely low and hardly sufficient to meet basic needs.<sup>254</sup>

Despite having in common a socio-economically disadvantaged background, women involved in local drug sales may vary significantly in terms of demographic profile, for example in terms of age. Some experts note that it is not uncommon to see older women selling drugs to consumers from their homes; a study of retail drug dealing in Mexico City shows how drug distribution tasks are divided between different family members, including a grandmother, whose age and gender helped avoid suspicion of illegal activity.<sup>255</sup>

In contrast, according to evidence from Colombia, women involved in micro-trafficking activities tend to come from urban areas and be younger than women working in coca-growing areas.<sup>256</sup> These women tend to enter the cocaine supply chain through family members or through recruitment by criminal groups. It would seem that recently more girls have become involved in drug sales at schools.<sup>257</sup> According to one former cocaine dealer in Colombia, there are currently visibly more women involved in retail drug sale than a decade ago.<sup>258</sup>

Qualitative research from Mexico shows that some young women from urban marginalized neighbourhoods become involved in retail drug sale through their male partners or other family members, either to solve their financial difficulties or to support their own drug consumption.<sup>259</sup> Many of these women have worked in informal, low-paid jobs, such as cleaning, cooking and street selling, prior to engaging in drug dealing.<sup>260</sup> Similarly, a study in Costa Rica from 2016 found that most women incarcerated for local drug sales were domestic workers (53 per cent) and commercial workers (17 per cent); while among men incarcerated for drug-related crimes, the most frequently mentioned occupations were in commerce (18 per cent), and in the construction sector (12 per cent), in addition to those who were unemployed (12 per cent).<sup>261</sup>

Coca paste is one of the intermediary products of the cocaine supply chain that is consumed across marginalized sectors of population in some South American countries.<sup>262</sup> Ethnographic research from Uruguay<sup>263</sup> <sup>264</sup> highlights the need to provide for the children's basic needs as one of the main reasons for

---

<sup>254</sup> Corina Giacomello and Coletta Youngers, "Women incarcerated for drug-related offences: A Latin American perspective" in Julia Buxton and others (eds), *The Impact of Global Drug Policy on Women: Shifting the Needle* (Emerald Publishing Limited, 2020), pp. 103-111.

<sup>255</sup> Carlos Alberto Zamudio Angles, *Las redes del narcomenudeo*, (CEAPAC Ediciones, 2012).

<sup>256</sup> Irina Cuesta, Genica Mazzoldi Diaz, and Aura Maria Duran, *Mujeres y la economía cocalera en el Putumayo: roles, prácticas y riesgos* (Fundación Ideas para la Paz, 2017), p. 34.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid.

<sup>258</sup> UNODC interview with a former cocaine dealer from Colombia.

<sup>259</sup> Corina Giacomello and Isabel Blas, *Propuestas de reforma en casos de mujeres encarceladas por delitos de drogas en México* (Equis Justicia para las Mujeres; Inacipe, 2016).

<sup>260</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>261</sup> Ernesto Cortés Amador, *Política criminal y encarcelamiento por delitos relacionados con drogas en Costa Rica* (CEDD; ACEID, 2016), p. 44.

<sup>262</sup> UNODC, *World Drug Report 2021* (United Nations publication), Booklet 4, pp. 39-41.

<sup>263</sup> In Uruguay, for example, as of 2018, one in four women in prison was incarcerated for drug-related offences, which refer mainly to the trafficking or sale of coca paste. See Gianella Bardazano and Ignacio Salamano, *Por el lado más fino: Privación de libertad y legislación sobre drogas en Uruguay* (Colectivo de Estudios Drogas y Derecho, 2016).

<sup>264</sup> Junta Nacional de Drogas, *Mujeres, políticas de drogas y encarcelamiento: Uruguay* (Junta Nacional de Drogas, 2019), p. 39.

women to become involved in the retail distribution of coca paste.<sup>265</sup> <sup>266</sup> Most of the women incarcerated for micro-trafficking in Uruguay come from contexts characterized by extreme poverty, lack of education and domestic abuse.<sup>267</sup>

Retail drug dealing in Latin American countries is often concentrated in marginalized neighbourhoods under control of criminal gangs.<sup>268</sup> Therefore, residents who participate in retail selling in gang-affected neighbourhoods may experience an increased risk of violence. Besides living in a general context of violence, both women and men may be targeted by gangs if they hide a portion of the earnings or use their location to sell drugs from different suppliers.<sup>269</sup> At the same time, in a gang-dominated context, women can also come to occupy positions similar to men and exercise power accordingly, such as by carrying weapons and engaging in violence to protect drug retail locations.<sup>270</sup>

### Local dynamics of drug distribution and sale: example from an urban community in Costa Rica

When a police operation was conducted in a marginalized urban community in Costa Rica in recent years, police discovered an entire neighbourhood involved in drug distribution.<sup>271</sup> Some women “cooked” “crack” cocaine and sold it to consumers, others transported the drug within the city from one point to another, still others were paid to store them to ensure against the loss of an entire supply in case of a police raid on the sales location. Residents in the supporting role were paid approximately 100 United States dollars monthly to have their houses available for hiding drugs and people in case the police entered the community. One woman was a coordinator: she managed the drug sale operations in the neighbourhood by making calls, recruiting new members, renting houses, finding proper stash places and giving orders to other workers. However, she lived in the same neighbourhood in similar conditions. Meanwhile, the leaders of the group lived in high-end neighbourhoods, possessed luxury objects, and distanced themselves from the community whose residents they employed. In addition, criminal groups reportedly organized their drug distribution business in a cyclical pattern: the drug sale points remain often located in the same properties, whose occupants change after each police raid. Typically, once a family is detained by the police, another family comes in, thus ensuring in practice very little or no interruption of the illicit drug activities.

### Supporting roles

Men and women may also act in supporting roles in the cocaine supply chain by performing relatively small tasks to assist with drug sale logistics. Women are often employed in this role as they typically help avoid police attention. For example, some women accompany local drug distributors to avoid suspicion from authorities. In a case described in Spanish court files, a woman with her children used to accompany a male cocaine smuggler when travelling across Spain by vehicle.<sup>272</sup> Other women let traffickers use their credit card to cover expenses related to drug-trafficking logistics; lend their vehicles or homes to transport and stash drugs, weapons or money; allow them to use their cell phone to avoid police interception; or serve as

<sup>265</sup> Coca paste is one of the intermediary products of cocaine supply chain that is used across marginalized sectors of population in some South American countries. See UNODC, *World Drug Report 2021*, Booklet 4 (United Nations publication, 2021), pp. 39-41.

<sup>266</sup> Serrana Mesa Varela, “Mujeres privadas de libertad por tráfico y transporte de drogas en Uruguay: un análisis antropológico y de género” in Natalia Montealegre Alegría (ed.), *El tiempo quieto. Mujeres privadas de libertad en Uruguay* (Universidad de la República, 2016), pp. 227-241.

<sup>267</sup> Ibid.

<sup>268</sup> Eduardo Moncada, “The Politics of Urban Violence: Challenges for Development in the Global South”, *Studies in Comparative International Development*, vol. 48, No. 3 (2013), pp. 217–239.

<sup>269</sup> UNODC interview with criminal justice expert in Costa Rica.

<sup>270</sup> Mariana Barcinski and Sabrina Daiana Cúnico, “Mulheres No Tráfico de Drogas: Retratos da vitimização e do protagonismo feminino”, *Civitas*, vol. 16, No. 1 (2016), pp. 59–70.

<sup>271</sup> Based on UNODC interview with a criminal justice expert from Costa Rica.

<sup>272</sup> Poder Judicial de España, STS 1706/2021, Tribunal Supremo. Sala de lo Penal, 5 May 2021.

a front to launder drug proceeds.<sup>273</sup> <sup>274</sup> In some cases, women act as helpers for male traffickers with whom they have romantic or other familial ties.<sup>275</sup>

### 3. Conclusion

The reviewed evidence suggests that women can participate in a wide range of roles in the global cocaine industry. Moreover, there are noticeable variations among women who enter different segments of the cocaine trade. Their socio-economic profile and the environment in which they live appear to influence the decision to become involved, the level of involvement and the specific activities performed. At each stage, roles occupied by women can vary from supporting to managerial, with low-ranking positions prevailing.

Retail-level drug dealing appears to absorb most financially vulnerable female participants who have little to no ability to advance. Others may become involved in smuggling drugs into prison due to their emotional dependence on the incarcerated male partners or other relatives. A pressing economic need combined with a duty to take care of children and other dependent family members create push factors for many women to engage in illicit activities. The discussed factors shape women's decisions and, while most of them engage in drug-related activities of their own will, their choices are limited by their socio-economic conditions and the prevailing cultural norms.

Women in most coca growing communities experience some gender inequalities typical of a patriarchal society in their respective countries. However, more research is needed to establish if participation in specific stages of the cocaine supply chain increases exposure to gender inequalities for women. Questions also remain as to whether women in mid- and higher-level of the cocaine supply chain are exposed to greater gender inequalities specific to the type of illicit activity.

At the same time, participation in drug-related activities may provide women with a relative financial independence and shift the power balance in their favour. For example, income from coca cultivation led to some female coca growers in rural Colombia becoming more active in community organizations. However, in their quest for community leadership women continue to encounter resistance from their male counterparts who hold decision-making power and resist to accept a woman not being an exclusively domestic worker.<sup>276</sup> Besides, proceeds from most drug-related activities in which women participate rarely result in real financial independence; rather they are barely sufficient to cover basic needs. Furthermore, women who live in coca production areas are at a higher risk of becoming victims of sexual violence on territories dominated by illegal armed actors.

Although their roles vary significantly, most women occupy lower-ranking positions in the cocaine supply chain: they work in coca bush cultivation farms, transport small quantities of drugs locally or internationally, sell drugs to consumers or smuggle them into prisons. Aside from exceptional cases where some women have leadership and managerial roles, women tend to benefit from illicit drug activities only marginally.

Despite a growing recognition of the importance of incorporating a gender perspective in policy-oriented research, gaps remain regarding several aspects of women's involvement in activities related to cocaine trafficking. Available data do not allow to determine with certainty if the participation of women in cocaine economy has increased over time. They do suggest, however, that drug-related offences lead women to come into contact with the criminal justice system at higher rates than before. As pointed out by numerous observers, most women are expendable and easily substitutable within the criminal hierarchy; and they often

---

<sup>273</sup> Poder Judicial de España, STS 1582/2021, Tribunal Supremo. Sala de lo Penal, 29 April 2021; Poder Judicial de España, SAP IB 919/2021, Audiencia Provincial, Palma de Mallorca, 24 February 2021.

<sup>274</sup> Poder Judicial de España, STS 1354/2021, Tribunal Supremo, Sala de lo Penal, Madrid, 9 April 2021.

<sup>275</sup> Poder Judicial de España, SAP IB 919/2021, Audiencia Provincial, Palma de Mallorca, 24 February 2021.

<sup>276</sup> Ana Jimena Bautista Revelo and others, *Voces desde el cocal: mujeres que construyen territorio* (Dejusticia, 2018).

incur heavy penal sanctions for non-violent drug-related offences.<sup>277</sup> <sup>278</sup> Furthermore, incarceration creates a series of negative consequences for women who are separated from their children and other family members; women are also less likely to be visited than male prisoners.<sup>279</sup> Moreover, women's incarceration has a devastating impact on their children, who are often left without their primary caretaker.<sup>280</sup>

Little is known about risks which women face in different contexts and how these risks differ from those faced by men in similar activities. Also, relatively unexplored are the working conditions to which women at different stages of the cocaine supply chain are subject and if these are gender specific. How much decision-making power women have relative to men and how much stigmatization they experience throughout their involvement are still largely open questions that require further research.

---

<sup>277</sup> Sergio Chaparro Hernández and Catalina Perez Correa, *Sobredosis carcelaria y política de drogas en América Latina* (Centro de Estudios de Derecho, Justicia y Sociedad, Dejusticia, 2017).

<sup>278</sup> Inter-American Commission of Women, *Mujeres y drogas en las Américas: un diagnóstico de política en construcción* (Organization of American States, 2014).

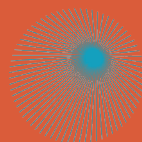
<sup>279</sup> Sergio Chaparro Hernández and Catalina Perez Correa, *Sobredosis carcelaria y política de drogas en América Latina* (Centro de Estudios de Derecho, Justicia y Sociedad, Dejusticia, 2017), p. 107.

<sup>280</sup> Corina Giacomello (ed.), *Childhood that matters: The impact of drug policy on children with incarcerated parents in Latin America and the Caribbean* (CWS – Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean, 2019).





CRIMJUST is implemented by UNODC in partnership with INTERPOL and Transparency International. CRIMJUST seeks to enhance law enforcement and judicial strategies beyond interdiction activities and to foster transnational responses along drug trafficking routes targeting each stage of the drug supply chain. This includes the production of knowledge on the cocaine market to support evidence-based policy and strategies designed to counter the cocaine threat.



**GIFP**  
Global Illicit Flows  
Programme

