
Drug Traffickers with Lipstick: An Ethnographic Trip to Sinaloa

Research note

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Abstract: Following the launch of the “war on drugs” by ex-President Felipe Calderon in 2006, multiple arrests of women bosses in drug trafficking organisations (DTOs) marked a new era for Mexican cartels. Journalists have provided rich data about Mexican women as smugglers and bosses in DTOs. The role of women as leaders of criminal organisations is a new dynamic area in the study of organised crime that has still been insufficiently studied. This research note is based on eight years of ethnographic research and 50 interviews with women from Sinaloa, a North-western state in Mexico. It shares some observations about the changing roles of women in Mexican DTOs and provides a brief account of women’s involvement in drug trafficking activities.

Keywords: Ethnographic Research; Mexico; Women; Drug Trafficking; Life Histories

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Women and drug trafficking in Mexico

On the 28th of October 2007, Mexican law enforcement officials presented to the media a woman who was considered to have strong connections with drug trafficking organisations (DTOs) and particularly with Ismael Zambada, *El Mayo*, a powerful drug lord of the Sinaloa Cartel. Before journalists stood a woman of 5'5 with long dark hair and dressed in beige jeans. Her name was Sandra Avila Beltran, she was 46 years old, a native of Baja California, and better known as “The Queen of the Pacific”. Beltran was considered by both Mexican and American law enforcement authorities to be one of the most important operators of the Sinaloa cartel (El Universal, 2007a; El Universal, 2007b) and in charge of “public relations” for the main boss of the cartel, Joaquin Guzman, *El Chapo* (Castillo García, 2007). Minutes after her arrest, her fiancé, the second in command of the Norte del Valle Cartel in Colombia, Juan Diego Espinoza, *El Tigre*, was also arrested.

In 2008, Julio Scherer García immortalised Beltran in the history of drug trafficking in Mexico after

he interviewed her in the female prison of Santa Marta Acatitla. Growing up in the Mexican underworld, she became romantically involved with *El Tigre* (Castillo García, 2007; EI, Universal, 2007b), and consequently with the importation of Columbian cocaine into Mexico followed by drug smuggling into the United States (EI Universal, 2007a; EI Universal, 2007b; Castillo García, 2007). In 2002, she was implicated in a seized shipment of US Dollars 1,500,000 in Mexico City Airport.

Towards the end of 2008, after travelling to Colombia and Bolivia for a shopping spree in the city of Zapopan (Jalisco, Mexico), a 23-year-old ex-beauty queen (Miss Sinaloa 2008) Laura Elena Zúñiga Huízar was arrested together with seven other men. Among them was her boyfriend, Angel Garcia Urquiza—one of the leaders of the Juarez Cartel (EI Universal, 2008; Noroeste, 2008). Although this was not the first time that she had been in a relationship with a Mexican drug lord (Santamaría Gómez, 1997 and 2014), she stated that she was not aware of her boyfriend's illegal activities (EI Universal, 2008; Valdez Cárdenas, 2009: 256).

In another case, a Colombian woman, Patricia Rodríguez Monsalve, a 28-year-old widow of Francisco Cifuentes, a Colombian drug lord murdered in 2007, was arrested with 21 accomplices in February 2010 as a result of a cross-border operation in Colombia. After the death of her husband, Monsalve inherited his drug trafficking business including a network of his contacts in the criminal world such as the before mentioned *El Chapo* (Aguirre, 2010; CNN Mexico, 2010). According to Colombian law enforcement, she was part of a cocaine trafficking group. Her deceased husband had meetings with *El Chapo*'s representatives in Panama, whilst she was responsible for making payments and implementing money-laundering strategies (Aguirre, 2010; El País, 2010). The houses she inherited from her husband were so big that it was possible for an aircraft to land and take off. The possibility of smuggling drugs by air facilitated the transfer of cocaine to *El Chapo*'s affiliates in Sinaloa, making Monsalve's criminal organisation known as the *Airmen Cartel*.

Another example is that of Angie San Clemente Valencia, a Colombian fashion model from Medellin. She had been wanted by Interpol since December 2009, but it was only in 2010 that she was arrested while carrying 55 kg of cocaine together with her boyfriend in a neighbourhood in Buenos Aires (Efe, 2010). She was accused of being part of an extensive DTO that specialized in cocaine trafficking from Colombia to Mexico and then on to Europe (Efe, 2010; Lee, 2011). Valencia was accused of being the head of an international network that recruited models for the sole purpose of transporting suitcases filled with cocaine. In September 2013, she was released from prison and sent back to Colombia by the Argentinian authorities (Efe, 2013).

These and many other examples clearly suggest that women often occupy key positions in Mexican DTOs because of their family ties, intimate or business relationships with drug lords. Apart from some anecdotal evidence, there has not been much empirical research conducted on the role of women in DTOs in Latin America and specifically in Mexico. However, analysing gender and leadership in DTOs may shed light on important aspects of how criminal organisations are structured and managed. Indeed, following the launch of the “war on drugs” by ex-President Felipe Calderon in 2006, multiple arrests of drug bosses marked a new era for Mexican cartels (Jacobo,

2003). As Calderon's policies targeted drug kingpins, many women had to take over DTOs previously managed by their fathers, husbands, and lovers (*ibid*: 11).

Presenting a full-body literature review on the role of women in drug trafficking in the format of this note is not possible^[1]. It is, however, useful that a few sketches are drawn. Specifically, an emphasis on a four-fold typology of women's involvement in DTOs is made. The first category includes women who serve as "mules", i.e. smugglers, transporting in suitcases or in body cavities (Mita Barrientos, 1994: 44; Harper et al., 2002). Their level of education is generally low, no higher than primary school. They are usually unaware of the risks involved in drug trafficking and the severity of the punishment imposed if caught. Even when they are aware of the consequences, they are still willing to accept these risks in order to make money. Women at such a low rank often experience violence, exploitation and deceit on behalf of drug bosses.

The second category encompasses women involved in drug trafficking in position of a "trophy". Trophy women have a more frivolous but no less dangerous role in DTOs. José Manuel Valenzuela (2002: 129) explains that trophy women are like "jewels" to be looked at: they are beautiful and are allowed entry into the cartel's highest circles as the mistresses' of drug lords. In the Mexican drug trafficking world, it is not enough to run drug trafficking businesses in secrecy: drug lords want to be recognised, respected, and admired. Therefore, they surround themselves with various kinds of "awards" and "prizes", which encompass airplanes, jewellery, luxury houses and cars, as well as beautiful women. A prime example of a "trophy wife" is Laura Zúñiga—a beauty queen of Sinaloa and the *2008 Queen of Hispanic America* (El Universal, 2008).

As suggested by Ovalle and Giacomello (2006), women's involvement in DTOs may also be defined by family relations. It represents the "stigma and prejudice that lies in women whose only crime is to be the wife, girlfriend, mother or daughter of a narcotrafficker" (*ibid*: 302). These women may not work directly for the cartel, but they are affected by their men's business as this affects their family. They both suffer and enjoy all the benefits of their men's lucrative business.

Finally, women have the qualities and experience needed to enjoy the highest status in DTOs. This category challenges the traditional image of women in cartels as subordinates. Apart from their ability to be successful in trafficking activities, women of this category occupy leading positions in DTOs. They have a greater "invisibility" to law enforcement, explained in part by a widespread assumption that women are less likely to engage in crime. However, given the increasing visibility of the inclusion of women in drug trafficking, it is likely that this feature of invisibility will become increasingly less important in future (Fleetwood, 2004).

What follows this brief overview of the various roles that women play in drug cartels is an investigation into Mexican women's everyday activities as members of DTOs and provides an account of their economic activities, the environment in which they operate, as well as a glimpse into their social lives. A short discussion of some challenges encountered while carrying out ethnographic research in Sinaloa, Mexico's North-western state with a long history of drug

trafficking, is also offered.

Ethnographic research in Sinaloa

This research on women's roles in DTOs is based on a direct observation and interviews carried out with 50 women over the last 8 years (2006-2014). This research note offers a few insights into the complex interview process and the challenges of interviewing perpetrators. It also shares some observations about the changing roles of women in Mexican DTOs and provides a brief account of their life stories. What follows are preliminary results from some of the interviews that I carried out with female drug traffickers in Sinaloa.

I started the research trip inside a jail in Culiacan, the largest city in the region of Sinaloa, where life stories from women who had been convicted of trafficking, selling, and storing drugs were collected. These interviews gave me the possibility of building up a network of contacts outside the jail perimeter. Gaining women's trust was very important. Some of my first interviews were a complete failure because I could not get any information from interviewees. Others, however, were more successful. What follows are insights and preliminary results from some of the interviews that I carried out with female drug traffickers in Sinaloa.

One of my interviewees from the jail^[2], a 32-year-old Lucia³, told me there were women among drug trafficking leaders. These women "are the bosses, and have a lot of young people working for them...you can't imagine who these women are, they seem like high society ladies, but they are like us, the only difference is that they are on top, and free, they do not screw up like me, for example". Lucia was arrested for attempted transportation of crystal meth from Culiacan to Tijuana. She and other women warned me of the risks of doing research in this area and told me to "be careful of what you ask and to whom you ask...[it] is really risky, curiosity is not good when it is about drugs...". Lucia also added that finding the women working for drug cartels or managing their own DTO is very difficult because:

... women ... involved in this kind of business ... do not show off much, they leave that to the lovers or wannabe girls who always brag about things that maybe they didn't do or just wanted to catch the attention of other men, or make girls jealous.

Although identifying women bosses may be difficult, Lucia said that there were several places where one can see them. She advised me to visit Paty, a hair stylist. "Queens sometimes stop by Paty's", she said. Among Paty's clients were several Sinaloan drug traffickers' mistresses, but, most importantly, Paty was one of the Queen's principal hair stylist.

So I went to Paty's salon and explained to her that I was a graduate student doing research on drug trafficking in Mexico and was interested in women's love stories and other experiences with

drug lords. I told Paty that I had met Lucia in jail. It turned out that Lucia was her friend. Paty^[3] explained that a lot of her customers were connected to drug dealers and that, if I wanted, I could stay with her and see them when they came into her salon. I asked her why she was so open with me because I could be an undercover agent. She replied:

Here, a lot of journalists come to see me because they know that in this neighbourhood a lot of drug traffickers live. In addition, you know my friend and that's why I'm giving you a chance. I don't think you are from the government or a foe; you just don't seem like that to me. And I don't give a sh*t if you are, you know, most people die anyway.

I did not know how to take this: was it a warning, advice, or a threat? I explained to her again that it was part of my research project. Having waited for three hours, I saw several gorgeous women coming in and out of the salon. All of them were well dressed, with designer bags and clothes. They paid Paty good tips. Most of their conversations were about holiday trips, shopping spree, husbands running away, and parties with popular singers and lots of alcohol. On several occasions, different girls asked Paty who I was, and Paty answered in a convincing and protective manner: "he is a journalist. He is writing about narco-culture".

I told them that it was interesting for me to see so many young and beautiful women:

- "There is a lot of competition among us, and if you want to catch a "big fish", just wear the best clothes you have, make yourself pretty for them and that's it," said Rosa⁵ (20 y.o.).
- "Why not be your own boss instead of being just a lover?" I replied.
- "Well, I don't know maybe because ... it's easier just to be pretty instead of having to deal with other men ... but really I don't know, I guess you need to ... be brave enough," she continued. "Yes, of course, there are women who like this stuff, not as much as men but women working in the narco business!" - "Do you know any of them?" I asked again.
- "I know two ladies. They are older than me, but I have heard about others, I don't know them but yes, some of them are the daughters or widows of *narcos*".

I explained to Rosa what my intentions were and she said she would try to help me.

Paty informed Rosa that I met Lucia in jail. At first, she thought I was arrested, but I explained to her that I needed to interview women who were had been accused of drug trafficking for my research. I explained to her that I needed life stories and that neither names nor photos would be used. I gave her my contact details. She replied that she would try to contact a friend of hers but asked me to be patient because it would take her some time to reach her.

Rosa shared with me that she knew a lot of women who wanted better life. They took the risk of entering the criminal underworld to achieve it. They undertook crossborders "trips" with cocaine, crystal meth, and marijuana. Some of them were luckier than others: Lucia was jailed, but others, who made it over to the United States, made a fortune and gained respect from the men who had

hired them.

Rosa also told me that she used to date a drug lord's son, and since then she liked that "world" because she saw it bought the good life: cars, fancy clothes, jewellery. She said that when she was dating this guy, he gave her money several times to buy clothes, fix her nails and hair. He even gave her plastic surgery as a present.

Rosa explained to me that he moved to another city where he was dating someone else at the same time. He got married, but that was not an obstacle to their love story. Rosa described this as a hard time for her because she was really falling in love with this guy despite of "what people were telling me about him being a womaniser". She did not care about what people said about her or the risks this relationship may cause.

Several weeks passed without any news from Rosa. I visited Paty several times after my meeting with her. I left her my phone number just in case she would see Rosa and could ask her to contact me. A week later I received a call from a private number. It was Rosa. She apologised that she did not call me before but she had not seen her friend after she met me, and the number she had for her friend had been changed. However, Rosa told me that she was able to meet her friend and that she told her about me. They even had an argument because of me. I apologised because of the trouble that I was causing. I asked Rosa to tell her friend that I would cover all the expenses involved. They could choose the restaurant if they wanted or the place where we could meet. She said that they would see me at Paty's.

A day after this phone call I went to Paty's again. After an hour the girls arrived. They got out of a black Cadillac. Rosa entered first. She greeted me. The girl I was expecting was following her. She firmly shook my hand and introduced herself as Claudia^[4]. I explained to her that I was a student from the Autonomous University of Sinaloa and was writing my thesis about women and drug trafficking. She said she already knew about me from Rosa. She said that she was not sure whether she could trust me. I said that she could lay down her conditions. But before she could say anything, I clearly explained to her that no names had to be mentioned and that I was not going to record our conversation. She confessed to me that she thought that I was a journalist or, even worst, someone who worked for the government. Claudia asked me to be honest because if I was lying to her she would definitely find out. I said that it was normal for her not to trust me but if she wanted she could check with my school if I was a real student or not and what kind of research I was doing. Claudia suggested that it might be better to go to a restaurant that she knew would be almost empty at that time of day.

Rosa, Claudia, and I went to the restaurant. We sat in a smoking area that was entirely empty. We ordered coffee and *chilaquiles*, and as soon as we finished ordering Claudia told me that we should not wait for the meal to arrive to start the interview.

Claudia explained that she got involved with drug trafficking because she was starting and needed

money. Her family lived in the mountains and did not have any income. Claudia's dad used to grow marijuana and sell it, but the money he was making with those sales was not enough to survive:

He was not a drug lord. Growing marijuana was the only source of money for us. Even beans and corn were expensive to grow and even after harvesting them, it was still hard to find someone who would buy them at a good price. I remember that as a kid, she continued, my mom would always call out to my brothers and sister to be in a different room while men arrived to our house and paid him for marijuana. She wasn't ashamed of what he did, but she didn't like us to be around when he was negotiating the price. I just looked through the window or went to the back door with my brother and hid so we could hear what my dad and the men were talking about. It was exciting not only because of the things we heard but also because we were careful not to be caught by mom.

She added that they grew up in the place, where growing and trading marijuana was considered normal, and that only her brothers were allowed to travel with her dad to different ranchos to sell the product. Her sister and Claudia would only help their mother with household work. Other than that, they would attend a local school. Recalling her school years, Claudia noted that she was not a brilliant student but did quite well at school. Her school classmates' families were also growing marijuana and opium poppies. Those growing poppies were richer:

- "With one sale of marijuana my dad would make half of what those who sold poppy gum would make. Poppy was like a bet, you could earn more money than marijuana with a smaller amount, but it was not clear whether you would be paid," Claudia shared with me. "I guess at that time [the 1980s] the police paid more attention to heroin... and cocaine," she added.
- "Did your father deal in cocaine?" I asked.
- "No, he only sold marijuana", Claudia explained. "There were times when people asked him to store some cocaine at home, but other than that he was in no way connected to cocaine trafficking. He just sold marijuana to the men picking it up in an aircraft".
- "And how did you get involved in drug trafficking?"
- "Honestly I don't know... I grew up and suddenly I was here, I never concentrated and studied while I was at school, I just keep doing it. For me it was normal and at the beginning I never thought growing and selling marihuana was a crime. It was just a fuc*ing plant," she said.

Claudia told me that people usually thought that villagers from the mountains were lazy and that was the reason why they traded in narcotics:

- "Up in the mountains it is not that we don't know what to do ... My school was so far from my house that sometimes it was very difficult to get there. And sometimes only the rich and those who have relatives in big cities, like here in Culiacan, are the ones who have an opportunity to study. For example, my mom would not allow me to go on my own to

Culiacan to study at university, and so I decided to quit studying.”

- “How did you get involved in drug trafficking if your dad just let your brothers do it?” I asked.
- “In the beginning, my father was only taking my brothers with him but then he thought...well I have two guys working with me and I need another person to help. I was old enough to help him, and since he couldn’t have another baby, he let me work with him.”
- “To work?”
- “Yes”, she nodded. “When he was out and there was no one at home except my mom, my sister, and I was the one who dealt with the men who came to do business with him”
- “And after all this time, do you not see yourself as a ‘boss’, or as a ‘queen’ in the drug trade?” - “To be honest, I never saw myself commanding other men or working here. Although I didn’t see myself working either as a secretary or as a teacher...I think I just kept working in the sector that I was already familiar with, it was something that I already good at. I couldn’t deny my past when I came into the city, and then suddenly become a secretary. It was easy for me to keep doing this sh*t”, Claudia told me. “But yes, I am a queen, and there are so many other queens. I won’t fight for a title but I will fight for profit. I care and protect what is mine”.
- “What is your work like? Is it harder to deal with men or with women?” - “Both are difficult to deal with because all they care about is business, you know...A man starts complaining because a woman is the boss. And a woman is sometimes jealous about who is in charge, but I guess it is natural to have this kind of frustration. Trust here [in the drug trafficking business] is a matter of life or death. If you trust too much that could be dangerous but if you don’t trust enough that could be dangerous too! You must understand when it is time to trust and when it is not. I have a group of women working with me, and it has been easy, we protect each other, and they think they are queens too, but it isn’t a problem for me because they know who is in charge”.
- “So, women are better than men?”
- “In my experience yes. For me it is easier to work with them, but I have friends who deal more easily with men because they can seduce them, or men try to do the best for them”.
- “Do you have anything in common with men in this business? Are there similarities between you and men ... I mean, because you are a girl?” I asked for specifications.
- “Not that much, but once, when I negotiated with a man, he was flirting with me instead of concentrating on the business deal. I really hated that. I think that in the end they are just “men”, they do not feel offended, but they think that because I’m a women I want to fu*k them like one of their whor*s that is always chasing them because of money. But what they don’t realise is that I have my own money, my own power, and I don’t need to sleep with them. It is not that I’m a saint or anything like that, but business is business”.
- “So they still see women as objects?”
- “They are used to having girls around them. These girls want to be close to them because of their money and power. They can get by being ‘the girl of’, but that sucks, because by the next day or next week they will already have another girlfriend, and they will end up getting dumped”.

- “And girls who work in the drug trafficking business don’t act like men? Don’t they have a boyfriend or a lover?”
- “Of course we do! [laughs] But I don’t know if I already told you, I think we [women] are more discrete in everything we do, even having a boyfriend or a lover. When a guy has a lot of girls they are more macho, you know, but a girl will always be a girl ... I do not brag about the number of guys that I have had.”
- “So being a woman who works in a drug cartel is better then?”
- It depends how you see it. I have a boyfriend, and he works with me. I let him wear my “crown” and don’t give a f*ck if he gets caught. It is not that I wouldn’t get him out of trouble but... it is more common for men to show-off and get caught. My girl-friends and I, we use men to protect ourselves too, I must admit that they take care of us pretty well...because they love us or just because we hire them as *sicarios*. We don’t use, or at least I don’t use, violence when it isn’t needed. You know, guys always shoot their guns at parties or engage in fights even when it is not necessary. Again, I’m telling you that they like to be at the centre of attention. That is not what I am looking for ... But I will show you what I mean. Come with me and see what I mean, being a woman sometimes makes you kind of invisible”.

We left the restaurant. She did not let me pay the bill. There were several bodyguards waiting at Claudia’s Cadillac. Claudia, Rosa and I headed to a fancy neighbourhood in Culiacan. Her bodyguards were driving in a car in front of us.

We were cruising around the neighbourhood and some of the main streets of Culiacan. We did not see any trouble until we found a roadblock where police officers checked cars Law enforcement officers looked at Claudia and Rosa but quickly let them go. No questions were asked. Although we were in a fancy car, we were not searched. Men are frequently stopped by the police. One of her bodyguards in another car was stopped and searched. When they are accompanied by their families and there are kids and women in the car, law enforcement officers do not check them. And if they do, they do it fast, as part of their routine. Claudia explained that she had been stopped once late at night, but officers did not search her and only asked whether she had been drinking. While she was telling me this story, Rosa took out two guns, one from inside her purse and the other from under her seat:

Now you see what I meant before about being a girl; after all it is not that bad. They (the Police) don’t think that with this face I could be dangerous. Besides, corruption helps a lot. Here, people are starving for money, and if you have it, you can make your life easier. Also you should not make so much noise if you don’t want to get caught by the police or by your enemies. But as my mom says, it is the quiet ones who are the worst. She is probably right.

Conclusion

Due to Felipe Calderon's "war on drugs", there seems to be an increase in the number of women bosses. As Jacobo (2003) argues, the "war on drugs" and the imprisonment of many male bosses in Mexico has produced a vacuum which has allowed women to carry on their fathers', husbands', or lovers' drug businesses. As Claudia said "someone has to look after these men. If our men are gone, women take advantage and help their father or lovers to keep the family 'business' going".

Claudia has been one of the 50 women that I have had a chance to interview for my research. By following in her father's footsteps she found a way of earning a living. Contrary to the *macho* image of male drug cartel bosses, drug queens do not want to draw attention to their activities. They care about their business activities and are not interested in power. For many women bosses earning money rather than having power or prestige seems to be more important.

In this research note I have offered several discursive and narrative glimpses of women's experiences as bosses of DTOs. I have not sought to establish the ultimate truth but rather I wanted to highlight the dearth of research existing in this area and emphasize the important merits of ethnographic research. Drawing on this ethnographic research and interviews with drug traffickers in Sinaloa, this research note challenges contemporary myths of women as purely victims of crime. Further studies on women as principal perpetrators in drug trafficking or other forms of serious offences may shed important light on the role of women in criminal organisations. Future studies are needed to establish theoretical frameworks through a thorough examination of gender, structure, and agency in the context of cross-border drug trafficking.

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[1] See, among others, Salazar Jaramillo, 1990 and 1993; Dunlap et al., 1997; Gaviria, 1998; Miller and Jacobs, 1998; Denton and O'Malley, 1999; Arriagada and Hopenhayn, 2000; Anderson, 2005; Carey, 2008; Santamaría Gómez, 2012.

[2] May 2, 2011: Culiacan's Running Center of Legal Consequences of Crime, Culiacán Sinaloa. 3 All names of women were changed to protect their identity and privacy.

[3] May 17, 2011: Culiacán Sinaloa.

[4] June 21, 2011: Culiacán Sinaloa.