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From Housewives and Mothers to *Mules*: The Case of Latin American Women Prisoners in Spain

By Joaquina Castillo-Algarra¹, and Marta Ruiz-García²

Abstract

Latin American women play a key role in the international cocaine business as couriers or mules. Beginning from theoretical perspectives that explain the relationship between criminality and gender, we analyze why women without a criminal background become criminals, how they become involved in trafficking, their positions and functions in the criminal organization, and the risks and benefits of their participation. Qualitative fieldwork was carried out based on in-depth interviews with fifty-one female inmates and twenty members of prison staff from nine Spanish prisons. A thematic analysis has been carried out based on this data. The results reveal that the prevalent profile among Latin women traffickers is that of heads of household. There is a relationship between their social and geographical contexts of origin and cocaine trafficking, which determines their criminal behavior. They occupy the most exposed and lowest-paid positions in the criminal structure. We found through their discourses, how they are recruited, how they transport cocaine and the money they obtain. We conclude that cocaine trafficking is a resource that women use to escape situations of exclusion and that allows them to avoid other options, such as prostitution and migration. Despite the risks of trafficking, the economic benefits they obtain from it leads them to commit the crime.

Keywords: Latin American women inmates, *Mules*, Criminal behavior, Drug trafficking

Introduction and Background

Women's criminology is an underdeveloped field compared to male criminology (Campbell 2008). Starting in the 1970s and taking place mainly in the 1980s, new approaches on female crime appeared in research as a consequence of the increase in the number of women in prison. These approaches considered female criminality as an extension of the sexual roles of women and proposed basic research on female criminality based on the different socialization of men and women, illegitimate structural opportunities for women, and different social reactions (Smart, Carten, & Leonard, cited by Del Olmo, 1996). Since the 1990s, women's participation in criminal activities began to be explained through their integration into the public space. Several researches establish that work opportunities in the drug trade have increased for women, underlining the relationship between drug trafficking and the increase of women in prisons (Wilson 1993; Fagan 1994; Chesney-Lind 1997); they also note the homogeneity of the offenses committed by women, highlighting drug trafficking as the most accessible criminal activity for them (Cunha 2009).

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An increasing number of studies reflect a qualitative change in women's participation in the drug business (Ronquillo, 2008; Valdez, 2011; Santamaría, 2012; Jiménez, 2014). Based on these studies, we have identified four main types of roles. The traditional role of women in cocaine-producing countries is cocaine cultivator and harvester. Since the 1980s, two new roles have appeared: the role of trafficker or *mule*, and the role of seller. In both cases women take up new tasks within the business which are better paid but are more exposed to arrest. In the late 20th century, a new role emerges, that of the so-called *drug queens*, women with long criminal careers who have made drug trafficking their way of life, occupying positions of power that legitimize their presence in this business.

Different perspectives, that explain the relationship between women and the drug business, have emerged from this evolution of roles. First, the perspective of victimization, which visualizes the female *mules* as victims of male power and exploitation and defines the drug organizations as stratified, segmented and sexually hierarchical spaces, in which men hold more powerful positions, are better paid and less exposed to detention than women (Sommers & Baskin, 1996; Denton & O'Malley, 1999; Maxwell & Maxwell, 2000). Second, the perspective of empowerment, which highlights new and different relationships and positions of women in the drug business, makes it more lucrative and autonomous for women (Fleetwood, 2009, 2014). These positions correspond to the aforementioned *drug queens*. From our point of view, both perspectives are not mutually exclusive, as these two profiles of women –*mules* and *drug queens*– are present in the current drug business, as also noted by Campbell (2008), Carrillo (2012), and Carey (2014).

In relation to trafficking, almost 100% of the cocaine produced in the world comes from Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia (United Nations Office on Drug and Crime, 2015; European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, 2019a). The cocaine is transported to Europe from Latin American countries, such as Colombia, Ecuador, Venezuela, and the Dominican Republic, which has been chosen by cartels for shipments to Spain (Gratius, 2012), the most important point of entry for cocaine into Europe (Giménez-Salinas, 2018).

It is complicated to make an estimate of the volume in cocaine trafficked by *mules* because of its illicit nature. It is known that 20% of the cocaine entering Europe is transported by air, either on private flights, by the use of drones or on commercial flights (European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, 2019). The latter is the method used by the *mules*. Some researchers have made approximations about the amount of cocaine transported by the *mules*; Resa-Nestares (2014) reports that in Spain, between 2002 and 2013, a total of 2.5 tons of pure cocaine were intercepted by the police on mules carrying it on commercial flights.

Regarding the business structure, there are different classifications of organizations involved in drug trafficking; most distinguish between large, clearly structured, formal, large-scale organizations, and informal organizations, which are poorly structured and remote from cartels and even emerge *ad hoc* in certain contexts (Benson & Decker, 2010; Reuter, 2014). Our study does not seek to deepen knowledge of the design of the typologies of organizations. We focus on the female *mules* involved in international cocaine trafficking and imprisoned in Spain.

Objectives

The aims of this article are to determine first why women, housewives, and mothers of families become *mules*, in short, to find out the reasons for the criminal behaviour of these women; second, how they become involved in the international cocaine trafficking business; and third, what are the risks they take and the benefits they obtain. For this purpose, we have studied Latin American female *mules* imprisoned in Spain. They are the best possible approximation to the entire population of *mules*, due to the nature of their “hidden population”. Besides, Latin American female *mules* imprisoned in Spain are a good representation of this

population, since international cocaine trafficking has Latin American countries as its main origin, Europe as its main destination, and Spain as the main point of entry for cocaine into Europe.

The following aspects have been explored with these objectives in mind:

1. To describe the profile of Latin American female *mules* imprisoned in Spain, their social, economic, cultural and geographical contexts of origin and their family situations. All of this is in order to determine if there is a relationship between the contexts and personal circumstances and the participation of female *mules* in the international cocaine business.
2. To describe how Latin American female *mules* imprisoned in Spain become involved in the international cocaine trafficking business: their recruitment by criminal organizations, their participation, positions and functions that are assigned to them in the structure of this business.
3. Finally, to identify what risks and benefits are involved in being a Latin American female *mule* in the international cocaine business.

Research Techniques and Methods

The research on which this article is based has been carried out with a *qualitative emerging design*, in which the data from interviews was analyzed. Moreover, this research includes, in addition to a theoretical, bibliographic and documentary review, an analysis of Spanish prison statistics from which data regarding the nationality and criminal typology of female inmates in Spain were obtained. This information helped us to select the prisons in which to carry out our field work.

A qualitative methodology of an exploratory nature was employed and data were collected by means of in-depth and semi-structured interviews. These interviews allowed us to obtain more complete and in-depth information, the possibility of clarifying doubts during the process and, for the interviewed subjects, to express their points of view.

Through the analysis of the interviews conducted with the female inmates, we have been able to reconstruct the reality of the Latin American *mules* imprisoned in Spain, the social and cultural processes in which they have taken part, what they have felt, what they have seen, and what they have experienced.

Fieldwork and Participants

The fieldwork was carried out in nine Spanish prisons, which were selected based on the number of Latin female inmates. The only selection criterion regarding the participating inmates was that they were in prison for a drug trafficking offense, regardless of their procedural situation and age. Of the 71 in-depth interviews conducted, 20 were conducted with members of prison staff. These interviews explored their knowledge and experiences with the *mules* and allowed us to contrast and contextualize the information obtained through the interviews with the *mules*, especially regarding their social and family situations and the circumstances of their arrest. The other 51 interviews were conducted with Latin American inmates from 10 different countries who had effectively been in prison between 3 months and 6 years. Tables 1 and 2 provide a profile of participants.

Table 1. Members of Prison Staff Interviewed

Position	No.
Prison director	3
Deputy director for treatment	2
Deputy medical director	2
Educator, women's unit	2
Psychologist, women's unit	2
Surveillance official, women's unit	3
Social worker, women's unit	1
Prison teacher coordinator	1
Prison supervision judge	1
Immigration lawyer	1
Educator, men's unit	1
Production manager (production workshops)	1
Total	20

Source: Own elaboration based on field work.

Table 2. Female Inmates Interviewed

Country of origin	No. of inmates	No. of mothers	No. of single-parent households
Colombia	24	23	21
Dominican Republic	9	9	8
Argentina	4	4	3
Bolivia	4	4	4
Venezuela	3	3	3
Panama	2	2	0
Ecuador	2	2	1
Chile	1	1	0
Brazil	1	1	1
Paraguay	1	1	1
Total	51	50	46

Source: Own elaboration based on field work.

The interviews with the inmates focused on a list of topics that included the causes that led them to cocaine trafficking, the way in which they were recruited, their roles and positions in the structure of the trade, the methods used to transport the cocaine, the circumstances of their arrest, their relationship with the organization, the benefits they hoped to obtain, the risks they took and, finally, their opinions and experiences regarding a possible disengagement from the organization. In short, what we asked in these interviews are open questions, related to the

objectives of our research. These questions are reflected in the different sections in which the results are structured.

All these interviews were conducted in different spaces within the women's divisions of each prison such as school and meeting rooms, face-to-face with the subjects and in private. Each interview lasted between an hour and a half and two hours. Interviews were audio-recorded after written informed consent was obtained. Participants were informed that their participation would be anonymous, and that the data obtained would be used exclusively for this study, so they could give their informed consent. No incentives were provided for participation.

All Latin American inmates of each prison were invited to participate through their educators, with only three declining participation. The interviews were transcribed verbatim, anonymized and any identifying data was removed. The interviews were conducted in Spanish by two female Spanish researchers. All interviewees were native Spanish speakers, with the exception of the Brazilian inmate.

Analysis

The information from the interviews was subjected to a thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006) using the qualitative analysis package ATLAS.ti (Gallardo, 2014). This program facilitated the integration of the information from the interviews into a hermeneutic unit and its subsequent organization, operation, and division into categories. These categories are intended to respond to the objectives of our research. As in any qualitative analysis process, some of them emerged in the first moments of research, through the theoretical and referential framework, and others emerged throughout the process. New categories have been generated and the previous ones consolidated. An open coding, which has been carried out guided by the data, was elaborated as the analysis progressed. Our methodological approach has not been a linear process but a dynamic one. The analysis of each category selected for this article has resulted in each of the results presented below.

Results

Sociological Profiles and Geographical and Social Contexts of Origin of the Latin American Female Mules Imprisoned in Spain

Latin American women constitute the largest group of foreign inmates in Spain. They represent 67.64% of the total of foreign female inmates, ahead of other groups such as Africans, which represent 16.59% and Eastern Europeans, which account for 15.75%. Colombia is the Latin American country with the most foreign women imprisoned in Spain followed by Brazil, with 140 and 105 women, respectively (Spanish Ministry of Interior, 2019). These nationalities are present in our field work, in which almost half of the women interviewed are Colombian (see Table 2).

Most of the *mules* are young, with an average age of 30. However, we found cases of very young women in their 20s, and the oldest being 54 years old. Regarding family situations, it is particularly noteworthy that all but one of the interviewees are mothers. Of these 50 mothers interviewed, 46 are separated and/or divorced, with dependents or are single mothers (see Table 3), even from early ages. These women are referred to as “heads of single-parent households” because they are responsible for the maintenance of their homes and families, as well as the education of their children. These responsibilities go beyond the immediate family and embrace other family members and relatives who depend on the mother, in line with the network of the extended family.

"I have the children in my care. My children are from two different fathers, but neither of them helps me support them. I also supported my

older parents because my little sister was studying. But life was becoming more expensive and my children needed more and more money. I thought about it a lot... in the end I decided to take drugs to Spain. They told me it was easy and that they would pay me well" (Colombian woman, 28 years old).

Our results in this regard are in line with reports such as the World Family Map (Institute for Family Studies and Wheatley Institution, 2019), which highlights the reality that more than two-thirds of the children born in Latin America are from single mothers, reaching 82% in Colombia. In this country, Law 1232 was approved in 2008, where the figure of a female head of a household is especially present (Pinzón & Aponte, 2013). This law shows how the figure of a female head of a household is the product of socio-demographic, economic, and cultural changes and specifically, of changes in gender relations in the family structure. Unable to fulfill the responsibilities associated with their roles as heads of households, many women see cocaine trafficking as an alternative.

"I got pregnant very young, I never lived with my son's father and I had to manage on my own. Getting the family through is very difficult, I have also had to take care of my mother" (Dominican woman, 25 years old).

Regarding female *mules'* levels of education, our data show that most of them have a basic education, although a high number have reached average levels of education and only one has a university degree. With regard to their employment status, almost all of them were employed at the time of the crime, usually poorly paid jobs marked by insecurity and precariousness. A number were self-employed owners of small businesses, such as bars, guest houses or service companies.

"I used to have a bar and now I'm here (referring to the prison). At first the bar was going well, but I got into debt and I had to close it, and I couldn't find a job. I started cleaning in a house, but the money was not enough to pay the debt" (Colombian woman, 26 years old).

The backgrounds of many of the *mules* interviewed are also marked by physical and psychological maltreatment, even sexual abuse. This coincides with the conclusions reached by other authors who have analyzed the contexts of origin and personal careers of women offenders all over the world (Bailey, 2013; Barnes & Cunningham, 2014; Glaze & Maruschak, 2009; Greene, Haney, & Hurtado, 2000; Lynch, Delhart, Belknap, & Green, 2012). All these experiences contribute to their processes of social exclusion. This link between contexts of origin and offending has also been highlighted in previous research on women prisoners in Spain (Añaños-Brediñaña & Jiménez-Bautista, 2015).

A common feature of all the *mules* interviewed is that they had no previous criminal record; it was the first time they had committed a crime, and, in addition, they were first-time inmates. Another of their significant features is that they are not drug users, as is the case with other female inmates who traffic drugs, such as the majority of Spanish inmates. The *mules* internalize this difference and use it to stereotype Spanish inmates as "drug addicts" and "junkies", drawing a clear distinction from themselves (Ruiz-García & Castillo-Algarra, 2014: 591). This difference implies different motivations for the commission of the crime of drug trafficking: Spanish inmates, traffic to get drugs for consumption, among other reasons, while foreign women are pushed by their situation as heads of households and economic and social precariousness.

The *mules* interviewed, regardless of their nationality, come from contexts of social and economic exclusion, with marked gender segregation, as is reflected in their comments.

"In my village there are no opportunities. It's a rural area and agriculture gives very little money. There are only a few bars and very few shops, there are no companies, there is no work. I sewed at home, I was a dressmaker, but I didn't have the money to support my children" (Bolivian woman, 32 years old).

Another feature of these contexts is the existence of drug networks in their home countries, which facilitates their involvement in the cocaine industry. Trafficking appears to these women as a quick and relatively easy way to obtain money to cope with situations of economic stress, in line with the contribution of Cuhna (2009), who states that drug trafficking is the most accessible criminal activity for women. We found out that for some of the *mules* interviewed, the purpose of trafficking was to handle a temporary financial need affecting the woman's family or herself directly.

"My father had his taxi stolen, which was the family's livelihood. I had no choice but to get into this (cocaine trafficking) in order to get money and be able to buy him another taxi. At that moment I didn't see any other solution" (Colombian woman, 20 years old).

Recruitment, Participation and Positions of Latin American Women in the International Cocaine Business

Recruitment generally is planned by criminal organizations, which specifically focus on women in situations of critical need, usually those who are heavily in debt and, therefore, highly vulnerable. One of the ways is to offer them a loan. This makes the women committed to the organization; often under threats, they force them to transport cocaine when they cannot afford to pay off this loan. A second way is to offer them money directly in exchange for trafficking cocaine.

"I had no choice but to bring a package to Spain (...). I thought about it, but in the end I did it because I needed the money to pay the loan they gave me" (Colombian woman, 26 years old).

"They stole trucks from my company, and we could not work (...). I had no money to buy new trucks because the situation was very bad, so I decided to get involved in drugs. This had been proposed to me before, and I hadn't accepted, but in this situation, I decided to" (Paraguayan woman, 40 years old).

Female *mules* can be contacted and recruited through the Internet, by friends or family or even by people linked to the organization, who approach them with the purpose of duping them. In most cases, it is a male figure who involves women in the cocaine trade, with whom they have previous real or fictitious sentimental or friendship ties. Their participation can be consensual or based on deception. Other authors also highlight the male influence on the incorporation of women in drug trafficking (Giacomelo, 2013: 233; Jiménez, 2014: 112).

"They asked me to do it (cocaine trafficking) in exchange for money (...); someone close to me, someone I know. And he convinced me. It was the

first time I did it (...). And I had to pay (...), pay for my own documentation (...). I needed a work contract" (Colombian woman, 24 years old).

"I am here (in prison) for doing favors (...), and it was the first time (referring to cocaine trafficking). I have a diploma as a cook, hairstylist, and masseuse. It is the first time (...). I have 3 children. I lived in Italy and made a stopover in Barajas from Santo Domingo, but I was going to Italy, and they left me here (in prison)" (Dominican woman, 29 years old).

At other times, it is the women themselves who attempt to contact the organizations, offering themselves as *mules* in exchange for money. This contact occurs in many cases through other female *mules*.

"I did it consciously, I needed the money... I knew of people who had done it and it was not difficult to contact them (referring to the criminal organization)" (Ecuadorian woman, 30 years old).

The participation of women in this business is not equal to that of men. The comments of the *mules* interviewed illustrate that the gender relations and the socioeconomic factors relating to their contexts of origin largely explain the configuration of international drug trafficking and the position of these women in such sex-stratified organizations, controlled by men, in which *mules* are placed at the base of the structure and used to achieve the objectives of the organization. In many cases they even see themselves as victims of the business.

"We don't hack people up, we don't kill people, we don't do anything unforgivable... Why don't they go after the big drugs bosses... but we get the short end of the stick, we're the big victims of the trade, but nobody thinks about that" (Argentinian woman, 50 years old).

Gender segmentation, present in the structuring of organizations, is another factor that affects the victimization of women, along with their personal and household circumstances and the geographical and socioeconomic characteristics of their contexts of origin. The unequal power relations between men and women and the gender stereotypes that mark the participation of women in the drug business are also verified by several reports (Washington Office on Latin America, 2016; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2018).

The participation of *mules* in the cocaine business is specified in a single task: the transportation of the drug. The *mules* interviewed transported the cocaine in packages, hidden either in their luggage or in their bodies. The methods most commonly used when cocaine is transported inside the body are condoms, fingers of latex gloves, capsules or special bags filled with the drug. These packages are inserted into the mule's body in different ways: into the vagina (female *mules*) and anus, and into the stomach and intestine by ingestion. More recently, cocaine in liquid form is carried by the female *mules* in their bodies in the form of breast implants.

"They gave me a condom (filled) with cocaine and I had to swallow it. It was very unpleasant, and I almost vomited but I did it (...). I think there was a tip-off or something, because nobody would have known what I brought (...)" (Colombian woman, 26 years old).

Cocaine can also be transported in the luggage, which enables the trafficking of larger quantities of drugs.

"I brought it (cocaine) in my suitcase, which had a false bottom. I thought I could pass for a tourist because they had said it was easy, but there was a lot of surveillance at the airport, and I was very nervous (...)" (Argentinian woman, 31 years old).

Despite the fact that organizations prefer women as *mules*, gender discrimination is also reflected in cases in which cocaine is transported by men, who receive a higher remuneration than women. The comments of the *mules* interviewed show that they are aware of this reality.

"Men charge more and that's not fair because, look at me, here I am in prison and my children alone. And on top of that, they haven't paid me anything. At least for them it's worth it" (Colombian woman, 23 years old).

Other studies also conclude that, compared to their male counterparts, women accept receiving less money for trafficking (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2018: 30). Resa-Nestares (2014) even points out that women earn an average of 150 € less than men for the same transportation task.

Female *mules* occupy the last positions within the organizational structure, are the most exposed to detention, and are the lowest paid. Only a minority of women have managed to reach positions of power within the organization, as is the case of the *drug queens* mentioned in the introduction. Previous studies in Spanish prisons have evidenced cases of women in positions of power in criminal organizations, but they are rare and refer to women from Eastern Europe in prison for human trafficking offences (Ruiz-García & Castillo-Algarra, 2014). However, the reality of the Latin American women we have interviewed does not correspond to the *drug queens*' profile and the position they occupy within the cocaine business is always that of *mules*.

Benefits and Risks of Cocaine Trafficking for Female Mules

The *mules* interviewed obtain three types of benefits from cocaine trafficking:

1. The economic benefit. The *mules* interviewed expected an average profit of 3,000 € for the transportation of a certain amount of cocaine. It is remarkable that none of them were aware of the amount of cocaine they were carrying. This shows how female *mules* are merely instruments of the organizations. Other studies point that the average wage of a courier is 6.5 € per gram of cocaine and the average remuneration for transport is approximately 5,000 €. This amount increases when the drug is carried in the baggage, reaching almost 6,000 €, and decreases to 4,200 € in cases where women carry the drug in their bodies (Resa-Nestares, 2014).
2. The economic benefit derived from trafficking enables these women to avoid emigration. Trafficking is seen as an exceptional event to be carried out in a short space of time, which allows them to return to their family environment and their normal life. Faced with this option, the option of emigration would imply the construction of a migration project that includes childcare in their place of origin, a costly trip in economic terms, the prolonged separation from their families, and an uncertain economic benefit far below what they can obtain from cocaine trafficking.

"I didn't want to leave my country or my family. It's hard to start a new life in another place and it's very difficult to find work for foreigners, so I saw in trafficking a possibility to avoid emigrating ... I thought this would only be back and forth, but it didn't work out" (Colombian woman, 26 years old).

The economic benefit is also a motivation to traffic even for women who have emigrated and have not achieved the objectives of their migration project in economic terms.

"I came (to Spain) to make my life as an immigrant, but it is not what they say (...). It seemed like we were going to earn a lot of money here, but it is not like that. Immigrants face a lot of hardship. I have worked in many places, but I never got any money (...). I met a girl who was involved in this (cocaine trafficking), and, well, she convinced me, and now, I'm here (in prison)" (Dominican woman, 30 years old).

3. Finally, trafficking appears a priori as a beneficial alternative to prostitution as a means of obtaining money. Authors such as Giacomello (2013) have described the use of prostitution by Latin American women. In some cases, the *mules* interviewed reported that the organization offered them both options, trafficking and prostitution. This shows how cocaine trafficking organizations reproduce a *mafia* model in which one of the features is the diversification of criminal activities (Medina, 2012; García, 2014).

"It was either this (cocaine trafficking) or becoming a prostitute, and my children were not going to take it well if I became involved in prostitution (...), but I did not expect that I would be imprisoned (...)" (Colombian woman, 22 years old).

Faced with these benefits, drug trafficking poses serious risks to *mules*:

4. The risk to their health in cases where they transport the drug within their body. Although the risk of breakage of the drug packaging is not high, it does exist. Breakage can have serious consequences for the mule's health, including death, if medical attention is not received in time.

"I had a very painful experience to expel the "acorns" I was carrying. I had to take laxatives and an enema and I spent many hours until I could expel everything... I almost died..." (Bolivian woman, 33 years old).

2. The risk of arrest and subsequent imprisonment. Most of the *mules* transporting drugs to Europe are arrested at the Madrid-Barajas Adolfo Suárez airport as they pass the customs checkpoints and are transferred to prison.

"People, Colombians who arrive in Barajas (Madrid airport, Spain) and what they know is Barajas-Soto del Real (a penitentiary in Madrid) (...). They are stopped and transferred immediately. They do not get to know Spain" (Surveillance official, women's unit).

It seems that sometimes the organizations turn their couriers in to permit the transit of others traveling on the same flights with more significant amounts of drugs (Giacomello 2013). The strategy most widely used by the organizations-which is mentioned by the *mules*- is to provide the *mule* with enough money, as well as hotel reservations, so that they can pass themselves off as tourists or even as residents in Spain pretending to visit friends or family.

Once detained, these women often spend a long time in pretrial detention without the possibility of bail because of the risk of escape, and they end up serving long sentences that keep them away from their families. The Spanish Criminal Code imposes high sentences for drug trafficking offenses, for three to six years for trafficking toxic drugs, narcotics or psychotropic substances. Furthermore, it determines that stronger penalties are to be imposed when the amount of the substance trafficked is of obvious significance.

3. A last risk arises when they need legal assistance once detained. The *mules* interviewed stated that they had the services of a private lawyer at their own expense. However, some of the *mules* were left to their own fate by the mafias and the Spanish judicial system assigned them a public lawyer as they had no financial resources for a private defense. These *mules* expressed their dissatisfaction with the availability and performance of these lawyers.

"My lawyer is a disaster. I have written to him and I have called him several times and he doesn't answer me... He doesn't care... If he had any talk it would be a different thing. He always says he will come and he won't come" (Dominican woman, 48 years old).

4. Finally, sometimes the criminal organizations put the female mules' and their families' safety at risk. Some of the *mules* interviewed show how they have been coerced by the mafias with threats of physical violence, kidnapping or death, to prevent them from violating their commitment or denouncing the organization in the event of being arrested.

"I had no choice but to bring the drugs even though I was about to repent, but they threatened my children and I was afraid... And look, now I am in jail... I wish I hadn't done it, because in the end, I got neither money nor anything else" (Colombian woman, 22 years old).

This reality is also picked up by other studies, who report death threats to the *mules*' children and other relatives (Wigglesworth, 1996).

Conclusions and Proposals for Action

Our study is a contribution to the literature on female criminality from a gender perspective through the analysis of a specific group of female criminals: Latin women sentenced for a crime of cocaine trafficking in Spain. Our results have allowed us to identify the reasons that explain why Latin American women, who are housewives and mothers, become *mules*, how they get involved and participate in international cocaine trafficking, and what are the risks and the benefits of. (add full stop); these are the main objectives of this article.

We conclude these women are victims because of their personal and household circumstances and the geographical and social-economic characteristics of their contexts of origin, since these countries are the world's largest cocaine cultivation and production centers and host the organizations that engage in cocaine trafficking. This makes them more vulnerable

to getting involved in cocaine trafficking and becoming *mules*. Nevertheless, they are tenacious women who developed different strategies to support their families before committing a crime. Therefore, we can state that there is a direct relationship between the characteristics of these contexts, the personal careers of these women and their criminalization process. This connection is especially evident in the case of Colombian *mules* and heads of families, mostly separated or divorced and solely responsible for the livelihood of the family group which, in most cases, is the extended family. Most of these women identify participation in cocaine trafficking as a resource which they use to avoid other options, such as prostitution and migration. These women accept this situation because of the potential economic benefits it will bring them and the possibility of escaping from a situation of social exclusion, despite the serious risks it entails. However, the reality is that trafficking does not solve the situation of social exclusion and economic need of these women, but, on the contrary, it makes it deeper as they end up in prison, the last step of social exclusion.

In spite of the recent perspective which emphasizes the existence of empowered women in the cocaine business, our research reflects that the women arrested and imprisoned in Spain for cocaine trafficking are the *mules*, who occupy the most exposed and even "sacrificial" positions within the organization. For the criminal organizations, these women have no face or personal history; they are simply couriers and the last links in the business chain. Although cocaine trafficking turns them into offenders, because they have committed an offense, at the same time, they are victims. On the one hand, they are victims of their geographic, social, and cultural contexts of origin, their family situations, and the gender hierarchy on which the drug business is based. On the other hand, they are also victims of the Spanish Penal Code, which treats them as common criminals, regardless of their social and household circumstances, and lacking previous criminal records.

Our proposals for action aim to counteract these processes of victimization. It is essential to strengthen actionable and awareness policies in the women's countries of origin, aimed specifically at the female heads of households who are the most vulnerable and have lower incomes and higher levels of familial responsibility. These policies should emphasize educational programs and job training which pay special attention to young women to facilitate their incorporation into the labor market and distance them from crime. In addition, the co-educational work of schools should be strengthened and focused on gender equality in family relationships.

Another contribution of our work is related to the repression of the offense against public health in the case of female *mules*. Accordingly, we question the efficacy of some sentences that criminalize these women, with a huge impact in their lives and in the lives of their families, deepening their social exclusion and victimization process. Our proposal in this regard is a revision of the sentences for offenses against public health imposed on the *mules*, in order to design alternatives to imprisonment, still rarely applied in Spain for this type of offense.

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