The Forced Recruitment of Women by Drug Traffickers in Mexico

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Abstract

The strong prevalence of drug trafficking organisations in Mexico has increased over the past decades. Since the start of the *War on Drugs* many people have disappeared, possibly murdered or to do forced labour for organised crime groups. The forced recruitment of women happens often with the purpose of sexual exploitation done by human traffickers. This thesis researches the socioeconomic and cultural factors that influence the forced recruitment of women by drug traffickers in Mexico. Through literary research, factors have been found that could possibly explain the occurrence, or factors that have influenced women's vulnerability in regard to this phenomenon. The factors are: (1) Women's Position in Mexican Culture, (2) Structural Unsafety, (3) Areas with High Crime Rates, (4) a Weak Economy, (5) Attitude Towards Drug Trafficking Organisations, (6) Poor Living Conditions, and (7) Lack of Trust in the Government and Judicial System. Corruption, high impunity rates and a strong network have benefitted drug traffickers in this phenomenon. Low economic means, residing in areas with more crime, and their position in society have increased women's vulnerability to this phenomenon. This research should be a starting point for further, more accurate research to eventually create effective policies to combat this phenomenon and increase women's safety.

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Women in Mexico have known a long history of violence. Since the start of the *War on Drugs,* drug-related crimes have increased. Disappearances, kidnappings, and crimes against women have consequentially increased as well. Women are often at greater risk of being targeted by organised crime groups. Injustice and effective anti-crime policies have been enormous. Drug traffickers have targeted women and forced them into doing drug-related crimes for them. This thesis will research possible socioeconomic and cultural factors that have influenced this phenomenon and women's vulnerability in relation to this.

The reason to specifically research the forced recruitment of women, and not forced recruitment in general, is because it is a phenomenon that is relatively unknown and under researched in relation to drug trafficking. It is no secret that women are often victim of gender-based violence or that they end up in organised crime. Female victims of forced recruitment by drug traffickers often go unnoticed, and there are many factors that have an influence on the occurrence of this phenomenon and on women's vulnerability to it.

The aim of this thesis is to present how certain socioeconomic and cultural factors influence the forced recruitment of women by drug traffickers in Mexico, and how those factors contribute to women's vulnerability to this phenomenon.

This will be done in three phases. The first phase is to determine and explain the concepts that function as a foundation to the phenomenon of forced recruitment by drug traffickers. Starting broadly with organised crime, it will narrow into drug trafficking in Mexico, and end with the concept of the forced recruitment of women.

The second phase will be an analysis of the socioeconomic factors and cultural factors that influence the forced recruitment of women by drug traffickers in Mexico. Some explain the occurrence of this phenomenon and others explain their influence on women's vulnerability.

In the third and final phase, an answer will be given, based on all the analysed literature, to the research question: "How do socioeconomic and cultural factors influence the forced recruitment of women by drug traffickers in Mexico, and how do those elements influence women's vulnerability to this phenomenon?" After that I will discuss the limitations of this thesis, give possible implications of my findings, and provide suggestions for further research.

With this research, I hope to be able to raise awareness for this phenomenon and provide a contribution to the improvement of women's safety.

Phase I – Foundational Concepts

While this thesis is about the influencing factors in the phenomenon of the forced recruitment of women by drug traffickers in Mexico, there are several other concepts that need to be addressed before diving into the core of the thesis.

The first is that the drug trafficking economy most often falls under the broader term of organised crime. There are exceptions, where drug cultivation, production and dealing are achieved on a small scale, without any relations to organised crime. Those cases are few in the grand scheme of the drug trade, and insignificant to this thesis. Thus, the focus lays on drug trafficking organisations (DTOs).

Organised crime itself is a complex and widely researched concept that has varying definitions and aspects. To have a clear understanding of organised crime, I will give one overarching definition based on how it has been defined in related literature.

The second section of the first phase will give an overview of the drug trade and human trade. Specifically, their history and current occurrence in Mexico, and the similarities and differences between the drug and human trade.

The third and last section of the introduction will be devoted to the role of women in organised crime (and thus in drug trafficking), both forced and voluntary, ending with the phenomenon of the forced recruitment of women by drug traffickers in Mexico.

Organised Crime

Definition

When thinking of organised criminal groups (OCs), many will jump to the term *mafia*. While originally referring to the OC of Sicily (also known as Cosa Nostra), it has become synonymous for an OC (Lupo, 2009). The same happened to some of the oldest and most commonly known OCs, such as the Russian *bratva*, the Japanese *yakuza*, and the Chinese *triads*. These groups are stereotypically associated with, and shaped by a specific type of organisational structure, culture, the use of violence, and an aim for power. Though unnuanced in their portrayal, these stereotypes are formed and strengthened by popular media culture (Finckenauer, 2005). However, these stereotypes have only made the synonymity of organised crime and mafia greater, and as a result made organised crime more difficult to

define (Smith, 1971). So what, then, is organised crime and what is an organised criminal group?

An OC can be described first and foremost, as a *continuing illicit (or criminal) enterprise* (Albanese, 2015; Smith, 1971; Nicaso & Danesi, 2021; UNODC, 2018). The illicit enterprise is established by either the use and/or sale of an illicit product, and/or because their operation is done illicitly. The amount of time for which an OC has existed proves its legitimacy and significance in the (informal) economy, and thus in society (Council of the EU, 1997; UN General Assembly, 2001).

Additionally, an OC must consist of *three or more people* (ibid.), and they must have an *internal structure*, both culturally and organisationally (Nicaso & Danesi, 2021). Organisational structure is necessary to show that not every group of people that committed a crime, which they planned beforehand, falls under organised crime (Finckenauer, 2005). This, typically hierarchical, structure is also needed to keep an OC functional, and this is where culture comes into play. The cultural structure is what unifies members of an OC and distinguishes one OC from the other. These are usually formed by specific types of communication, symbols and rituals, and codes of behaviour (including a code of silence). These are often enforced and ensured by use of violence, or the threat thereof. Violence is not only used as a means for internal discipline, but also for maintaining and/or gaining (market) territory (Cressey, 1969).

The corruption of public officials, with (the threat of) violence are the main methods of maintaining the existence and prosperity of an OC. The ultimate goal of organised crime and OCs is power (Nicaso & Danesi, 2021). The main source of money is through territorial control, and both lead to more power, which in turn ensures the possibility of more money and territory. Money, territorial control and power are the sole goals of an OC, there are no political ideologies involved. That said, politics are definitely involved in an OC's method of operation.

From these elements, I give the following definition of an organised criminal group:

A continuing illicit enterprise, consisting of three or more people, with an internal organisation that aims to gain and/or maintain power through the profit from illicit activities.

Prevalent criminal markets

In the *Global Organized Crime Index 2023* from the organisation Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC, 2023a), the top five criminal markets of 2022 are Financial Crimes (5.98), Human Trafficking (5.82), Cannabis Trade (5.34), Arms Trafficking (5.21), and Human Smuggling (5.16). The index offers the scores on a scale from 1 to 10, 1 being the lowest level, and 10 the highest level of organised crime. There are fifteen markets in total, of which the following seven will be used in this thesis: Heroin Trade, Cocaine Trade, Cannabis Trade, Synthetic Drugs Trade, Human Trafficking, Human Smuggling, and Extortion and Protection Racketeering. The first four fall under the Drug Trade. Human Trafficking and Smuggling fall under the Human Trade. Extortion and Protection Racketeering are the most frequently used methods by OCs and is thus also important for this thesis.

Drug Trade and Human Trade

Two of the most prevalent criminal markets of organised crime are the Drug Trade and the Human Trade. In some cases, the two enterprises operate fully separate from each other. Because of their similarities, however, they often intertwine. This section will first present the history of the drug and human trade in Mexico, and what the current situation is. Then, the similarities and differences will be given as a foundation to the third section about the forced recruitment of women.

Drug Trade

The production and use of drugs for recreational and medicinal use has been prevalent for centuries. Opium, made from poppy seeds, was used in ancient civilisations (Nencini, 2022). The cultivation and use of coca leaves also have a long history. Its traditional use remains an important practice in indigenous South American groups (Allen, 1981). Though since then, there has been a transformation in the drug world. Coca leaves are now not chewed but processed with chemicals and then dried, until all that is left is cocaine powder. From simple opium sap, morphine and eventually heroin were made. And while drug abuse and addiction are nothing new, it is true that in the past decades, narcotics have become more dangerous to its users. Every new drug is more potent, more addictive, and more harmful than the previous, made with the cheapest chemicals possible to gain as much profit as possible (Pardo, 2019).

The economic opportunities from narcotics as these have always been a main driver for its production and trade. The two *Opium Wars* are plenty evidence for the battle between

economic profits from narcotics and the desire for drug prohibition (Caquet, 2022). Since the nineteenth century, the *War on Drugs* has evolved up to the point how we know it today. After United States' president Richard Nixon has declared war on drug abuse, the term *War on Drugs* was popularised by the media. Though Nixon cannot take the credit for the desire for drug regulation and prohibition, he did set in motion a series of measures to attempt international drug control.

That said, Mexico has its own history leading up to its current situation of battling the drug trade. Mexico's conservative stance on drugs can be linked back to prejudiced opinions on the use and trade of marijuana in the beginning of the twentieth century (Smith, 2021). Much like the practice of chewing coca leaves, marijuana had already been used for centuries, mostly to treat medical issues. It was widely used during the Mexican Revolution, but the initial hype died out in the 1930s. The prejudice, however, did not die out. This prejudice was more against the people involved in the trade, than against the drug itself, and would shape Mexico's anti-drug policies over the decades (ibid.).

While Mexico and the US cannot possibly be separated regarding the drug trade and the *War on Drugs* in both countries, there were internal developments in Mexico that led to its severe response to the drug trade. Up until the start of this century, Mexico had an authoritarian political regime. Though corrupting the government, the ruling party had pacts with DTOs and other OCs to control their operations and keep OCs from waging war on each other. Criminal organisations paid the government to turn a blind eye to their operations, which made the crime situation relatively stable (Medel & Thoumi, 2014). During the democratisation of the state, the government struggled to control OCs, and increased the use of armed forces, leading to violent encounters. Mexico was still a weak state, making it also more prone to corruption and weak institutions (Rosen & Zepeda, 2016).

Mexico places third out of 193 countries on the Organized Crime Index (GI-TOC, 2023a), with a score of 7.57 of overall criminality, scoring exceptionally high in the Drug Trade and Human Trade. Heroin is mainly produced in the north-western states of Mexico and trafficked to the US. The country serves as a transit country for cocaine, moving it from the Andes region to the US. The cocaine trade has increased since the Caribbean route was blocked in the 1980s, which Colombian DTOs had used to traffic it to the US themselves (Rosen & Zepeda, 2016). Despite its legalisation in some US states, Mexico is still US's largest foreign cannabis provider (GI-TOC, 2023b). The synthetic drugs trade in Mexico has

increased in the past years. Fentanyl and methamphetamine are the two most prominent synthetic drugs, the former being cheaper to produce and more potent than heroin (Pardo, 2019).

Drug use has rapidly increased over the past decade, making the drug trade an economically beneficial sector (Arias & Grisaffi, 2021; UNODC, 2024b). Since the democratisation, Mexico has suffered economically, still being characterised by low economic growth, and high levels of poverty and informal markets (Rosen & Zepeda, 2016). Anti-drug policies have failed to succeed their goal of "the protection of public health, an increase in public security and the suppression of criminal activity," as Watt and Zepeda (2012) put it. The prejudiced notion of the effects of drugs, and in turn behind the start of many anti-drug regulations around the world, can explain why the *War on Drugs* is still being waged, rather unsuccessfully. Violence has been the main tool for drug enforcement in Mexico, partly because of its acceptance of US militarisation in Mexico's drug war, despite how ineffective it has been (Teague, 2021). Mexico's contemporary severity of drug-related violence stems from harsh measures from a corrupt government, its poor economy, and from DTOs' power control (Medel & Thoumi, 2014).

Human Trade

The Human Trade consists of two different criminal markets: human trafficking and human smuggling. Human smuggling is the illegal move of people, often from an unsafe and/or poor country to a richer and safer country. Usually, after the smuggled person is at the destination, the relationship between them and the smuggler(s) end (Kleemans & Smit, 2014). Human trafficking is a longer-term relationship based on the exploitation of the trafficked person(s) to recruit, transport, harbour, or receipt them. Traffickers use for example violence (or the threat thereof), coercion, deception, and abuse of power to reach their goals. While they are distinct in nature, human trafficking and smuggling are interlinked. In human smuggling, similar means may be used as in human trafficking to ensure payment. Or smuggled persons may eventually be trafficked if they had not been able to pay, for example. The most important differences between human trafficking and human smuggling are that human smuggling always involves crossing borders and is initially done with the consent of the smuggled person (Aronowitz & Veldhuizen, 2021; Kleemans & Smit, 2014).

Human Trafficking in Mexico, scoring an 8.00 on the OC Index, is particularly active on its borders. Its victims are subjected to forced labour and sex work, the former is nearer to the southern border, the latter is nearer to the northern border (GI-TOC, 2023b).

Human Smuggling, scoring a 9.00 in Mexico, has an incoming stream of migration from its southern border, and an outgoing stream from its northern border. Smugglers in southern Mexico are usually local people living in that area. Smugglers in northern Mexico are often linked to OCs and corrupt officials. Like with the drug trade, Mexico functions as a transit country for human smuggling. For human trafficking as well, albeit on a lower level with trafficking victims coming from and/or staying in Mexico. (GI-TOC, 2023b)

Drug and Human Trade

As mentioned before, the goal of OCs is power through money and territory. The same applies to DTOs and human trade organisations. The main difference between the two is that the products of DTOs can be used only once, while victims of human traffickers can be used multiple times (Shelley, 2012). In recent years, DTOs have diversified their business by participating in the human trade, which is a possible consequence to anti-drug policies. The entry costs are low, the risks are relatively low as most countries focus more on the drug trade, and one business can be hidden within the other. Additionally, drug trafficking routes can easily be used to move humans. Within human trafficking, drugs are used to recruit new victims and to keep them compliant. Within human smuggling, the smuggled persons may smuggle drugs as a form of payment to the smugglers (ibid.).

For this research, only the overlap between DTOs and human trafficking and smuggling is of importance. And only the instances in which DTO-facilitated human smuggling evolves into trafficking will be relevant from the human smuggling market, since human smuggling in its pure form is not directly linked to forced recruitment (Aronowitz & Veldhuizen, 2021).

The Forced Recruitment of Women

Though organised crime is often seen as a man's world, women have always played a role in it (Carey, 2014). Not just as the mothers, daughters, wives and lovers as widely depicted in the media, but also as the drug mules, crime bosses, and everything in between. Recently, more research has focussed on women in power positions in organised crime and the increase thereof (Adler, 1975; Fleetwood & Leban, 2022; Maher & Hudson, 2007).

Despite this emancipation process women have undergone in the drug trade, the reality is that most women in the drug trade have not chosen to be there. The majority of sex trafficking victims are women (UNODC, 2023). Additionally, most cases of women forced into organised crime are those of sex trafficking (ibid.). Given the overlap between the drug trade and human trade, these cases are relevant to the forced recruitment by drug traffickers.

Recruitment into organised crime is about the motivations of an individual to decide to participate in an OC. With forced recruitment, it is not a matter of willing and consented participation. The means through which this happens often coincide with those used by human traffickers and include the use (and/or threat) of violence, coercion, deception, and forced substance use.

Dancing on the line of stereotype and reality, it is difficult to determine the true extent of women's roles in organised crime. Nevertheless, the available research on this topic is vital to understand the forced recruitment of women by drug traffickers.

Phase II – Influencing Factors

Methods

This thesis is completely based on information gathered from academic papers and books about organised crime, drug trafficking, human trafficking, the roles of women in OCs, recruitment into organised crime, and forced recruitment of women in the drug trade and human trade. Only secondary data is used. This allowed me to maintain a broad enough scope to research the phenomenon of the forced recruitment of women by drug traffickers in the whole of Mexico.

I have used the online database from the University of Groningen, as well as Google Scholar to find relevant articles by filling in keywords related to organised crime, drug trafficking, forced recruitment, women, and Mexico. To find more relevant articles, I looked at the cited sources from the articles I read and looked at the "cited by" function on Google Scholar to see what other articles had used that same article in their research. Additionally, I received a list of relevant authors in fields related to this thesis from my supervisor, which helped me plough through the plethora of academic articles about organised crime.

The Factors

From the foundational concepts, which explained the basics of organised crime, how the current situation of the drug trade in Mexico arose, how the drug trade and human trade are interlinked, and what the forced recruitment of women is, the influencing factors can be given. The factors are mostly socioeconomic or cultural in nature, but can also have overlap with each other and/or with political factors. The factors give either reason(s) why the phenomenon of the forced recruitment of women by drug traffickers in Mexico (*the phenomenon* for short) can occur, or how they impact women's vulnerability to the phenomenon.

The seven most important factors are (1) Women's Position in Mexican Culture, (2) Structural Unsafety, (3) Areas with High Crime Rates, (4) a Weak Economy, (5) Attitude Towards Drug Trafficking Organisations, (6) Poor Living Conditions, and (7) Lack of Trust in the Government and Judicial System. The cultural factors are the first, fifth and seventh. The socioeconomic factors are the second, third, fourth and sixth. Each factor builds on the information from the previous one(s).

When talking about factors that make women more vulnerable to the phenomenon, I do not mean that those women are responsible for being in a position where they are subjected to this crime. Those factors represent a system that has failed to protect women against this phenomenon.

Women's Position in Mexican Culture

Sexism is deeply ingrained in Mexican culture because of religious and colonial notions that have shaped women's subordinate position in society and is kept intact through family education and media portrayals (Monsiváis, 1973, as published in Klahn & Luna, 2024).

Stemming mostly from religious control, women are seen as inferior beings and must therefore be exploited (ibid.). During the centuries of Spanish rule, such views were enforced into rules of law and through the influence of the catholic church. Historical literary works have also strengthened the mythification, idealisation and exploitation of women.

The emancipation of women has improved their position in many aspects. In a study from 2011, researchers compared the gender portrayal in Mexican films from before and after the establishment of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). They found that films associate female modernity positively with foreign values and negatively with Mexican values, which were also related to more sexist portrayals. Women received more respect from men in films that were positive about Mexican values. Pre-NAFTA films had more sexism in the portrayal of gender roles. Post-NAFTA films showed less sexism overall. (Benítez-Galbraith et al., 2011)

In contemporary popular culture and media, the portrayal of women in organised crime is almost always as the victim, lover, or grieving family member (Carey, 2014). At the same time, they portray men as cool, powerful, and independent (Fickenauer, 2005). Such media portrayals play a huge role in keeping the sexist notions and gender-roles intact.

The views of female innocence and purity are why women are less likely to be suspected of criminal activities by authorities (Campbell, 2008; Maher & Hudson, 2007). Precisely this is why drug traffickers want women to perform certain crimes for them. Once the rise of women in organised crime became known, policies have changed as well. An example is employing female police officers, who would be less likely to have this bias against other women, in comparison to male police officers (Carey, 2014). Even if this helped

prosecute more women, current crime convictions of women for organised crime have helped little in reducing drug crimes (Fair Trials, 2022).

Regardless of anti-crime policies having adapted to this, women are still at a high risk to be forcefully recruited by drug traffickers. They are still desired to (1) work as drug mules because they are less likely to be suspected, to (2) open their homes for drug operations because they present a "loving and proper home" to authorities, or to (3) become a sacrificial decoy, purposefully getting caught to mislead authorities from a location where the actual trade is completed (Bonello, 2023; Carey, 2014). Sexist views on women's supposed roles and capabilities amongst drug traffickers caused them to occupy the lowest-status roles in DTOs (Bonello, 2023). They are not required to have special skills or to be educated, which makes them easily replaceable.

Structural Unsafety

The reason for the occurrence of the phenomenon in Mexico is twofold. Firstly, Mexico's governmental and judicial system is inherently unjust because it has been shaped by the sexist biases ingrained in Mexican culture. Secondly, there is a lack of criminal deterrence for drug-related crimes and crimes against women.

Mexico was built on the inclusion of patriarchal norms and values, and on the exclusion of marginalised groups, indigenous peoples and women (Monsiváis, 1985, as published in Klahn & Luna, 2024). Especially women from Indigenous communities have a higher disadvantage in Mexico's society. They are vulnerable due to a history of oppression that led to discrimination, exclusion and poverty. Migrant Indigenous women living in US-Mexico border states, who moved there in search for better living conditions, have to cope with little to no access to food, water and healthcare (Tobon, 2024). These issues are in some cases exacerbated by language barriers and illiteracy. People from Indigenous communities and those from other ethnicities are more often victims of forced agricultural labour (GI-TOC, 2023b). Moreover, these biases against marginalised groups are imbedded in Mexico's government in the sense that there are no public policies to protect them against violence or to alleviate poor living conditions (Tobon, 2024).

The detection of victims of human trafficking in North America has increased since 2019, but the number of convictions of these crimes has decreased (UNODC, 2024a). Victims that were trafficked for sexual exploitation make up 69 per cent, women and girls making up 92 per cent of that total. Victims of forced labour make up 23 per cent of the total,

out of which 43 per cent were women and girls. Though it is not specified in the *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2024* where those victims are largely detected (i.e., Canada, Mexico or the United States), it does give an insight of regional trends. From the *Global Organized Crime Index Mexico* we know that human trade rates are incredibly high, especially sex trafficking is highly prevalent near the U.S.-Mexico border (GI-TOC, 2023b).

While the overall number of women accused of crimes is smaller than men, they are more negatively impacted by prosecution processes (Fair Trials, 2022). Many prosecuted women were a victim of forced criminal labour or were prosecuted because of their connections to men. Additionally, many of those women do not have the financial resources and social support system to provide a proper criminal defence. Women (as perpetrators) who were investigated for human trafficking in Mexico were proportionally more convicted than men (UNODC, 2023).

Mexico's institutional instability has led to the expansion of the human trafficking and drug trafficking markets (GI-TOC, 2023b). There are high levels of corruption amongst government officials who contribute to ensuring the presence of DTOs in return for money (Medel & Thoumi, 2014; Nicaso & Danesi, 2021). Additionally, there are high impunity rates for drug-related crimes and crimes against women (Atuesta & González, 2022; Bonilla, 2024; Rosen & Zepeda, 2016).

The lack of action against crime against women and drug-related crimes, either from incompetence or unwillingness (both reflections of a weak and corrupt state), in combination with high impunity rates for these crimes has not helped in preventing these crimes; criminal deterrence is weak at best. The risks for drug traffickers to forcefully recruit women are low, so the benefits are greater. And if those women get caught and prosecuted, they can be replaced just as easily as they have been recruited.

Areas with High Crime Rates

Networking is a major part of ensuring the continuation of OCs. Most recruitments are made through the "social snowball effect", which is a process that uses close social ties to bridge social and criminal networks (Comunale et al., 2020). Most recruitment into organised crime for women goes via family or emotional relationships (Calderoni et al., 2022). In an area with a strong DTO presence, which suggests a strong network, the chance of becoming recruited is much higher than in areas with low crime rates.

In areas with a high and strong presence of a DTO, where they have overtaken a big part of the economy, there is a scarcity of legal or formal jobs. Women living in these areas may come in a situation of financial desperation, a risk factor for being recruited (Calderoni et al., 2022). DTOs can use this to manipulate these women by promising an income. Out of a need for economic survival, it can be the only option to join a DTO.

Mexico's western states have more intense rates of violence than the south-east states (Bergman, 2018). These states have experienced high rates of disappearances, with many victims kidnapped by drug traffickers who forced them to work for them (Atuesta & Gonzáles, 2022). From existing data can be concluded that victims in those cases of forced recruitment are men. For women, the occurrence of disappearances in U.S.-Mexico border regions were more often related to sex trafficking.

In general, areas near the northern border where drugs are exported, and areas near the southwest coast where drugs are imported in ports are the areas with the highest chance of interaction with drug trafficking organisations.

Weak Economy

Regions with a weak economy will have higher levels of unemployment and job insecurity, and will have fewer resources to provide proper education, healthcare, regulated housing, or to spread awareness to the dangers of DTOs (further elaborated in the next factor). While Mexico's economy was quite stable before the era of democratisation, the economic distribution and benefits were highly unequal (Haber et al., 2008). This has festered in little to no housing regulations and a weak accessible healthcare distribution. A lack of access to affordable healthcare has mainly affected women from poorer communities, women from Indigenous communities, and migrant women (Tobon, 2024). A lack of access to affordable housing has also affected poorer communities and exacerbated poor living conditions (to be elaborated).

Globalisation and the transfer to a neoliberal economic system has provided DTOs the opportunity to expand their business further out in the world. It became easier to ship drugs around the world and to widen their network (Medel & Thoumi, 2014). This has made the prevalence of organised crime greater and stronger (see previous factor).

Lower levels of education can lead to higher unemployment rates, which increases risks of recruitment into organised crime (Atuesta & González, 2022). Historically, girls and

women who were not from the highest social class, did not receive a formal education (Monsiváis, 1985, as published in Klahn & Luna, 2024). While this has legally changed, women are still receiving less education than men, mainly because they need to work to provide for their families instead of going to school. Girls and women who are in school will drop out as soon as they are married, and start working and/or caring for their children (Roy, 2018).

In 1994, the North American Free Trade Agreement went into force. The agricultural sector could not compete with price-reduced products from the United States. Many rural workers had no choice but to move to urban areas, abandoning their lands in the process. As a result, many of these lands were used to cultivate marijuana and poppy (Rosen & Zepeda, 2016). Many marginalised groups are located in these rural areas, making them more exposed to DTOs. While DTOs will often support the poorer families in their territory, it often comes with demanding something in return (ibid.).

Mexico's formal economy is instable and unequally distributed, affecting the marginalised groups the most. Mexico's informal economy continues to grow and prosper in spite of the state of the formal economy, increasing the possibility for the phenomenon to occur, while simultaneously increasing women's vulnerability to the phenomenon.

Attitude Towards Drug Trafficking Organisations

Women's attitude towards drug trafficking organisations and their operations is an important factor in the level of vulnerability to the phenomenon. There are a few factors involved in forming an attitude towards crime.

The first is how organised crime is depicted in literature, news media, and films. News outlets have the power to shape viewers' opinions to their stance through information manipulation. The more an item is repeated, the more seriously people think about that issue (Camarillo, 2024). Additionally, the more someone consumes the same types of media topics, the more their opinions will align with those of media. The government can play a vital role in news depictions. They can have the power to spread awareness for the dangers imposed by organised crime organisations and highlighting the severity of crimes against women. They also can use that power to downplay OC related crime issues (Tucker et al., 2018).

Contemporary films and tv-shows often glorify and romanticise drug trafficking organisations, empowering men while depicting women as secondary characters. This

depiction makes it attractive for boys and men to participate in organised crime. News content and cinematic entertainment can result in the normalisation of drug-related crimes and their imposing violence.

Women who are more exposed to violence, because they live in an area with a strong DTO presence, or because they consume a lot of violence-filled media can become desensitised to the dangers and consequences of drug trafficking. This increases their vulnerability to the influence of drug traffickers, and in turn the phenomenon.

On the other hand, some people will develop an extreme adverse opinion of drug trafficking organisations. This may be because of direct experiences, or because of friends and family that have been affected by violence. If they search for protection measures and government officials and authorities have not provided them, they may seek to organise their own groups (further elaborated in *Lack of Trust in the Government and Judicial System*).

Poor Living Conditions

Women without an income or with an instable income will have a lack of financial means to acquire basic living resources (i.e., food, water, shelter, clothing). This lack of basic living resources increases vulnerability to the phenomenon, with DTOs promising money in return or providing the necessary living resources directly.

There are cases in which a DTO facilitates human smuggling. In some instances, it can occur that human smuggling evolves into forced labour, if the smuggled woman has not sufficiently paid in any way (Aronowitz & Veldhuizen, 2021; Camarillo et al., 2024). While human smuggling crosses country borders, it is difficult to determine whether those forced into DTOs from human smuggling were first smuggled into Mexico and then forced into drug trafficking, or if they were meant to be smuggled out of Mexico but stayed as a result of insufficient payment. This means that it is not necessarily Mexico's (regional) poor economic state and its consequential lack of resources leading to poor individual living conditions that increase the vulnerability to the phenomenon due to human smuggling. Nevertheless, it is a result of Mexico's high crime rates and DTO presence. Furthermore, simply because insufficient payment is the most found (and easily justified) reason for forced recruitment, it does not mean that drug traffickers that facilitate human smuggling are strictly honouring the agreement to truly smuggle a person. Women being smuggled by a DTO are therefore more vulnerable to the phenomenon.

Violence from DTO operations, or violence from clashes between two or more DTOs can lead to displacement. Internally displaced persons often lack a good support system and resources to live in a place that is safe. Therefore, they are more susceptible to (violent) manipulation from DTOs. Women that recently migrated without a support system are also more vulnerable to the phenomenon. An overall lack of a support system and/or (stable) social and work relationships makes for a great asset in the drug trade, because there is a relatively low chance that they will be reported missing if they are forced into organised crime. (Camarillo, 2024)

Women that live in a dysfunctional or abusive household also have an increased chance of being involved in a DTO (Calderoni et al., 2022). This situation is not a consequence of high crime rates per se, it has more to do with personal relationships and abusive behaviour. This can be linked to violence against women and a lack of protection and justice, as presented in *Structural Unsafety*. Abusive behaviour within households is often paired with a lack of social contacts outside the household. As mentioned above, having a weak (or no) support system increases women's vulnerability to forced recruitment (Camarillo et al, 2024).

A more obvious living condition that influences the phenomenon is the geographical location of a woman's residence. This is closely related to the factors of areas with high crime rates and of gender roles shaped by Mexican culture. Women that live in an area where drugs are cultivated can be at higher risk of the phenomenon, where they are forced to do fieldwork, such as picking leaves and weeding. OC-related disappearances are most frequent in the northeastern border states, where drug smuggling is more prevalent. Women living in such an area are at higher risk to the phenomenon given their observed innocence from authorities and social worth to drug traffickers.

Lack of Trust in the Government and Judicial System

In areas in Michoacán and Guerrero, the presence of DTOs was so strong that those areas were practically fully controlled by them. The areas had no protection from the state, so some citizens created self-defence groups (Rosen & Zepeda, 2016). The self-defence groups have grown in numbers and expanded in reach since 2013, evolving into paramilitary groups. The government has refused to formally recognise these kinds of groups to keep their authority, but also failed to bear responsibility for the safety of their citizens. It created a situation of lawless violence and lawless protection. DTOs continue to operate for power and

control, self-defence groups operate to protect against DTOs, and the government essentially does not operate at all or in a corrupt manner, neither of those two options improving the wellbeing of the residents in those areas. The whole interaction between these three actors only exacerbates the vulnerability to the forced recruitment by drug traffickers.

There is a lack of accountability and responsibility from the government for atrocities that are related to the *War on Drugs*. Government-provided data about disappearances are unreliable due to corruption and an overall lack of reports (Atuesta & González, 2022). These disappearances are probably less frequently reported because of the threat of violence to either the victim or their family, or because corrupt government officials intercepted the reports in order to protect DTOs. Alternatively, when reports are made for disappearances or femicide, investigations from the government are often absent or utterly incompetent. Hoping for proper justice is futile. In many instances, communities find support within their shared desire to protect their children by arranging investigations and methods for protection without help from authorities (Bonilla, 2024).

This (justifiable) lack of trust in the government's capabilities to provide protection and justice, especially regarding gender-based violence, can lead women to resort to accept protection from DTOs in return for participation in their operations. Especially when those women have no support system or community protection programmes, they are more vulnerable to the influences of drug traffickers.

Another consequence to being unprotected, exposed to violence, and seeing no justice for crimes that could happen to any woman, is a decrease in mental health and morale. This may result in carelessness and indifference towards the dangers imposed by drug traffickers. Alternatively (or simultaneously), these consistent structural injustices have sparked support and protest groups amongst victims and families of victims (Todelo, 2024).

Phase III – Conclusion

Answer to the Research Question

I have presented seven socioeconomic and cultural factors which have a direct or indirect effect on the forced recruitment of women by drug traffickers in Mexico. The main findings are:

1. Mexico's cultural perception of women was historically shaped by religious and colonial notions, and has evolved over the years with help from media through literature and films. Overall, women are viewed as innocent and pure and therefore less suspected of crime, making them an ideal target for drug traffickers;
2. If women *are* suspected of crime, they are more likely to be convicted than men. Women's forced roles in OC are low-status, and thus easily replaced. Impunity rates for men for crimes against women and drug-related crimes are high, thanks to corruption in the government. Criminal deterrence is therefore low, increasing the incentive for the phenomenon;
3. The chance of involvement in DTOs is higher in areas with high crime rates, than in areas with low crime rates. Areas with an overwhelming DTO presence has fewer legal or formal jobs available. Women in financial desperation are more susceptible to manipulations from DTOs;
4. Mexico's weak economy has led to lower education, lower access to healthcare, and less affordable housing, affecting mostly people from marginalised ethnicities. Globalisation provided DTOs the opportunity to branch out their reach and increase organised crime rates, exposing more women to the phenomenon;
5. News media, films and tv-shows shape people's perception of the dangers of organised crime. A high exposure to violence, whether through direct experience or via media consumption can lead to the desensitisation of the impacts of organised crime related violence. Normalisation and desensitisation can make people more vulnerable to DTO influences. Those who have an adverse opinion of DTOs can resort to self-protection and political action.
6. Women with poor living conditions and/or a weak support system are more vulnerable to forced recruitment. Women that are displaced or being smuggled are also more vulnerable. Women living in areas that have a strong DTO presence are more likely to be victim of the phenomenon;

7. A lack of trust in the government has led to the forming of community protection groups, often leading to more violence from authorities and DTOs. A lack of trust can also lead to accepting protection from DTOs, a decrease in mental health, and the rise of political protests.

Many of the factors have explained situations in which women were left little to no choice but to succumb to false promises and manipulations from DTOs out of financial desperation or out of need for other resources. These have shown that even without direct physical violence or threats, women are at risk of being manipulated into DTOs. That said, most often women are subjected to physical and emotional harm from drug traffickers in this phenomenon.

The research question is: How do socioeconomic and cultural factors influence the forced recruitment of women by drug traffickers in Mexico, and how do those elements influence women's vulnerability to this phenomenon?

To conclude an answer, the factors have presented the following:

Socioeconomic and cultural factors have influenced the increase in the prevalence of drug trafficking organisations in Mexico and therefore increased the opportunity for the occurrence of the forced recruitment of women. What is beneficial to drug traffickers is a strong network of connections, a strong organisation, government corruption and high impunity rates, and no criminal deterrence.

Socioeconomic and cultural factors have shown what makes women vulnerable in Mexico's society, what factors exacerbate the vulnerability of women, and what characteristics makes women better, low-risk targets for drug traffickers. What disadvantages women is their weaker position in society, having low economic means, and living where they are more exposed to crime.

Implications

This thesis has shown the multifaceted ways in which the forced recruitment of women by drug traffickers in Mexico can be influenced, and how certain factors can make women more vulnerable to this phenomenon. The used literature has supported the factors I found to be most influencing. It is important to note that even if the factors have definitive data, this thesis is mainly based on speculation from these data. The findings are meant to be a starting point in realising how broad this phenomenon is. From here, more targeted research

can be conducted for more accurate assumptions and conclusions, to eventually find what aspects are the root causes and how policies should be shaped to combat this phenomenon.

Discussion

As stated above, this thesis is speculative. Though it is based on valid academic articles, the factors present possible influences on the occurrence of and vulnerability to the phenomenon, not definitive ones. While researching for this thesis, I have encountered various difficulties.

The first problem is that articles that discuss organised crime as a whole are often too broad to reliably conclude the same information for just Mexico. In addition, there is an overflow of articles that researched organised crime in countries in Europe, and I have found especially many that were case studies based on situations in the Netherlands. This might very well be because I am based in the Netherlands, but I know that organised crime research just is that big here, probably because of the size of the drug trafficking sector. Still, those location-specific academic articles gave an insight to what could possibly be influences in drug trafficking and forced recruitment.

Articles on the topic of recruitment into organised crime were not specifically about forced recruitment. Partly because the line between recruitment and forced recruitment is blurred, but also because people that are just recruited are at lower risk of disappearing from society.

This brings me to the following point, which is that data on forced recruitment cannot be accurate, especially in Mexico. Corruption and a lack of reports because of threats from OCs have not helped to paint an accurate picture of how, where, and in what numbers the forced recruitment of women by drug traffickers occurs in Mexico. Additionally, many data on those involved in drug trafficking (including those that are forced) do not specify the roles of those people in the DTOs. Especially data on women's involvement have lacked.

Another problem is that I cannot speak Spanish. Reading Mexican news articles were unreliable through a computer translator. While many Mexican academic articles that were originally written in Spanish have been translated, they were scarce.

Unfortunately, many academic articles about Mexican cases of drug related-crimes and forced recruitment have been on the relationship between Mexico and the United States. Though these also do give some insight for possible reasons of the phenomenon, they are not

wholly useful. This ties into the fact that many academic studies are conducted by people from outside of Mexico, almost always from rich countries. Research studies on Mexico need to be decolonised. Without proper research it will be difficult to invent and implement policies that are actually effective.

Partly thanks to the imposing influence of the United States in Mexico's *War on Drugs* the largest part of measures and policies to combat drug trafficking organisations and the use of drugs have been very violent. Additionally, criminal procedures and conviction policies are too focussed on just getting offenders in prisons. There is no real rehabilitation strategy that will prevent repeat offences.

I hope that despite these points this thesis has been able to raise awareness for the forced recruitment of women by drug traffickers in Mexico. From here, more research in this specific phenomenon shall need to be conducted. Hopefully, women's safety in Mexico will be improved. Women all around the world know what it is like to feel unsafe; none of us should be.

Used abbreviations

DTO – Drug Trafficking Organisation

OC – Organised Criminal Group

The phenomenon – the forced recruitment of women (by drug traffickers (in Mexico))

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