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**LAS MUJERES HERMOSAS PERO PELIGROSAS DEL NARCO:
THE EVOLVING ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE MEXICAN DRUG CARTELS**

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Introduction

In Mexico's drug war, women have traditionally been invisible and played only minimal roles within the transnational drug trafficking organizations or cartels that have plagued Mexico with their incessant violence. The 21st century has brought about many changes to traditional gender roles, most especially in Mexico, a patriarchal society in which strictly defined gender roles are taught since birth. Women are viewed as passive and submissive, the nurturers of society whose responsibility lies in bringing up children and ensuring the household runs smoothly. However, some women are quickly shedding those passive roles and coming to the forefront of the drug war by taking on more traditional male roles in their quest for economic freedom, equality and power. Recent arrests and intelligence have seen a spike in women taking a more operational or tactical role within drug organizations by heading and participating in kidnappings, torture and assassination's which would belie those stereotypical gender roles. To better understand women's involvement in Mexican drug cartels, this paper will closely examine the role women have played in drug trafficking organizations, what has changed in those traditionally held roles and the threat that is posed by this evolving role.

General Description of area of study

In a male-dominated society and a country such as Mexico, women pose a new threat to law enforcement on both sides of the border who continues to view women as victims, rather than victimizers.¹ Do law enforcement officials view women as less of a threat? Has gender played a role as to how much a threat women really are? An equally question of 'why now' forces a deeper look at the context that shapes women's gender-specific roles. Are women overtaking the roles historically played by men? Women in Mexican cartels have evolved into a diverse group that includes more of a hands-on role, such as tactical and para-militaristic roles and transportation of drugs and money by utilizing female charms that is uniquely different from the traditionally patriarchal Latino culture. While participation in the drug trade is not a new phenomenon for women, assuming more tactical or operational roles is a new phenomenon that needs to be examined from a security conscious perspective. Women are unsuspecting "sicarias" or assassins and are increasingly violent and have proven to be more vicious than their male counterparts, who are expected to be ruthless and sadistic. These women organize criminal activities with ease, often operate their own drug rings, and are able to reach unsuspecting targets effortlessly, thereby, being able to deceive law enforcement officials on both sides of the border with their beauty and femininity. In doing so, these women improve their chances of bypassing security checkpoints without fear of getting caught.

Significance

Since the start of the original drug organization by Miguel Angel Felix Gallardo in the 1980's and his subsequent decision to branch his organization off according to established drug routes to trusted associates, Drug Trafficking Organization's (DTOs) have always had men working all aspects of the trade.² It was almost unheard of to have women working within the

¹ Bloom, Mia, "Women as Victims and Victimizers," *eJournal USA*, (May 2007): 16-19.

² "Miguel Angel Felix Gallardo a 18 anos en prision, ya casi no ve ni oye." *Zocalo Saltillo*, April 9, 2008.
<http://www.zocalo.com.mx/seccion/articulo/miguel-angel-felix-gallardo-a-18-anos-ya-casi-no-ve-ni-oye>

drug trade and they were usually relegated to status of couriers/mules or trophy wives or mistresses with limited knowledge or access to the inner workings of this lucrative criminal enterprise. Within the original drug organizations, women were usually aware of the activities of the drug trade but never got involved other than supporting the household and ensuring the children were protected from the violence of the drug trade. Their roles of subservient females led them to be introduced to the drug trade by their boyfriends, husbands, or family members persuading or manipulating them to carry drugs across the border or risk incurring their wrath. More often than not, the women in these courier roles did not profit from participating in these illegal activities. Gradually, they provided logistical support and helped facilitate the role their significant others played in drug trafficking. Unfortunately, they were commonly left to fend for themselves, if significant others or family members were arrested or killed.

A gradual shift began on two levels as it became more common to have the women act as handy lookouts or “halconeras” or radio operators also known as “radieras” to avoid having their brothers, boyfriends or husbands arrested or killed by law enforcement officials or rival drug members while conducting drug related business.³ Women are often viewed with less suspicion if seemingly waiting for someone or even window shopping. Secondly, as time went on and these trophy women became more integrated within the drug trade by establishing glamorous households that also served as protective environments for their men and having their children, the women became trusted advisors and confidantes as is typical in most relationships or marriages. In addition, these same children, who often had lifestyles that rivaled those of real life princes and princesses, were often groomed to take over their family’s established drug trade and mothers continued serving in what was now a traditional advisory role.

Mexico has traditionally been a patriarchal society and it would stand to reason that those operating within the cartels would be no different. As the recent rash of high-profile arrests of women has indicated, women are assuming more visible roles in which they are becoming increasingly violent or simply assuming the financial aspect of the organizations left vacant by the increasing violence within Mexico that has killed off thousands of men involved in the illegal drug business. In examining the various media pieces and the reasons the women were arrested, it has become clear that women have advanced in two apparent paths within the cartels and this paper will highlight both.⁴

Operational/Tactical Roles

The first path is that of an operational or tactical role and includes women who have chosen to become “sicarias” or assassins and work alongside the men carrying out kidnappings, torture and even more shocking, beheadings or “guisos” or acid baths.⁵ Conversely, as the cartels became more violent in their quest to gain control of certain drug routes and men were

³ “Female Assassins a growing part of drug cartels.” *Borderland Beat Website*. June 24, 2011. <http://www.borderlandbeat.com/2011/06/female-assassins-growing-part-of-drug.html>

⁴ Print and Broadcast media coverage and Internet sources from U.S. and Mexican publications noted throughout this paper.

⁵ These “guisos” is the Spanish term for cookouts and typically involve burning the victim alive. Acid baths involve submerging the victim in acid either whole or dismembered.

being arrested or killed with alarming frequency, women started taking on more deadly roles within the drug organizations such as in the case of “Los Zetas” employing female assassins and providing para-military training to those recruited. As other cartels also started employing this seemingly unorthodox action, the explosive cartel violence that has gripped Mexico in recent years has intensified in the ruthless pursuit for control of lucrative smuggling routes has resulted in an escalation of violent methods employed to intimidate and eliminate anyone who dares get in the way.

According to Dr. Arturo Santamaria, a Sociology professor from the Autonomous Universidad from the Mexican state of Sinaloa,⁶ more women are playing major roles in the cartels due to the violence that has claimed the lives of many of the men involved in cartel operations.⁷ He argues that this will make the cartels stronger as women in general are more cautious and use violence sparingly as opposed to men. He states, “The narco-traffickers will become stronger as a result of this, they will be more difficult to fight because the women appear to be acting smarter.”⁸

The following examples of females in the enforcement arm of the cartels represent the tactical operations drug trafficking organizations employ in utilizing women within those ranks. While the statement that women would bring about less violence would be generally agreed upon, the following examples of the violence women in the tactical roles have employed in the course of cartel operations provide an alternate viewpoint. According to Dr. George Grayson, author of “Mexico: Narco-Violence and a Failed State?,” Maria del Pilar Narro Lopez, aka “La Comandante Bombon,” was the head of “Las Panteras” or “The Panthers,” an all- female assassin group within the Zetas organization. Las Panteras are responsible for getting key officials in compromising positions in order to “look the other way” or not patrol certain areas and have the skill-set to kill the official in the event they chose not to cooperate with these beautiful “sicarias.”⁹ Dr. Grayson also commented that Narro Lopez, whose alias translates into “The Sweet Commander”, was on the opposite spectrum of sweet and was in fact just as cruel as her fellow Zetas. She was arrested in 2009 in a law enforcement operation that also resulted in the arrest of other high level cartel members.¹⁰

Another example is Yadira del Rio Larios, aka “La Guera” or “The Fair or Blonde One”, who was arrested in 2009 on murder and weapons charges resulting from being a “female commando” of “La Linea,” the armed wing of the Juarez cartel.¹¹ Yet another brutal example is

⁶ Santamaria Gomez, Arturo (journalist and author) telephone discussion, August 2012.

⁷ Duerson, Meena Hart. “Women rise to power in Mexico drug cartels: report.” *NYDailyNews.com*, May 28, 2012. <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/world/women-rise-power-mexico-drug-cartels-report-article-1.1085610>

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ “Female Assassins a growing part of drug cartels.” *Borderland Beat Website*. June 24, 2011. <http://www.borderlandbeat.com/2011/06/female-assassins-growing-part-of-drug.html>

¹⁰ Dr. George Grayson (Professor and author) email discussion, January 2012.

¹¹ “Juarez Cartel Trains Beautiful Women as Sicarios.” *Borderland Beat Website*. August 18, 2010. <http://www.borderlandbeat.com/2010/08/juarez-cartel-trains-beautiful-women-as.html>

Sarai Fabiola Diaz Arroyo, aka “La Muneca” or “The Doll,” a known Zetas leader arrested for the horrific 2011 San Fernando massacre of nearly 200 people in Tamaulipas, Mexico. Diaz Arroyo, along with other Zetas members, was responsible for the kidnappings, rapes and murders of those traveling by bus along the Mexican Federal Highway 101. These people were kidnapped in an effort to replenish the ranks of the Zetas and had to fight other prisoners “gladiator style” to the death and the survivors were then recruited to be the newest “sicarios”. Those who refused to fight were killed on the spot, buried in mass graves and included women and children.¹²

These women represent only a few examples of how women allow the cartels to survive in order to replenish and allow cartels operations to continue. Another interesting parallel that emerged among the women showed them not only participating in the violence typically associated with the men in the drug business but organizing and developing their own smuggling routes and contacts to become major players within the illicit world of drugs.¹³

Business/Financial Role

As this paper will highlight, women have become increasingly inserted within the drug business by rising to some level of power due to their family or marital connections. They often represent the 2nd or 3rd narco-generation and as they rose to “mid-level” manager type positions, these women started exhibiting more freedom and power but never rose to a level in which they were responsible for running their own “plazas”. Plazas represent a certain span of territory in which everyone from politicians to the local beat cop is bribed or intimidated to ensure the drugs reach their destination without any problems. These illicit activities have garnered billion of dollars for the cartels and they are often run like legitimate business corporations by family members and trusted associates in conjunction with corrupt law enforcement officials and politicians on both sides of the border. Women who have extensive narco-family ties or who have also established relationships with high-level narco bosses have utilized these contacts to provide them with an advantage in order to set up their own smuggling routes and represent the business or financial side of the cartel.¹⁴

Sandra Avila Beltran, aka “La Reina del Pacifico” or “The Queen of the Pacific” is a notorious example of familial advantage. Avila Beltran was a glamorous figure in the narco trade and even has her own narcocorridos or ballads written to pay tribute to her reign in the narco trade.¹⁵ Avila Beltran’s family connections helped her climb the hard ladder of success as her uncle was the original “Godfather” of the drug trade, Miguel Angel Felix Gallardo, as well as other prominent narco related family connections.¹⁶ Her personal life was no exception as she

¹² “Una implicada en la matanza de Tamaulipas entregada por su madre.” *CNN Mexico*. April 26, 2011. <http://mexico.cnn.com/nacional/2011/04/26/una-implicada-en-la-matanza-de-tamaulipas-es-entregada-por-su-madre>

¹³ Media sources include both U.S. and Mexican print and web sources.

¹⁴ Mia Bloom also makes similar observations in her research on women in terrorism.

¹⁵ Contreras, Joe. “Mexico’s Suspected Drug Queenpin.” *Newsweek*. October 9, 2007. <http://www.newsweek.com/mexicos-suspected-drug-queenpin-103459>

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

has been linked to corrupt high level law enforcement officials, including her first husband who originally dubbed her his “Queen” while providing almost unlimited illicit funds for shopping all over the world, including Paris.¹⁷ Avila Beltran was very successful in utilizing her looks and feminine wiles in addition to her savvy business sense in forging her path to fame and glory in the narco sub-culture. Subsequent romantic relationships provided Avila Beltran with many political and personal contacts that enabled her to become the nexus for the movement of money and cocaine between Columbia and Mexico, which gave a reputation as a heavy hitter within the narco world.¹⁸ When arrested by Mexican law enforcement officials, Avila Beltran was more concerned with how she was portrayed in the media that she convinced officers to allow her to fix her makeup before being paraded before the press. She was later extradited to face charges in Miami on drug smuggling charges but pled out to a lesser charge and deported back to Mexico in 2013 where she will once again face charges, this time for money laundering.¹⁹

A distant relative of Avila Beltran has also made a name for herself within this illicit world of drugs by taking over the helm of one of the most notorious drug trafficking organizations, the Tijuana cartel or the Arellano Felix Organization. Enedina Arellano Felix is another example of women who have extensive narco related relatives and utilize their beauty and business savvy to ascend to positions of power. Arellano Felix, also known by various monikers such as “La Narco Mami” (The Narco Mother), “La Jefa” (The Boss), and “La Madrina” (The Godmother) was only a teenager when her older brothers were “given” the Tijuana drug route by the original Godfather of the drug world, Miguel Angel Felix Gallardo.²⁰ Enedina eventually graduated from a private Mexican university with a degree in accounting which she put to good use for financial management purposes within the family business. She helped her brothers by serving as a trusted advisor and eventually took over the money laundering aspect of the cartel. Her brothers have since been killed or arrested and since 2008, she has been recognized as the leader of the Tijuana cartel, a true feat for a woman in a world where machismo still reigns and one acknowledged by Mexican media and U.S. law enforcement, specifically, the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA).²¹

Arellano Felix has since been grooming her son, Luis Fernando Sanchez Arellano, to lead the Tijuana cartel alongside her and has implemented many measures to curb the level of violence that seem to agree with the research undertaken by Mr. Arturo Santamaria, author of “Las Jefas del Narco.” Mr. Santamaria believes women will bring less violence to cartels as they become more involved and hold positions of authority. Enedina has already engaged in narco-diplomacy by reaching out to other cartels to forge alliances in an approach not practiced by her

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ McKinley jr. James C. “In Mexico, a Fugitive’s Arrest Captivates the Cameras.” *New York Times*. October 12, 2007. <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/12/world/americas/12mexico.html? r=&>

¹⁹ “Mexico arrests ‘Queen of Pacific’ after US deportation.” *BBCNews, Latin America & Caribbean*. August 20, 2013. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-23774694>

²⁰ Ravelo, Ricardo. “Enedina Arellano Felix, la primera jefa narca.” *Proceso.com.mx*. April 30, 2011. <http://www.proceso.com.mx/?p=269001>

²¹ Ibid.

brothers, who engaged in violence to achieve their means. She has also led the Tijuana cartel into a more business-like approach that has helped it survive despite the best efforts of the Mexican government to dismantle it.²²

Another example of a woman who has utilized her beauty, charm and personal relationships to set up her own empire within the narco world is former Colombian beauty queen, Angie Sanclamente Valencia, also known as “The Narco Queen”. This former lingerie model set up her own smuggling ring after she obtained valuable knowledge and contacts garnered from her romantic relationship with a Mexican drug lord known as “The Monster.”²³ The 30 year old former model specifically recruited other models and beautiful women to smuggle cocaine from Argentina to Europe by way of Mexico. Her ‘angels’ as she referred to these women, were recruited as to not draw too much attention yet be able to utilize their beauty and charm so as to escape security checkpoints at airports.²⁴ In 2009, Sanclamente Valencia came under suspicion when one of her “angels” was caught with a suitcase full of cocaine and made no attempt to conceal her illicit load. Once questioned by authorities, the “angel” quickly informed them she was working for Sanclamente Valencia. Authorities pursued the elusive former lingerie model and finally tracked her to a Buenos Aires hostel where she had attempted to change her appearance by dying her hair blond.²⁵ While she was sentenced by the Argentine courts to almost 7 years for drug trafficking, she was released and deported back to Columbia where she is free but barred from reentering Argentina.²⁶

Societal Ramifications

Historically, law enforcement in Mexico has neglected to pay attention to a rising trend of women in cartels because of their deeply-held cultural and gender biases. This would stand to reason that the women are aware of this and according to a high ranking border official, it explains why women are able to charm and evade detection by altering their appearance. For example, a woman can change hair and eye color and use different types of dress to further manipulate her appearance.²⁷

²² “Mexican women becoming drug kings.” *News.com.au*. May 28, 2012.

<http://www.news.com.au/world/mexican-women-becoming-drug-kings/story-fn6b9br-1226368866527>

²³ Stanglin, Douglas. “Lingerie Model allegedly hired beautiful models to smuggle cocaine.” *USA TODAY*. February 24, 2010. <http://content.usatoday.com/communities/ondeadline/post/2010/02/lingerie-model-sought-for-allegedly-hiring-beautiful-models-to-smuggle-cocaine/1#.UqUkNOK>

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Penhaul, Karl. “Model, allegedly drug queen, on the lam.” *CNN Latin America*. March 27, 2010.

<http://edition.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/americas/03/24/columbia.drug.queen/index.html?hpt=C1>

²⁶ Parkinson, Charles. “Argentina frees, Deports Columbia ‘Narco Model’.” *InSight Crime: Organized Crime in the Americas*. September 30, 2013. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/argentina-frees-deports-columbia-narco-model>

²⁷ Hagelsieb, Oscar. (Assistant Special Agent in Charge, Homeland Security Investigations) Face-to-Face Discussion. February 2012.

The significance of the evolving role of women within the cartels is that while there has been considerable research done on the ethnographic (cultural and social phenomenon) aspect of female smugglers, this particular research seeks to focus primarily on how the role of women has evolved from a security perspective. The motivations are often the same no matter the research focus and these include the quest for power, money, dominance and a need to survive in a country in which the level of violence has ripped apart the very fabric of societal norms. Since the 2006 anti-drug trafficking initiative launched by former Mexican President Felipe Calderon, it is estimated that over 60,000 people, most of them men, have been killed as a result of drug related violence.²⁸ Since drug organizations need manpower to continue holding the reins of power, this is the reason they have started recruiting women to work within the cartels in tactical operations and upper level financial positions.

This is significant on two levels; first, women were always considered the voices of reason and would counsel their children not to get involved with the cartels. Secondly, we must consider the ramifications if the women themselves are becoming more integrated within the narco business. “El que nada debe, nada teme” is a popular viewpoint which means if a person does not owe anything, they will have nothing to fear. Sadly, that is no longer true as more civilians are finding themselves caught in the crossfire between rival cartels and the women who used to be the voices of reason are now becoming more involved within the narco-world and making it easier to integrate other family members.²⁹ This would have a profound effect on family structures, societal norms and how women are viewed by law enforcement officials while furthering destabilizing an already fragile environment.

The examples provided thus far serve are only a few and serve to illustrate how women have been able to achieve previously unheard of positions of power by utilizing their beauty, feminine charms and intelligence to not only circumvent and evade detection by law enforcement officials but avoid the violence and death associated with the narco-trade. While the cartels already pose a national security risk,³⁰ this newest subset of female “sicarias” and operatives whose roles are to influence politicians, military and/or police officials make the cartels even more dangerous than before. Should the officials prove to be uncooperative, these women are trained to kill as efficiently and ruthlessly as men and in fact, are used to reach rival members or targets in a far more effortless manner making them valuable assets to drug trafficking organizations.

Safety and Security

²⁸ “Q & A: Mexico’s drug-related violence.” *BBC News-Latin America & Caribbean*. November 25, 2013. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-10681249>

²⁹ Ellingwood, Ken. “Dismembered bodies, warped minds.” *Los Angeles Times*. November 8, 2010. <http://articles.latimes.com/2010/nov/08/world/la-fg-mexico-depravity-20101109>

³⁰ Wyler, Grace. “The Mexican Drug Cartels Are A National Security Issue.” *Business Insider: Politics*. June 13, 2011. <http://www.businessinsider.com/why-the-us-needs-to-stop-fighting-the-drug-war-and-start-fighting-the-cartels-2011-6>

Research on women in terrorist organizations by scholar, Farhana Qazi, has revealed that women usually resort to violence for personal and political reasons. Most women seek to “protest the loss of their society or their country from falling to foreign occupied forces.”³¹ Her analysis can also hold true for Mexico. It can be argued that Mexico is experiencing a type of occupation by hostile forces, those of the cartels and their various factions fighting for control of valuable smuggling routes and terrorizing entire communities while doing so. In addition, as a senior Army official observed, “Women have never been viewed with the same lethality of men” and the same can be said of the way law enforcement on both sides of the border view the women in the cartels as the culture simply does not allow for that, thus “making the female a very valuable tool.”³²

One of the most basic things a government can provide for its people is safety and security and Mexico has certainly proven incapable of doing so, despite the \$1.6 billion provided by the Merida Initiative since 2008.³³ While further research would have to be done on this particular topic, it would seem that women are almost compelled to get involved with the cartels as their very security is being compromised. Just as the concept of “plata or plomo” (silver or lead) is the fundamental cartel code that members live and die by, these women also live by a parallel of this code. This code is “live or die” and with women used and discarded as easily as an article of clothing, they are especially vulnerable and doing whatever it takes to not only survive in such a harsh environment but to try and thrive as well. This is certainly a concern and Mexico’s health secretary, Jose Angel Cordova bluntly stated that Mexico risked becoming a country in which “killing someone can be seen as normal or natural” and the widespread epidemic carnage has only further numbed people to watch in “stunned fatigue” to the various factions competing to one-up each other in publicizing their viciousness.³⁴

Another significant aspect is the issue of desensitization since women are considered the voices of reason and the nurturers of society and yet, are now becoming an important aspect of the narco-world. Sadly, the escalation of the violence and methods employed have become so commonplace that society as a whole has become desensitized to these grisly messages. Cartels are seemingly taking a page out of a terrorist handbook and have employed such means such as dismemberment and beheadings while their victims are still alive, submerging their victims in acid, setting victims on fire (guisos) and even hangings to name a few of these horrific means of eliminating their rivals. Even more shocking is that women are not exempt from these types of murders as female cartel members and “sicarias” have been found dead having met the same frightening fate as their male counterparts. The posting of these gruesome murders on social media sites such as YouTube and by writing menacing messages on “narcomantas” or banners

³¹ Qazi, Farhana. “Commentary: Why Women Become Suicide Bombers.” *Newsweek*. July 29, 2008. <http://www.newsweek.com/commentary-why-women-become-suicide-bombers-93075>

³² Ibid.

³³ U.S. Department of State. Merida Initiative. <http://www.state.gov/j/inl/merida/>

³⁴ Ellingwood, Ken. “Dismembered bodies, warped minds.” *Los Angeles Times*. November 8, 2010. <http://www.articles.latimes.com/2010/nov/08/world/la-fg-mexico-depravity-20101109>

and posting them alone or with the bodies of their victims' further add to the traumatizing and desensitizing effect on the people to the extreme violence already surrounding them.³⁵

Research Design and Strategy

The strategy utilized to analyze the evolving role of women in the cartels is a historical research design. This method allows research to be conducted on events that have occurred since the start of the 2006 anti-drug trafficking campaign initiated by former Mexican President Felipe Calderon to the present. Primary sources were not collected for this research study as it was determined that actual interviews would be too dangerous and difficult in obtaining. The secondary sources collected were assessed to be reliable, trustworthy and credible and included the professional observations of the researcher's professional colleagues and academic contacts with extensive familiarity of female terrorists as well as Mexican drug trafficking organizations. This research is intended to provide a basis for additional research to further explore this phenomenon of the evolving role of women in the Mexican cartels and comparisons to other females in terrorist organizations, the risks they pose to law enforcement and the intelligence community and what type of counter strategies can be implemented to mitigate these threats.

Literature Review

A plethora of research can be found that delves into the cartels and their criminal organizations, however, not much literature exists on the phenomenon of the rising role of women within the cartels. Only recently there been a spike in interest into this subject which has led to newspaper articles and a few books dedicated to the subject of narco-women and their meteoric rise within drug trafficking organizations. One researcher in particular, Dr. Arturo Santamaria, a Professor of Sociology with the Autonomous Universidad del Estado Sinaloa as well as a journalist with a long career with the newspaper, *Noroeste*, has explored the subject of women in the narco-trade and states the attrition rate has made it easier for women to step into roles traditionally reserved for men and believes this may prove beneficial to quell the violence that has resulted from the various factions fighting for control of valuable smuggling routes. His interest led him to gather other interested academics and journalists to probe the reasons and roles women had in the narco-trade. The results of this effort led Dr. Santamaria to write a book examining this subject titled, "Las Jefas del Narco."³⁶

In addition, one can also find a great deal of information that exists into the reasons why women resort to terrorism and suicide bombings and focuses primarily on women of the Middle East or who are Muslim. One researcher in particular, Farhana Qazi, has made it her life's work to seek out the answers as to why women choose the paths to their own destruction and why others instead choose to try and change long held traditions, beliefs and cultural norms in patriarchal countries where women are considered second class citizens. She has written many articles and is currently working on a book dedicated to the women of Kashmir and their struggles. Some thoughts in particular are of specific interest to this area of research as Ms. Qazi

³⁵ *PuroNarco.com*. Various videos and messages posted by cartels showing graphic material.
<http://www.puronarco.com>

³⁶ Santamaria Gomez, Arturo (Professor, journalist and author). Telephone discussion, August 2012.

notes that women who resort to becoming suicide bombers and terrorists are doing so as a result of reveling in newfound freedoms by taking on roles traditionally held by men.³⁷

However, as Ms. Qazi points out, while these women believe they are doing this of their own free will and are being honorable, some are actually being exploited to serve the political ambitions of male-dominated groups, who recognize that women who commit these acts garner more media attention for propaganda purposes and are less likely to arouse suspicions or be questioned while carrying out attacks.³⁸ While the women of the narco-trade do not commit suicide bombings or acts of terrorism we tend to associate with Muslims, they are taking up more tactical and high level roles traditionally held by “narcotraffickers” and reveling in the independence, power and money such roles provide.

While they may not feel they are being exploited, it can be argued that their role can be construed as exploitation as the narco-world merely sees them as a means to an end. Women are simply filling the void resulting from all the men being killed as a result of the drug war and reaping the benefits that have resulted. What is unknown is whether this deeply traditional and patriarchal country will continue to change and “allow” women to step into legitimate and visible roles such as in the government, law enforcement or political arenas and receive the same respect and value as the men. In a country full of corruption and in which the women virtually go unnoticed, it is no wonder that women have chosen to pursue the path of drug trafficking and criminality to gain a level of respect and power they simply cannot seem to achieve by positive means.

Overview of Data Methods and Primary Sources

In 2006, former Mexican President Felipe Calderon declared the start of the anti-drug trafficking campaign in an effort to rid Mexico of the grip drug trafficking organizations had on his country. Little did he or any of the global community imagine that the violence would reach the heights of brutality and viciousness that it has and leave nobody untouched in its wake.

With this in mind, the overview of the data methods and primary sources utilized and collected for this research study consisting mainly of secondary sources, including a compilation of various media materials from Mexico and the United States, specifically the Southwest border region. The examples of print media researched include newspapers, magazine and journal articles as well as books written in both English and Spanish. Broadcast media was also utilized and include television newscasts and radio and talk shows from both sides of the border. The most concentrated area of media that was of most assistance consisted of internet sources such as videos, pictures, and websites that focused on the various aspects of the drug war and the various factions jockeying to one-up each other for power, domination and intimidation.

It must be noted that Mexican journalists have been threatened into silence or killed in trying to report on the activities of the drug trafficking organizations and has made objective and responsible reporting difficult or impossible. Since the start of the anti-drug campaign initiated

³⁷ Qazi, Farhana. “The Bomber Behind the Veil.” *RAND Commentary*. December 13, 2005. <http://www.rand.org/commentary/2005/12/13/BS.html>

³⁸ Mia Bloom also speaks to this in her book, “*Dying to Kill*.”

by former Mexican President Calderon, more than 45 journalists have been killed or disappeared. According to Carlos Lauria of the Committee to Protect Journalists, this has led to abandonment of the profession, censorship and to a “climate of fear and intimidation in which journalists work.”³⁹

Narco-blogs operated by the drug trafficking organizations themselves seemed to be a means to maximize the terror and control they hold over the citizens. This elevation of fear and shock was achieved by posting videos on various social media sites of the gruesome murders committed by cartel members. This ensured the general public would not act contrary to the message of fear the cartels were broadcasting or they would then meet the same fate if they tried to snitch to the police or act against the cartels. While these were videos posted for anyone to see, the most alarming part of this was that citizens actually experienced either seeing the results of these grisly murders when the cartels would just dump the bodies in public venues or some of these murders would take place before their very eyes and people were powerless to do anything about it and now were fear for their own lives. Narco blogs operated by anti-narco activists were especially informative and helpful as well as they are seeking to effect change within Mexico and inform the global community of lack of security and perpetual fear the citizens live in. In particular, these blogs have also suffered cyber attacks trying to shut them down and are suspected of being the work of the cartels themselves.⁴⁰ One blog in particular, *El Blog del Narco*, has been revealed to be the work of a young 20-something year old female by the name of Lucy. She has been living in fear for her life yet has continued to provide up to date cartel news with photos and information available only to the police or the cartels themselves. This has made her a celebrity for being daring enough to report and expose the criminal acts of cartels. However, this has also made her the number one target of assassination by the very criminals she reports on.⁴¹

Analysis

While conducting research into this particular subject, it was readily apparent an intelligence gap exists into the area of the evolving role of women in the Mexican cartels and the type of threat they pose to the national security interests of both nations. Unfortunately, just as U.S. military forces learned the hard way, women have utilized their femininity in efforts to bypass security efforts and have taken advantage of the reluctance of men to view them as dangerous or deadly.

³⁹ Martin, Michael. “In Mexico, Cartels Target journalists.” *NPR Organization*, May 14, 2012. <http://www.npr.org/2012/05/14/152673030/in-mexico-cartels-target-journalists>

⁴⁰ “Blog del Narco author revealed as a Woman.” *NarcoBolo*, April 4, 2013. <http://narcoblog.blogspot.com/2013/04/blog-del-narco-author-revealed-woman.html>

⁴¹ Nye, James. “I’m a woman, I’m single, And I love Mexico’: Mystery blogger reveals why she risks assassination to expose drug cartels.” *Mail Online*. April 4, 2013. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-woman-Im-single-And-I-love-Mexico-Mystery-blogger-reveals-risks-assassination-expose>

A possible solution geared towards the law enforcement and intelligence communities is providing threat assessment training, such as those provided to U.S. military troops to help identify the various threats posed by females but tailored to the unique circumstances encountered along the border and within the cartels themselves. Just as women are evolving within the cartels, so too must intelligence driven analysis in order to provide more female driven perspectives that could help identify the reasons and offer recommendations on how to better combat and/or exploit this developing threat. Of course, the real solution lies in continuing to help Mexico combat the cartel fueled violence and corruption that permeates every aspect of its government in order to offer the population the security and safety they so desperately crave.

Continued assistance is needed in order to build alternatives to violence and produce strong and resilient communities as they are most certainly ready for an end to the violence and to come together in unity to help stop the perpetuating cycle of drugs, corruption and violence that has taken over their lives in order to reunite and reintegrate the piece of society torn asunder by the cartels.

Conclusion

In this particular research study, I have argued that law enforcement officials *and* the criminal element continually underestimate the wiliness and ability of women to gain some level of authority and control in a country in which they are mainly perceived to be invisible and powerless. The reluctance to view women as violent actors is the reason an intelligence gap exists and should therefore be examined more closely. Women are continually overlooked or disregarded as insignificant threats; even when interviews and debriefings of women held in custody, as well as informants, could help the international community better understand the threat women pose. Engaging these women could also enable security agencies to develop counter-strategies to mitigate a looming threat.

Women are now gaining power and rising to unheard of levels of position within the cartels due to attrition, opportunity and need. They have proven themselves to be as ruthless as their male counterparts, if not more so. Therefore, the mentality of the law enforcement and intelligence community must also change with this evolving threat by the implementation of solutions that could help contend with how women are viewed as well as the reasons women are choosing these paths contrary to their very nature. Much more research is needed to evaluate the issues women are facing by taking over traditionally male dominated roles and how this will affect not only the women themselves, but their families, communities, society in general and the overall law enforcement and intelligence communities.

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