

# The New Sugar: The Cocaine Route from A Gender Perspective

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**Abstract:** *The cocaine route was not born in the 1970s, via Colombia, but at the end of the 19th century, in 1860, more precisely in the commercial relationship between Peru and Germany. It is regarding the emergence of this route that we will approach this article, with the aim of showing how the relationship of center and periphery of the drug market was constituted. The result of doctoral research, our investigation focused on the drug market in peripheral countries, due to the billionaire amounts handled by global financial institutions (banks) to launder this illegal money, and the imprisonment of women through their work as mules, in the period 2006-2016. The drug market is currently one of the sources of employment for poor, Black women, both young and old, with children, single, having little schooling, living in the periphery and with precarious access to civic rights.*

**Keywords:** *gender; drug market; dependent economy; Latin America.*

## **O novo açúcar: a rota da cocaína na perspectiva de gênero**

**Resumo:** *A rota da cocaína não nasceu nos anos de 1970, via Colômbia, e sim no final do século XIX, em 1860, mais precisamente na relação comercial entre Peru e Alemanha. É sobre o surgimento dessa rota que trataremos no presente artigo, cujo fito é o de mostrar como a relação de centro e periferia do mercado de drogas constituiu-se. Fruto de uma pesquisa documental de doutorado, a investigação partiu do mercado de drogas nos países periféricos, em decorrência dos valores bilionários operados pelas instituições financeiras mundiais (bancos) para tornar esse dinheiro ilícito em lícito e do aprisionamento das mulheres na condição laboral de mulas, na última década (2006-2016). O mercado de drogas é, atualmente, uma das fontes empregadoras de mulheres pobres, negras, jovens e não jovens, com filhos, solteiras, com baixa escolarização, moradoras da periferia e com precário acesso à cidadania.*

**Palavras-chave:** *gênero; mercado de drogas; economia dependente; América Latina.*

## **El nuevo azúcar: la ruta de la cocaína desde una perspectiva de género**

**Resumen:** *La ruta de la cocaína no nació en la década de 1970, vía Colombia, sino a fines del siglo XIX, en 1860, más precisamente en la relación comercial entre Perú y Alemania. Es sobre el surgimiento de esta ruta que abordaremos este artículo, cuyo objetivo es mostrar cómo se constituyó la relación de centro y periferia del mercado de drogas. Como resultado de una tesis doctoral, la investigación partió del mercado de drogas en países periféricos, debido a los valores multimillonarios operados por las instituciones financieras globales (bancos) para legalizar este dinero ilícito y el encarcelamiento de mujeres en condiciones laborales de mulas en la última década (2006-2016). El mercado de la droga es actualmente una de las fuentes de empleo de mujeres pobres, negras, jóvenes y no jóvenes, con hijos, solteras, con baja escolaridad, que viven en la periferia y con precario acceso a la ciudadanía.*

**Palabras clave:** *gênero; mercado de drogas; economía dependiente; América Latina.*

## Introduction

[...] the sugar economy was a relatively large market. To use a current expression: this was a very import-intensive economy.  
(Celso FURTADO, 2007, p. 92)

Using the analogy of sugar for cocaine is not simply because of the fact that the refining processes are very similar. Both are born in the shape of trees, and from them are extracted the properties that result in a white, fine and crystallized end-product. They are close in their characteristics and very alike in their production processes, especially in the exploitation of the labor force. The historical marks of our colonized roots, in which the relation of domination and exploitation started with slave labor endures with formal free labor. Sugar and cocaine are like past and present, old and new, and from these commodities we can revisit history and better understand the present, since the worst positions in the drug market and on the cocaine route are occupied by men and women, mostly Black, and children of the Black Diaspora. Let us see how Pedro Antônio Viera (2010), in an article entitled "*A inserção do 'Brasil' nos quadros da economia-mundo capitalista no período 1550-c.1800: uma tentativa de demonstração empírica através da cadeia mercantil do açúcar*" (The insertion of 'Brazil' in the framework of the capitalist world-economy in the period 1550-1800: an attempt at empirical demonstration through the sugar market chain), analyzes this question:

The solution to the labor force demand through the importation of slaves from Africa made the slave trade the mainstay of sugar production and extended the sugar mercantile chain not only to Africa, but to all spaces where the equipment, goods, and people involved in the continued procurement of enslaved workers came from. (Pedro Antonio VIEIRA, 2010, p. 506-507)

The cocaine route, contrary to what many people think, was not born in the 1970s, via Colombia, but in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in 1860, more precisely in the commercial relationship between Peru and Germany. Regarding the emergence of this route, we will address how the relation of center and periphery of the drug market was constituted. Based on the work of Andrés López Restrepo (2018), entitled *Ilusiones defraudadas: auge y caída del comercio legal de coca y cocaína en los países andinos*, we will examine the cycle of expansion and fall of the cocaine market as a legal substance (1880-1920), spanning the era of criminalization from the 1970s, when Colombia, until then non-existent in this market, became the major world producer. Lastly, we look at the role of women in this informal and illegal market in the period 2006-2016 in Brazil, based on the bibliographical study of theses and dissertations on the subject. The aim of this article is to show how, over the course of history, the global drug market has benefited from the peripheral and dependent condition of Latin American countries, taking advantage of the natural resources as well as the expropriation and exploitation of the labor force of both men and women.

## The cocaine route and expressions of dependence

Based on the formulations of Restrepo (2018, p. 239), the legal cocaine market was formed by the following factors: technological advance, globalization, modernization, and advertising throughout the nineteenth century: "Coca and cocaine were global products that were produced and consumed in different continents; therefore, to understand their cycle, it is necessary to adopt a global approach that takes into account what happened in the main centers of production and consumption." This is because modernity ushered in the capacity to transport goods from one continent to another, opening up the possibility of a global exchange.

On the other hand, this globalization effect was created in a situation of inequality, since the raw material producing countries were suppliers for countries with greater scientific and technological power, enabling the latter to dominate the entire production chain. As for cocaine, it was only conceived as such in Germany, via the pharmaceutical industry. With better transport conditions, the coca leaf used to go from Peru to Germany. It was in 1855 that, for the first time, cocaine, one of the fourteen known alkaloids, was isolated by the German chemist Friedrich Gaedecke and, five years later (1860), its procedure was described by the chemist Albert Niemann (RESTREPO, 2018).

In the beginning, the use of cocaine was strictly pharmacological. Also according to Restrepo (2018), due to its anesthetic qualities, it did not take long for the German pharmaceutical company Merck to become, in 1862, the major world reference in the production and commercial manufacture of cocaine to treat the dependence caused by the use of morphine. In this period (1877), the main supplier of the coca leaf to Germany was Peru. For Restrepo, the boom cycle enabled Peru to form an industrial area linked to the production of Coca. Thus, the world market for the coca leaf was born, considering that its expansion began in 1863. In this way, Peru and Bolivia came to make up the global chain of coca leaf exports to the European market (Germany, France, England) and the United States, starting a diversified production network, from medicines

to coca-based cigarettes. Added to the success of Vin Mariani was the great marketing and diffusion of the raw material, via recreational use and, later, the invention of Coca-Cola.

With the emergence of Coca-Cola, the leaf gained a strong and active market. By removing alcohol, prohibition in the US led to the mixing of cocaine with carbonated water. Only later, in 1903, did Coca-Cola remove the alkaloid from the composition and take on the character of a "soft drink". Between 1884 and 1887, cocaine was widely promoted and advertised, both by Coca-Cola, in the US, as a recreational drink, and in an article by the physician and psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, who "published his first and most famous paper on coca, in which he recommended using cocaine for various conditions, including morphine and alcohol addiction, and as a local anesthetic" (RESTREPO, 2018, p. 244). Freud's colleague Karl Koller, a year later, drawing on scientific studies, claimed that a few drops of cocaine on the eyes produced an insensitivity, enabling surgery to be carried out using it as a local anesthetic.

Through these scientific advances, the recreational and medicinal use of cocaine was expanded. At the tail end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Peruvian cocaine, increasingly known in Europe, from 1892-1899, supplied 67% of the German demand, 18% in the USA and 15% in other European countries. The increased demand made this market a promising one. For example, in 1890, 1.7 tons were produced per year. In 1901, it was 10.7 tons. Peru continued to be the main supplier and producer of cocaine, since part of the national industry was dedicated not only to cultivation but also to refining, while Bolivia was only active in cultivation (RESTREPO, 2018, p. 248).

The scenario began to change at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when European countries tried to develop the cultivation of coca to avoid export taxes. In addition, the production of coca in the Southern Cone represented a productive threat, since, in this period, Colombia was already showing interest in its production through entrepreneurs. What was done was to take away the productive sovereignty of Peru and invest in Indonesian soil, in Java, and in the European colonies outside the Southern Cone, aiming for shorter transportation time and cost reduction.

Java, compared to Peru, had a more specialized production process from the labor point of view, with Amsterdam as its largest customer. Production, which started modestly, in 1905, with an average of 60 to 70 tons, reached 122 tons in 1906 "and continued to increase rapidly, until it exceeded 1,300 tons annually in 1913-1914." This advance in production meant that in 1910, Java occupied the first position in the production and export of cocaine, making Amsterdam the leader in the world commerce of cocaine, with Hamburg in second place (RESTREPO, 2018, p. 251).

Between 1914 and 1920, 80% of the cocaine consumed in Europe came from Java. Much of this production supplied the frontline in the First World War (1914-1918) for recreational and medicinal use. Demand combined with low production due to the wartime context meant that production dropped from 18.5 tons in 1913 to 5.3 tons in 1917. According to Restrepo (2018, p. 254), after the War ended, cocaine exports resumed and, in 1919, Amsterdam regained its sovereignty in the world coca trade. With an increase in the prices of the commodity and a global market upturn, in 1918, 10.1 tons were produced in Java alone, and in 1920, the historic milestone of 20.7 tons was achieved. Exports of leaves from Java averaged over 1,000 tons per year between 1919 and 1926. Exports of leaves from Peru continued to decline, remaining at only 242 tons per year in the period 1919-1923.

This crisis in the Peruvian market was marked by the expansion of production in Java, which had a larger and better production structure, and the subsequent repression imposed in 1922 by the United States, through control mechanisms and the criminalization of cocaine's recreational use, only permitting it to be used for medicinal purposes. This situation worsened three years later (1925), after the International Opium Convention, which established specific control regulations at a global level. On the other hand, the major pharmaceutical industries were not against the rules, since their profits didn't exclusively depend on products derived from cocaine, unlike the producing countries, such as Java and Latin countries (Peru, Bolivia and Colombia). Curiously, it was on those producing countries that the policy of control and formulation of the war on drugs took place with greater latency and pressure.

The policy of control by developed countries over developing countries was applied to the production and sale of coca, since it was a market of autonomy, sovereignty and regional integration, especially in the Southern Cone countries. The attempt to create barriers occurred precisely to invalidate any movement of coordination and domination of this market by the peripheral countries, via the legal market and regulated by the government. By making the drug market informal and illegal, these countries continued to be active, since it was the manner in which these economies developed as producers and exporters of raw materials, including cocaine.

The imperialist yoke of the United States was to create sanctioning and criminalizing mechanisms for dependent countries, so that they were under the guardianship of international organizations, based on the war on drugs policy. The autonomy and sovereignty of these nations were rendered so unviable that the alternative was to adhere to the foreign policy of a trade war. Through illegality, a drug production chain was created with stratospheric profits, which only shows the absence of the state in the regulation of legal criteria for production, marketing, sale,

exportation, and use. The illegal content, in this case, allows for killing (military confrontation), imprisonment (prison system), torture (justice system and the production of truth) in the name of the law, that is, they use the structure of the state in order to subordinate it to the monopsonist market of drugs.

This is why it is impossible to generate a sovereign Latin American industry – since the adoption of the legal process that occurred in Europe was transferred as illegal to the peripheral countries. This relationship was only established to maintain a degree of dependence and subordination to foreign capital. As such, the chances of overcoming this reality seem distant, since, when it comes to peripheral economies, there is a link to external demand, which responds to short-term needs at the national level. This fact expresses realities such as those of Brazil, Peru, Colombia, Bolivia, and Mexico, economies that produce and export drugs to the US and Europe.

Thus far, we have tried to show how the drug market, in its legal condition, boosted and spread the use of both pharmacological and recreational drugs around the world in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. However, the scenario changed after American intervention in the mid-1920s, and deepened in the 1970s, following the policy sanctioned by then former U.S. president Richard Nixon. For half a century (1920-1970), the idea of trafficking, at that time still seen as “smuggling”, was directly linked to heroin, a substance consumed on a larger scale by North Americans. The return of cocaine in an illegal form and with high production occurred from the 1970s on, having Colombia as the world’s largest producer.

## **Drug war policy and US imperialism**

Although cocaine was already prohibited for recreational purposes, the war on drugs policy was born in the midst of the rise of North American warmongering, with a strong investment in Latin American countries, under the logic of military interventions, which led to punitive laws throughout Latin America. In Brazil’s case, Law 6.368 of October 21, 1976 (BRASIL, 1976), proves that the idea of this fight against drugs was strengthened by imprisonment, without acting on the route and production of drugs, whose destination was the very nation that claimed to be fighting it.

This contradiction meant that producer countries came under the direct action of militarized governments whose central function was to create a real internal war in these countries (Colombia, Mexico, Bolivia), guided by the political designs of the United States in the name of supposed “national security.” Such imperialist intentions made Ronald Reagan (1981-1989) declare, at the end of the 1980s, that one of the fundamental priorities of national security was to combat drug production in neighboring countries. In 1985, debates began about the authorization of the armed forces to combat drugs and how the U.S. military could then act and enter nations such as Mexico and Colombia. At the turn of the 1990s, already under former President George Bush (1989-1993), the U.S. embarked on a policy of destroying the triangle of Peru, Bolivia, and Colombia, the largest coca producers (Pedro José PEÑALOZA, 2012, p. 14-17).

Interestingly, the greater the combat policy was, the greater the profits were as well. Illegality provided the drug market, especially the cocaine market, with progressive growth. As an example, according to data from the UN World Drug Report (UNODC, 2018), in 2017, the amount of cocaine seized increased 13% over the previous year. Global cocaine production was at a record high in 2017, reaching 1,976 tons, a 25% increase from the previous year and a 50% increase in a decade. Colombia remains the largest producer and distributor of cocaine, responsible for 70% of global production. Also according to the report, in a decade (2007-2017), the amount of the drug seized worldwide increased 74%. In 2017 alone, 1,275 tons of cocaine were seized by authorities, 13% more than the previous year. From the total of these seizures, 90% occurred on the American continent, with 38% in Colombia alone (UNODC, 2018).

On the growth of production and the export route, the same report (UNODC, 2018) points out that pure cocaine in Bolivia in the last decade (2007-2017) increased by 47%, and that the border relationship with Brazil, the main country of route for export, has allowed greater trafficking to the European continent, Africa, and North America. According to the authors of the report, this underground economy is almost entirely directed to export, via the Atlantic, from Brazilian ports, especially Paranaguá in Paraná and Santos in São Paulo. The logistics for transporting production from Bolivia, Peru, and Colombia traverse the border regions with Brazil, concentrating in the North and Midwest regions of the country.

As for the expansion of the cocaine market, the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA), published in 2019, reveals that seizures made in 2017 reached a historic high: more than 104,000 seizures recorded, for a total of 140.4 tons. As a result, according to data from the same document, the amount of cocaine seized surpassed the highest rate recorded in 2006, surging by more than 20 tons. This represented double the amount seized a decade later (2006-2016). As the document cites, some 86 tons of cocaine were seized on the European continent. Of this total, 45 tons were reported in Belgium and 41 tons in Spain, which represents 61% of the estimated EU total in 2017. Another important fact concerns the

large seizures in countries that do not figure in this scenario, such as France (7.5 tons) and the Netherlands (14.6 tons) (OEDT, 2019, p. 28-29).

Meanwhile, the Brazilian Federal Police and Internal Revenue Service revealed in 2019 that a considerable portion of the cocaine seized in Europe originates from Brazilian soil. The country's port zone is among the most used for this trafficking, because besides bordering the producing countries, the logistics of delivery, via container ships, has been the main alternative route for cocaine to be exported. This survey shows that between 2016 and 2019, 13,157 tons of cocaine were seized in the port of Paranaguá alone. Of this total, 1,646 were destined for France; 1,729 Spain; 4,900 Belgium; and 4,882 Holland. In three years and in only one port, the amount of cocaine seized surpassed the national average of 2004 (7.5 tons) (BRASIL, 2019b). In the first half of 2019, the Federal Revenue Service reported on its website, in the economy section, that 25,339.25 tons of cocaine were seized in national territory, an increase of 91.7% compared to the first half of 2018 (13,217.22 tons) (BRASIL, 2019a).

In the year 2018, the Federal Revenue Service disclosed that 23 tons were seized in the Port of Santos alone, in São Paulo, and 4.8 in the port of Paranaguá, until then considered record values. In the first half of 2019, the same source reported the seizure of 10.5 tons of cocaine in Santos and 7.5 tons in the Paranaguá port, amounts that exceed the entire previous year (2018) (BRASIL, 2019a). On the Federal Police website, there is a statistical graph with cocaine seizures per ton, nationwide, since 1995. Twenty-four years ago, the quantity seized was 3.1 tons. In 2018, there were 76.1 tons more compared to the first year of counting, reaching 79.2 tons of cocaine. In the first half of 2019 alone, 39.3 tons of drugs were seized. Estimates were that by the end of the same year more than 80 tons would be seized (BRASIL, 2019b).

The amounts handled in this market run into the billions and are strictly dependent on the world's financial institutions (banks) to turn this illegal money into legal tender. By way of example, consider the U.S. Senate investigative report published in February 2012, entitled U.S. Vulnerabilities to Money Laundering, Drugs, and Terrorist Financing: HSBC case history (USS/CHSGA, 2012) which, among other topics, addresses Mexico HSBC's illegal transactions<sup>1</sup> to the USA's HSBC.

According to this report,<sup>2</sup> in 2002, HSBC Holdings PLC agreed to acquire the Bital financial group (Banco Mexicano) at an agreed price of \$1.20 per share, with the corporation valued at \$1.14 billion. In the process of the group's acquisition, Bital group held 647 million in correspondent deposits in Mexico, 700 million in the Cayman Islands, and 143 in New York; it had about 6 million customers and 15,400 employees. After this merger, between November 2006 and February 2007 alone, HBMX sent almost 742 million dollars (US dollars) to HBUS. In 2008 the Mexican group exported 4 billion in cash remittances to the USA. Already in the year 2009, the remittance was more than any other Mexican bank affiliated with HBUS. Also according to the Report, smaller companies controlled by the British HSBC group transported \$7 billion in cash through armored vehicles and airplanes bound for the US. This money, according to the Mexican headquarters' own staff, was linked to trafficking. As for the amounts deposited in the Cayman Islands, the report found that it was drug trafficking capital, destined to buy airplanes for the cartels. In December 2012, 10 months after the report was published, HSBC paid \$1.92 billion to end the investigation (USS/CHSGA, 2012, p. 35-45).

The history of the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation Limited (HSBC, 2016) in laundering money from drug trafficking is not recent. Founded in Hong Kong in 1865 by Scotsman Thomas Sutherland, this bank began as an institution that financed the trade and trafficking of opium in the Far East. During the entire 20<sup>th</sup> century, it concentrated its activities in the former British colony until the territory was returned to the People's Republic of China in 1997, which had been under British rule for almost a century. Only in the late 1980s did this corporation start to operate with its branches in the Americas and in most of Europe (Jean-Louis CONNE, 2010).

In a lucrative market, the corporation continues to pursue its tax fraud actions in the billions of dollars (white collar crime) without the slightest embarrassment. After paying a billion-dollar fine in 2012, six years later (2018), HSBC agreed to pay \$101.5 million to conclude the U.S. Department of Justice investigation into fraudulent transactions in the currency market. Also according to the bank itself, the total irregularities committed in the Global Markets division in 2010 and 2011 comprised \$63.1 million in sanctions and \$38.4 million in reparations. The Bank made this data public only as a form of public remediation, which was equivalent to an apology, by publishing its financial transactions with more transparency, a sanction imposed by the U.S. Senate (HSBC, 2016).

HSBC pays million-dollar fees and penalties because its profits are still in the billions. In the first half of 2017 alone, the financial institution reported a 10.12% increase in its net income, which averaged \$6.99 billion. Its financial clout is so great that it determined the length of a public investigation by paying for it to be concluded. This practice was carried out in 2014 in settlement

<sup>1</sup> In the Report, HBMX appears referring to Mexico and HBUS to the USA.

<sup>2</sup> Conducted for nearly a decade, the US Senate investigation concluded that subsidiaries of the British bank HSBC laundered billions of dollars over the years for Mexican drug cartels, rogue states, and terrorists. The special committee produced a 340-page report detailing the security lapses and the bank officials' explanations to the US Congress.

with the UK Financial Conduct Authority and the US Commodity Futures Trading Commission, and in 2017 when it paid \$175 million to the Federal Reserve Board (the US central bank) for irregularities in its currency market operations. In the same year, HSBC paid €300 million to French authorities to dismiss an investigation into the tax evasion of French clients in Switzerland.

## From tons to grams: the difference between dealers and retailers

The brief review of the tons of drugs exported and the billions of HSBC's transfers is intended to demystify another obscurantism around the amounts collected by the women arrested and convicted for the crime of drug trafficking in Brazil. In the drug market in which these women operate, the amount and profits bears no comparison with those mentioned above. This is made clear in Luciana's narrative<sup>3</sup> (arrested in Brasília-DF, Brazil), interviewed by researcher Ludmila Carneiro (2015, p.103):

*I'd already left with six thousand on the Plan [...] So, I prefer to deal smalltime, directly with addicts, because you earn more. Really. You make more money. Because you get it for 15 reals and sell it for 20 reals a gram. You make five reals on each gram. It is more dangerous. It is much more dangerous. On the five grams (crack) that the guy sold me for 80 reals, I make the 80 reals back and two hundred and something on top. Do you understand? Or you handle tons and tons, kilos and kilos, to make a lot of money. Or you do the little ants run. Because it pays, it pays a lot of money. Do you get it? **It makes you a lot of money.** But at the same way it comes, it goes. Do you see what I mean? I have already lost two thousand reals in one night. **Look, with only 25 grams, I make one thousand five hundred reals. Just with 25 grams.** And then you get everything, all you already have. You get a TV, a computer, clothes for your kids, everything like that, for the price of a banana, like a fair. Do you get it? If a pair of sneakers in a store costs five hundred reals, you pay five grams. People are crazy and offer everything. [...] a lot of things, leather jackets, designer clothes... Wow, perfume, I have a lot of imported perfume. (CARNEIRO, 2015, p. 103)*

In the narrative, it is noted that the amounts of cocaine are no more than grams and the figures do not exceed three zeros. In addition, the drug trade in which the vast majority of these women act is the retail sale of *crack*, a market that provides for other forms of payment, such as clothing, accessories, appliances, etc. Although the market value is higher than that paid in exchange for *crack*, this informal network of goods has also been one of the women's sources of income, which endows this underground economy with specificities of a domestic nature, contrasting radically with the global financial model of drugs.

Another important data we can draw from these observations is that the highest rates of female imprisonment from 2006-2016 occurred in Amazonas, Mato Grosso do Sul and the Federal District (Marcos Vinícius Moura SILVA, 2017). These women – as can be analyzed in the works of Carneiro (2015), Sintia Helpes (2014), Vanessa Moreira (2012), Carla Patrícia Serqueira Lima (2016), Luciana Ramos (2012), Laisa Feitosa de Lima (2016), Janete Biella (2007), Luciana Chernicharo (2014) and Hannah Prado (2016) – were arrested, in part, in the capacity of mules, carrying drugs either on their own bodies, or in larger shipments, in cars or trucks. But it is precisely based on this idea that drugs are carried by mules that the large shipments, which require port logistics, businessmen, and corruption of state employees, are concealed. This engineering is obscured and serves to use the force of law and punitive surveillance on women, as Karl Marx (2017, p. 82) explained in the texts of the Rhenish Gazette, when he said that “the population sees the sentence, but does not see the crime, and precisely because it sees the sentence where there is no crime, it will not see crime where there is no sentence.”

The idea and the discourse that women who act as mules are responsible for all the drug shipments only serve to distort reality. The media coverage that is given to the apprehension of these women is not the same as in the case of major fiscal crimes. It is in this sense that the premise that there is a female criminality is questioned, exactly because this discourse is not directed only at a construction of deviant behavior, but also at a structural form of capital to exempt itself from its expressive and striking inequalities.

The association of the woman who acts as a mule in the drug market is not a matter of chance. The mule was an indispensable animal during the colonization process in Brazil, a period without roads and railroads. The mule, therefore, played a central role in the shipment of goods and in the opening of borders. Among the characteristics attributed to the mule, in addition to physical strength, expressed in the ability to walk for hours and with low energy expenditure, mule owners claimed that it was an obedient, passive, docile animal that accepted commands more easily.

They claimed that because it was a female and originated from the cross-breeding of the male ass with the mare, it was inferior to other animals of the species from which it came (horses and donkeys). The mule was considered the animal best suited to carrying loads, and was widely used until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, especially in places with uneven topography. Another issue was

<sup>3</sup> Fictitious name.

resistance to disease: mules got sick very rarely and, in general, lived a long time. The mule fulfilled a double function in this business, because it was the main means of transport, especially in areas of mineral extraction, and at the same time, carried raw materials for export (Luiz Adriano BORGES, 2016). It could be said that the mule, during and after colonization, until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, played a central role in the opening of trade routes, export and exploitation of natural resources in the country.

By briefly establishing the importance of mules in the movement of goods, we can reflect on the correlation between mules and women, in contemporary times, in the drug market. In research on the subject (CARNEIRO, 2015; HELPES, 2014; MOREIRA, 2012; SERQUEIRA LIMA, 2016; RAMOS, 2012; FEITOSA DE LIMA, 2016; BIELLA, 2007; CHERNICHARO, 2014; PRADO 2016), we are able to grasp the sex/gender inequalities in the work of women as mules in the informal and illegal drug market.

It is no coincidence that the highest imprisonment rate in Brazil from 2006-2016 corresponds to the female sex/gender. One can notice the selective character of the justice and penal systems, whose philosophical foundations manifest themselves in a permanent action, determining the imprisonment of specific segments, marked by intersectional discriminations of class, race and gender. Based on Marxian formulations, it is possible to affirm that a woman working as a mule cannot be a trafficker, nor can she answer for the crime of trafficking, since her actions do not correspond to the global crime of the drug market and therefore her imprisonment results only from the penal and criminalizing action of the state.

On the favoring of crime in the extraction of profits, Marx (2017, p. 112) is still very current, because, in his evaluation, this was a strategic way to cover up major crimes and, at the same time, profit from the dispossessed, both in forced labor with criminal penalties and in the payment of fines to timber owners, via the state. This relationship is analogous to the case of the big banks that launder money from trafficking, which, given their ability to profit from this market, possess the political power to stop a public investigation and continue profiting. At the same time, for the crime of trafficking, women are arrested for carrying drugs on their bodies, most of them inserted in the vagina or anus, which explains the dehumanized place in which they are operating.

To be a mule, according to the studies analyzed that address this concept, is to be a woman that does not draw the attention of the police, does not have the profile of a "drug dealer," is honest and does not create problems. Therefore, being a mule, today, in the drug market, according to these criteria, is like being a mule in the colonial past: carrying goods and only following the route assigned. Women working as mules, in general, transport drugs for their partners, children, grandchildren, and husbands in prison, having to bring the drugs on visiting day, or they do it as backpackers, taking drugs from one state/country to another. This is classified as small-scale trafficking,

since it is only possible to handle the amount of drugs that are invisible when attached to or inside the body, either in the vaginal or anal cavities. In this case, swallowing the drug is not possible because there is not enough time for the drug to be expelled. (CARNEIRO, 2015, p. 180)

The first case is the one that appears most often in these studies, because they are caught in the act during the strip search and, as the authors point out, in some cases they are used in order for a larger shipment to enter while they are being detained. We are talking about mules who, sometimes, are hired just to get arrested, without their knowing it. On average, these women earn between R\$600.00 and R\$2,000.00 to work as mules. The lowest prices are precisely those that involve the greatest risk, in this case, that of trying to enter the prison system. Another important issue is the number of older women in this work, both because they "attract less attention" and because they also face more degrading conditions of access to formal work. In the research of Prado (2016, p. 117), it is clear how poorly these women are remunerated, since the value of the drug within the prison walls is worth up to 10 times more than the market outside the prison walls.

M. earned R\$600.00 to take 50 grams of drugs (marijuana) to her boyfriend who sold them inside the prison for more than ten times the price [...]. This happens because the value of the drugs inside the prison is very high, due to the difficulty of getting it in. She explains that she liked the risk she was taking and started of her own free will, but she claims that it was also due to pressure from her boyfriend's friends, who persuaded her by saying that a woman should 'strengthen her man' who is in prison, that is: bring in drugs putting herself at risk in terms of her health and safety while receiving little for it. (PRADO, 2016, p. 117)

As for the motivation for this research, it focused on the increase in the number of women imprisoned in recent years and the paucity of studies on the subject. However, part of the research seeks to answer the reason for their involvement, some of them denying the affective issue, others affirming autonomy, while others questioned the relationship between victimization and punishment in a dual manner. In this respect, there is a lack of understanding about the networks of affections and survival that make up the reality of poor men and women. In the case of male traffickers, the idea is that the woman is either complicit and passive or at other times active. If she

is situated in the passive discourse, she is more likely to be a victim of sexist structures; if she is more active and exerts leadership, she is to some extent disrupting this traditional sex/gender "role".

These are perfunctory analyses from the point of view of social materiality and reduce the criticism made about the social construction of sex/gender, because they assert that oppressions are not organically linked to social structures, but rather come from the relationships that are or are not established between people who are more vulnerable to criminalization actions. To think this way is to create a fixed image that every affective relationship between people involved in the drug market, especially in the case of women who are "just wives" of drug dealers is, by "nature", violent and unequal, while those who are not married and active in the drug market are said to be in a process of "empowerment". As a demonstration that this analysis is mistaken, a good part of the women who were arrested as mules and who were interviewed in the analyzed studies were single.

In this regard, some analyses seem to be far from the social reality of these women, to the extent that they pose the debate between autonomy or submission. In addition to being dichotomous, this implies a degree of limiting reality that can only be done by those outside of it. From a very early age, poor women take on responsibilities in the field of caregiving that place on them, also from a very early age, a burden of life and social experience that sometimes transcends the possibility for analysis by those who approach this reality in a punctual and circumscribed manner, in search of ready-made and definitive answers.

Kimberlé Crenshaw (2002), when dealing with the importance of intersectional discrimination, emphasizes the issue that this analytical perspective is not "limited" to "a more precise description", nor to the idea that partial listening to the "lived experience of women" is sufficient, when the determinants of race and gender that constitute the objective and concrete conditions of these realities are not taken as a reference (CRENSHAW, 2002, p. 177).

Associating the mule, for example, solely with the position of passivity, or of lesser value, assumes a diffusivity of denial that the precariousness of women's lives removes them from any passivity in the name of survival. A distinction must be made between this position within the structure of the drug market and also outside of it. The relationship of passivity can be related to the discourse attributed to the historical figure of the mule. However, the woman, in the labor condition of mule, is not only a passive subject, because her concrete and material demands place her in a place of non-inertia.

The working position of mule, even though it is largely occupied by women, is not specific to the female sex/gender. Men also perform this activity and, in general, they make the riskier crossings – logistically and in terms of the value of the cargo. What we have today is a great apprehension of women in the exercise of this activity in specific places, such as prisons, airports, and bus stations. It is necessary to understand that the mules also act outside this route and, in this case, we do not see the same rate of imprisonment of women because, when it comes to large shipments "or long distances, situations that involve large amounts of money and the carrier is responsible for the operation, then planes, ships, buses and cars are used. Here the predominant presence is of men, who are in charge of the transaction" (CARNEIRO, 2015, p. 97-98).

On the cocaine route, the inherent antagonism between wealth and poverty is suspended in the analysis of reality, positioning the material condition of the subjects in the realm of individualization, culpability, and subjectivity. Therefore, theories of deviation and studies focused only on the life experiences of these women tend to reinforce the relationship between degradation of material life and criminalizable action as distinguishable from social reality, thus generating an interpretation reduced to individualistic subjectivism.

The drug market is currently a source of employment for poor, Black, white, and indigenous women, both young and not so young, with children, single, poorly educated, living in the periphery, and having precarious access to their rights. To affirm that these women gain autonomy in this market means not correlating it with the global capitalist structure, which for 160 years has been sovereign in the international traffic of cocaine. These women are not empowered or emancipated in any way, nor are they changing gender relations, because the generational dimension demonstrates those who are selected by the justice and penal system over the course of history. In order to reflect on the global relations of production and reproduction of capital, as Silvia Federici (2019) points out, we must also take a critical look at how women are integrated. As such,

Globalization is especially catastrophic for women not because it is managed by male-dominated agencies that do not understand women's needs, but because of the goals they aim to achieve. Globalization is intended to give corporate capital complete control over labor and natural resources. To do this, it needs to expropriate workers of any means of subsistence that would allow them to resist more intense exploitation. As such, globalization cannot triumph unless it carries out a systematic attack on the material conditions of social reproduction and on the main subjects of this labor, which in most countries are composed of women. (FEDERICI, 2019, p. 183)

As such, to speak of protagonism, occupation of the public space by women in the drug market is limited to the socio-spatial reality and its local relations, a theme that most of these

studies have focused on. But when we situate these life trajectories in the global framework of capital, the informal work relations, absence of state regulation, and profits for the major banks, we are talking about the dispossessed of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Therefore, it involves the deprivation of contemporary human dignity, sometimes masked in discourses of an alleged freedom of choice, or of awareness, without considering that the structural crisis of global capital takes place in the present time, through the international division of the female work force, availing itself of a historical subordination and domination between sexes/genders.

## Conclusion

Contrary to the findings of certain studies, there is no empowerment of women in the drug market, because when we situate it in the global capitalist structure, we can see, from research conducted with women imprisoned for the crime of drug trafficking, that they occupy the worst positions and have lower pay than men. As such, in Latin American countries, especially those that operate in the global drug market, there is the propagation of a discourse about the war on drugs that only serves private property, because it uses the legal and penal structure of the state to criminalize the poor and, at the same time, produces a discursive argument that the incidence of women entering the drug market is merely the result of subjective and individualistic motives.

That said, the women who are in the drug market today do not enter it for purely subjective, affective, and/or family reasons. There must be a real demand, sustained in their material needs for life and existence, which, according to them, is the central reason for their involvement. Trafficking would not be supported by the perfidy of the idea of participation simply for power and control, because it is certainly not for everyone. It is necessary to understand that these women correspond to a mass of unemployed informal workers, with low schooling levels, young and not so young, rejected by capital, from the point of view of secure work relations, a situation that most of them are familiar with from generation to generation.

This provides us with enough information to understand that, in the drug market, women are hired to perform retail activities with a domestic perspective. In other words, this market also targets women who are poor, unemployed, with no income, have children, are single, have no prospects of spatial displacement, and are in a state of material precariousness, and it has tried to mediate its interests with theirs, since a good number of them would not engage in street retailing or join faction groups like the younger ones.

It is worth noting that the women who are retailers do not know the head of the trafficking. In general, they buy from a supplier. They do not establish a relationship with the broader market; their access is more restricted to the place of sale. In the case of the women who act as mules, the system operates in the same way. The drug market also works with these women through patriarchy, in that it uses this structured pattern to exert power over them. As such, the women get involved knowing little, and the fact is that they do not want to know much. Another dimension that positions the work of women in the drug market as an extension of private life and socially conceived as belonging to the female sex/gender has to do with the use that they make of the resources. Most of them manage their earnings around the family and the sustenance of their children.

As for being drug lords, the women show that they are not drug dealers, because they do not own anything and, when they are arrested, they cannot even afford a lawyer. These women are poorly paid and are mostly involved in selling *crack*, which, according to them, is profitable because it is cheap. But, as we have seen, their earnings alone are insignificant compared to the overall earnings of the real traffickers.

Regarding spatiality and time, the answer to why the market prioritizes the periphery has to do with the lack of access to the formal work market, the possibility of exercising wide and extensive punitive selectivity on the poorest in a determined spatiality, and the greater possibility of dependence and subordination of the female sex/gender to the male. The women interviewed affirm that entering the drug trade did not depend on an affective relationship with men, but that all contacts with jobs above those in which they worked were occupied by men. In order for there to be a real change to this reality, there must be a change in the forms of relations between central and developing countries, so that the latter are not dependent on the former both in terms of production and the sale of the work force to the former. This situation is expressed even in the informal and illegal drug market.

The scenario of women imprisoned for the crime of drug trafficking in Latin America is the result of a set of factors that are constituted from their demands, needs, particularities, and resistance under a structural and structuring material condition. Women inside or outside the drug market continue to be women, occupying inferior jobs, being paid less and performing activities of greater risk. Even if they recount – and this is essential – that they are there because they want to be, because of an affective relationship, or because of a family tie, none of them occupies these jobs having previously enjoyed a financial condition that would allow them to be in another position. This clarifies the fact that, even when read individually, these life stories demarcate the

social structure of class, race, sex/gender, and generation, giving these determinants bodies, places, and forms of survival in the face of a legal and penal system that historically penalizes them even before they are born.

Hence, when we think about societal change, we think about the decriminalization and depenalization of drugs, placing them in the labor market with a global scope. It implies fighting in defense of secure, formalized, and rights-based labor. It means recognizing that, in the society of capital, there are limits to the access and guarantee of rights, but that if they are not defended, they become unviable, dismantled, and withdrawn. To engage in this struggle is to acknowledge that the sale of labor power requires regulation by the state and that it is capable of generating leisure, culture, training and a sense of pleasure, and new forms of socialization via substantial civic consciousness, not fetishized by the consumption of merchandise.

Let the women prisoners lead their resistance, even under the tutelage of the justice and penal systems, conflicting and affirming how this legal model, far from being fair, serves as a principle and legal guarantee to private property. As a task, it is up to us to contend with the destruction of capitalism and the possibility for the education and class consciousness of those who are outside the formal labor system. This assumes a commitment beyond the defense of guaranteed rights, or of those at risk for specific segments that, in general, occupy the formal and lawful place of work. It is urgent to recognize the informal global drug market as a predatory system, expropriating peripheral and dependent economies, but nevertheless highly profitable. The struggle consists, therefore, in its formalization, regulation, and the possibility of forging a regionally integrated Latin American economy that prioritizes its diversified capacity and ensures rights for women who sell their labor force.

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