



# Police Practice and Research

## An International Journal

ISSN: 1561-4263 (Print) 1477-271X (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/gppr20>

# Drug mules: women in the international cocaine trade

Bruno Paes Manso

To cite this article: Bruno Paes Manso (2016) Drug mules: women in the international cocaine trade, *Police Practice and Research*, 17:4, 388-389, DOI: [10.1080/15614263.2016.1175183](https://doi.org/10.1080/15614263.2016.1175183)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15614263.2016.1175183>



Published online: 15 Apr 2016.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 113



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Drug mules: women in the international cocaine trade**, by J. Fleetwood, Hampshire; New York, NY, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, 208 pp., US\$ 76 (ebook), ISBN-13:978-1137271891, ISBN-10:1137271892

Drug lords, mafias, drug cartels, bloody disputes over the market, violent and vertical leaderships: knowledge of the drug trade around the world is strongly influenced by common sense and the universe of hyper-masculinity. They are simplifications that arise from descriptions and images in newspapers and films, but that end up guiding government decisions and public policies on the debate over the combat against drugs in the world.

This book confronts some of these myths based on a conscientious and revealing ethnography. For five years, the author was in contact with women from various countries convicted of drug trafficking in Ecuador. In addition to revealing the complexity of the women's trajectory toward crime, the narratives unpack the structure of this activity, which prospers based on horizontal relations, with various ramifications that traverse borders, and which are highly dependent on the social connections of its members. This is a very relevant topic, since this activity has increasingly contributed to the massive imprisonment of women and men in various parts of the world. In the international drug trade, drug mules are primarily responsible for transporting cocaine. The women's role is important since they represent between 20 and 30% of those imprisoned for drug trafficking, a percentage that has been on the increase since the 1980s. In Ecuadorian prisons they are primarily from Latin America, the United States, and Canada. In the structure of the drug trade, mules work to plans and routes designed by the enticer, manager, or investor, with no power to decide over their activity or destination, as the author demonstrates in Chapter 7. Usually the enticers know the mule's life details but not the other way around, which establishes unequal power relations. This information allows only one of the parties to seek compensation in case of betrayal or non-compliance with agreements. This subjection is unrelated to gender. The ethnography demonstrates that the relationship between gender, power, and exploitation is more complex than previous studies on the topic tend to suggest.

The book attempts to answer a fundamental question raised by criminological debates: do women enter into drug trafficking because they are passive and defenseless victims of enticers, or do they make decisions on their own free will? The latter answer, which values consumption and independence, is generally associated with men, but could also explain the increase in women's participation in the trade based on a simplistic interpretation of female emancipation and their entry into the labor market. For Fleetwood, neither explanation is sufficient to understand the phenomenon. Far from being a dichotomous choice, the narratives reveal women with a capacity for evaluation and reflection, who seek to lead their lives within the limits established by the context, their circumstances, and the identities they assume in that context, which are strongly related to gender. There is coercion and there are limits to their choices and the paths followed, but they are subjects designing their own destinies according to personal values and the context in which they are inscribed. In this respect, the author borrows Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* to think of social practice, considering the means whereby certain social positions and experiences lead individuals to opt for certain types of discourses and discard others. The trajectory of the drug mule involves two sides. First, there are those who contract her. On this side,

there is no 'Mr. Big,' who represents large vertical empires that force them to perform tasks as victims with no choice. Verticality and the use of violence is not what is observed in everyday relations. The women's narratives place social networks and connections in the forefront, which determine the forms of recruitment according to the strategies and interests of the international drug trade.

For the recruiters, gender is not the most important factor, as demonstrated in Chapter 4 of the book. Rather than seeking desperate, indebted, poor women with limited choices, the emphasis is on people whose nationality, level of schooling, age, and ethnicity, for example, might contribute to deceive the authorities in charge of inspection. Having a passport and traveling relatively often can also be important factors. Recruiters attempt to minimize losses by diminishing the risk of imprisonment and the loss of merchandise.

The women's choices, on the other hand, tend to be more circumstantial than instrumental, and their wager on that life depends on a variety of factors that go from who makes the contact to what the woman believes is at stake. When the recruiter is a successful mule, for example, the undertaking appears to be safer and more predictable, which might help to convince the candidate to make the trip. In other circumstances that can inhibit or induce the women to agree, gender plays a very relevant role. It structures women's material opportunities, but primarily by determining how they think of themselves, of women's roles, and their responsibilities.

The women almost always explain their involvement in drug trafficking with discourses on poverty and the economic challenges to maintaining their roles as mothers, daughters, and underemployed heads of households. They also place themselves in that role because of their love for a boyfriend or husband. Those choices are related to their relationships to others and to the role they assume as caretakers of those people. They are relational identities, cultural scripts, as the author argues, in which the choices and narratives are rarely conceived as entirely autonomous, as is the case in the male universe. Male criminal trajectories are generally narrated from the perspective of desire for consumption, ostentation, and independence. These narratives demonstrate that gender appears as a global social structure, even if it does not occur in the same manner worldwide. The international drug trade, rather than being a modality of crime to be combated exclusively through imprisonment, reveals its true face as the source of urgent and current dilemmas produced in the current phase of global capitalism.

Bruno Paes Manso

*Centre for the Study on Violence, University of São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil*

 [mansobruno@yahoo.com.br](mailto:mansobruno@yahoo.com.br)

© 2016 Bruno Paes Manso

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15614263.2016.1175183>

### **Mexico is not Colombia: alternative historical analogies for responding to the challenge of violent drug-trafficking organizations**, by C. Paul, C. P. Clarke, and C. C. Serena.

Santa Monica, CA, Rand Corporation, 2014, 132 pp., US\$29.95 (paperback), ISBN-13 978-0833084408, ISBN-10 0833084402.

This book examines the case of Mexico, which has faced the challenges of the violence perpetrated by VDTOs (Violent Drug-Trafficking Organizations). The latter term is proposed by the authors, who find it more appropriate than the terms currently used, such as 'cartels,' 'narcos,' 'narco-insurgents,' and 'criminal insurgents,' as well as the term used in the academy and in policy discussions – DTOs (Drug-Trafficking Organizations). The authors believe that the term VDTOs recognizes the fact that drug trafficking is the main enterprise of these organizations and that they are organized, while also highlighting the violence used by them, thus more appropriately locating the field of study.

This new concept is an important contribution to area studies, providing appropriate terminology that differentiates the various drug markets, and recognizing the existence of non-violent and less