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Queenpins: an exploratory study of female participation in high-level drug distribution networks

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Abstract

Despite increasing recognition within mainstream media, criminology is yet to offer a substantive analysis of femaleparticipation within the upper echelons of organised crime. As such, this exploratory paper aims to offer an insight into the key themes identifiable within the context of high level, female, drug suppliers. Identifying thirty-six case studies, this exploratory paper combines descriptive statistics and a Fisher's Exact test with Cramer's V to demonstrate the prevalence and overall trends. Overall, the study demonstrated that women, dubbed Queenpins, are most likely to participate at high levels within Latin American cartels and the Camorra. Unlike their counterparts operating within the lower rungs of drug markets, these women are able to invert the highly patriarchal narcocultures they exist within. They operated in a narco-feminist role that supported the men in their lives and offered aroute to resist their machismo-oriented habitus.

Keywords Queenpins · Organised crime · Narco-feminism · Illicit markets · Feminisation

Introduction

It has been long recognised that the study of female criminals and the effects of crime on women is an undeveloped field in comparison to studies of male criminality (Carlen 1985; Miller 2000; Chesney-Lind and Pasko 2004). Within the context of organised crime, this issue is amplified. Increasing recognition of female participation within the higher echelons of organised criminality can be observed in crime dramas, including *The* Queen *of the South* (2016), *Ozark* (2017), *Power* (2014) and,

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most recently, Netflix produced *Griselda* (2024) based on the real-life case of Columbian drug lord Griselda Blanco. There is also a multitude of documentaries, including *Cocaine Cowboys II: Hustlin' With the Godmother* (2008), Queen of Cocaine (2023), and Netflix-produced *Drug Lords* (2018). Literature has also been written examining this phenomenon, including *Queen Pin* (2010), a memoir based on Jemeker Thompson-Hairston known as the "Crack Queen on L.A.", *Top Girl* (Marin 2022), which is based on the author's entry into organised crime, and *Cartel Wives* (Flores and Flores 2018) which was penned by two women who were once married to high-level drug traffickers. Criminology has, thus far, paid scant attention to such a phenomenon. Meanwhile, law enforcement and the media increasingly view their involvement as an exception, nullifying their agency (Farfán Méndez 2020) and marginalising consideration of them in the context of drug policy (Buxton 2020). As such, this exploratory paper aims to offer an insight into the key themes identifiable within the context of high level, female, drug suppliers. Within this study, 36 female drug lords that we label *Queenpins* were identified through Nexis/Lexis and WLII searches. Data was coded and then transferred to SPSS for data analysis. Descriptive statistics were produced and analysed. Due to some of the expected counts being below 5, a Fisher's Exact test was used to explore the data with Cramer's V to explore the effect size of associations. The results offer a new insight into the prevalence of Queenpins within international drug markets, the areas and groups they operate within, and activities they are evidenced to partake in. Overall, Queenpins were concentrated in Latin American states. Their positions in the hierarchy correlated with familial and spousal affiliation. Their involvement in highly competitive and frequently violent drug markets was often highly removed from the experience of the subjugated and vulnerable women found within the lower echelons of drug markets internationally. Inverting the highly patriarchal narco-cultures they operated within, the Queenpins operated in a 'narco-feminist' role that both supported the men in their lives but also offered a route to resist their machismo-oriented habitus.

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exploratory paper aims to offer an insight into the key themes identifiable within the context of high level, female, drug suppliers. Within this study, 36 female drug lords that we label *Queenpins* were identified through Nexis/Lexis and WLII searches. Data was coded and then transferred to SPSS for data analysis. Descriptive statistics were produced and analysed. Due to some of the expected counts being below 5, a Fisher's Exact test was used to explore the data with Cramer's V to explore the effect size of associations. The results offer a new insight into the prevalence of Queenpins within international drug markets, the areas and groups they operate within, and activities they are evidenced to partake in. Overall, Queenpins were concentrated in Latin American states. Their positions in the hierarchy correlated with familial and spousal affiliation. Their involvement in highly competitive and frequently violent drug markets was often highly removed from the experience of the subjugated and vulnerable women found within the lower echelons of drug markets internationally. Inverting the highly patriarchal narco-cultures they operated within, the Queenpins operated in a 'narco-feminist' role that both supported the men in their lives but also offered a route to resist their machismo-oriented habitus.

A review of the literature

As Fiandaca (2007) observed, female involvement in organised crime has gained scant attention. Seven years on, Hübschle (2014) echoed this sentiment. A decade later, whilst some progress has been made (Fleetwood 2014), the gaze of organised crime-related scholarship is still very male-centric. Undoubtedly, this is due to the indisputable fact that most organised criminal activity is conducted by men. As the literature identifies, though, female participation in organised crime is neither chimerical nor tenuous (Siebert 2007; Farfán Méndez 2020).

It's a man's world

Understanding the roles of women across the vast array of organised criminality in the global context is well beyond the scope of this paper. Organised crime is a complex and ever-evolving form of criminal activity with huge differences dependent on the geographic, cultural, and political boundaries the group operate within and originates from. As such, variances are complex and fluid. Hübschle (2014) identified women involved in the illicit trafficking of human beings, drugs, and wildlife on the African continent. Variances between female involvement in Mafia activities differed greatly within the work of Allum (2014), who noted the subordinate role of women involved with the Sicilian Mafia, whereas the Camorra has highly engaged female members engaged in activities that varied from front companies to leadership and even violence. Such leading roles developed, according to Allum, due to the history of the Camorra in which women were forced to take the reins due to fatalities incurred during the mafia wars in the seventies and eighties (ibid.). As the traditional hierarchical structures of the Camorra dissipated a democratisation soon followed. Conversely, female involvement in the Japanese Organised Crime Groups such as the Yakuza was highly prevalent during the first half of the last century, but

cultural changes brought forth by legislative developments (that influenced increasing activity in the licit rather than illicit markets by Japanese OCG's that has enabled law enforcement to identify members more clearly thus reduce active participation, alongside sanctions for licit business engaging with OCG affiliated businesses) have since resulted in their outright ban from formal involvement (Otomo 2007). As such, their role is largely marginalised to informal involvement, such as supporting partners who are dependent upon them financially at the lower levels of the criminal hierarchies' and as convenient participants for higher ranking members to conceal illicit proceeds through businesses that appear legitimate (Farfán Méndez 2020). At the higher levels of Yakuza activity, though, wives of bosses have been seen to engage in management-style roles to settle internal disputes at the lower rungs of the organisation (ibid.). Meanwhile, the involvement of women in the Human Trafficking activities of the Chinese Triads is well documented (Sein 2008).

Specific to drug trafficking, the involvement of female participation in domestic illicit markets is rife, though marginal, within many of the seminal texts on drug markets across the globe. Accounts of women being manipulated into low-level participation in drug dealing feature frequently. Often, these cursory glances detailed women whose involvement in illicit supply networks developed through romantic relationships with drug-involved men (Bourgois, 2003: 226–229), which were often highly exploitative (Fleisher 1995: 85; Marsh 2020: 52). Much of the involvement at low-level supply networks is to obscure the visibility of male drug dealers from law enforcement attention (Harding 2020: 95; Marsh 2020: 52). More sinister forms of exploitation are evident though and involvement in drug lifestyles is often accompanied by sexual violence (Marsh 2020: 52–53) and exploitation, with vulnerable and addicted young women being used as gift girls for young gang members in county lines dug networks (Harding 2020) or as an alternative revenue stream for organised criminal gangs (Briggs and Gamerio, 2017:115).

This is not to say that all of the women who appear in the literature are exploited and vulnerable subjects devoid of agency or power. Some women involved entered the drug trade through casual user-dealer routes (Dorn et al. 1991). Some of these women existed within chaotic and addictive realms of the drug economy, routinely participating in low levels of instrumental violence to feed their addictions (Marsh 2020: 44). Others, however, were not limited by the nature of psychopharmacological addiction and became embedded within organised crime groups as a way to support their families (Hobbs 1995). Though these women acknowledged clearly that their involvement in the trade is only possible due to their association with males who are known to be highly adept at violence (Hobbs 2013), offering them some protection in an otherwise volatile and predatory illicit business (Ancrum and Treadwell 2015; Treadwell et al. 2020; Marsh 2020). In his ethnographic studies of Dublin's drug markets, Marsh's (2020:66) participants observed that female user dealers were marginally exempt from the more violent repercussions of market involvement in comparison to their male counterparts. Due to those involved in the business being reluctant to enact violent retribution to those who were indebted within the drug trade, this limited their ability to participate fully and they were not trusted with large sums of cash due to their vulnerability.

Outside of the limits of domestic markets, utilisation of vulnerable and drug-dependent women for trafficking across national borders was noted by Briggs and Gamerio (2017: 110), who encountered participants who trafficked large quantities of drugs from Morocco back to the drug markets they frequented in Madrid. As within the involvement of vulnerable women within national boundaries, exploitation that involved cross-border trafficking hinged upon exploiting vulnerability, leading to debt bondage, marginalisation, and destitution. Overall, much of the cursory glances towards women's involvement in illicit markets indicate marginal roles relatively low down the pecking order of the organised criminal milieu of their respective states. Of the literature that offers sustained attention (Fleetwood 2014), focus is upon those who share experiences of drug muling, as the work of Briggs and Gamerio (2017) detail. Participation is often underpinned by exploitation tied to drug use (Briggs and Gamerio, 2017) and predatory romance (Fleetwood 2014), with the domination of women found across street cultures globally playing a major role in this. Exceptions to this, though, are apparent, with specific signal crimes such as the rise of Medellin Cartel member Griselda Blanco gaining considerable attention in the media (*Cocaine Cowboys II: Hustlin' With the Godmother*, 2008; Tregunna 2014; *Griselda* 2024).

Just *girls* doing the business

The World Drug Report of 2015 revealed that since 2010, drug trafficking and the violence that often accompanies the crime have become a significant social problem worldwide, which is specifically true for females (UNODC 2014). Latin American countries have seen a dramatic increase in women imprisoned for drug offences between 2000 and 2013, with Brazil seeing a 334% increase, Argentina seeing a 113% increase, and Costa Rica seeing a 225% increase (Boiteux 2015: 4). In addition, reports of women being arrested for the trafficking of drugs has risen in countries such as India, China, Nigeria, and Zambia are commonplace. For example, in India, Delhi criminal justice agencies reported a rise of approximately 15% from 2005 to 2006 in female offenders arrested for drug trafficking, and Punjab police in Malwa reported a 12% increase in arrests of women during the first five months of 2012 (Tandon 2012). Similarly, courts in China's provincial capital of Guangdong reported that women represented a substantial portion of the 250-plus individuals prosecuted for drug trafficking, with a trend showing that female offenders are 'local women who help their foreign boyfriends smuggle drugs into the Chinese mainland' (Caixiong 2012). Furthermore, In Thailand, 82 per cent of all women in prison are serving sentences for drug offences (Álvarez 2019), and in the Philippines, 53 per cent of all women in prison are serving sentences for drug offences (Álvarez 2018).

Female participation in narco-culture

Female participation in drug trafficking in recent decades has seemingly expanded (Campbell 2008). Yet away from cursory glances within, there are few studies of female drug smugglers and, to an even greater extent, research concerning those women that become "drug lords" - operating at the higher echelons of organised criminal activity (Fiandaca 2007; Hübschle 2014). Clearly the causes of female

involvement in the drug trade, smuggling, and the impact this has on women's lives specifically has been largely neglected within academic discourse (Campbell 2008). The reasons for this academic short-sightedness can be traced back to the birth of the USA's War on Drugs policy, in which the initial focus was on drug trade violence and, as a consequence, produced academic work focused almost exclusively on men's involvement in drug distribution, purchasing, and related crimes. It paid little attention to women's involvement within the illicit drug market beyond their 'relative powerlessness or supporting roles to domineering males in illegal, street-based drug markets' (Anderson and Kavanaugh 2017: 339). This is due to, the authors suggest, an over-preoccupation with masculinity within the context of engaging within illicit markets and the use of seemingly petty but serious violence that it often entails (Treadwell and Kelly 2023). Through this hyper-masculinised lens, female participation in illicit drug markets has been bypassed as marginal and anomalous (Buxton 2020). Fleetwood and Leban (2022) suggest that previous academic work, particularly deriving from the USA, reveals that although women were involved in the drug trade, they were a minority and only executed marginalised or insignificant roles. They also suggest that 'drug markets were described as gender-stratified and hierarchical, reflecting patriarchal power and gender stereotypes' (Fleetwood and Leban 2022: 2).

This is not to say that the role of masculinity is not highly influential to the realities of drug markets, and therefore, women involved in the trade as demonstrated by the concept of 'Narco-culture' – 'a way of life associated with the cultural complex created, surrounded, and produced by those involved in the business or practice of narcotics trafficking' (Sanchez 2022: 95) within cartels in Latin America. According to Yanes and Salas (2018), narco-culture is characterised by a world of money, excess, and luxury, where an extreme form of heterosexual masculinity is promoted (Cabañas 2012), and women are seen as objects of satisfaction for men. Moreover, as Sanchez (2022) submits, narco-culture is a culture of violence whereby individuals are swallowed up by a way of life that ultimately glorifies violence. The use of violence within this culture is legitimised and validated as a construction of masculine identity (Penglase 2010) by associating extreme violence with the measure of manhood (DaMatta 2010). It is in this logic, according to Yanes and Salas (2018), that we can understand why the prominent levels of violence used by these illicit organisations, as the more violent the individual is, the more that individual is seen as a 'real man' (i.e., violent and powerful) (García-Reyes, 2022).

Bourgois' (2003) research into Puerto Rican migrants involved in the street-level drug trade in East Harlem found that the work the community previously sought was disappearing. Men in the community were unwilling to take jobs in the service sector, as this was perceived as "women's work", mirroring the informal roles held by women romantically involved to low echelon participants of the Yakuza (Farfán Méndez 2020). In Harlem, the migrant's wives and partners, unlike the males who were economically marginalised, successfully gained such employment, and financial independence soon followed (Bourgois 2003). Consequently, this threatened the patriarchal structures of family homes within the community. Due to this perceived threat to their masculinity, such men 'took refuge in the drug economy, where there

were very violent norms of gang rape, sexual conquest, abandonment of families and "real manhood" based on devotion to group membership' (ibid.: 96).

Fleetwood (2014) notes that the drug trade is undergoing increasing feminisation and that women are subjected to drug violence, manipulation at the hands of male drug traffickers, used as drug mules, keepers of drug stashes, and profiting very little in the process (Campbell 2008). Of note here is the work of Sumter et al. (2022), who reported that Mexican drug lords used younger women of higher-class status for transporting drugs because they were in new cars, with stylish clothing, and could pose as shoppers heading over the border. Comparatively, Jamaican Yardie groups utilised both financial incentives and instrumental violence to coerce vulnerable and economically marginalised women into trafficking illicit substances into Britain throughout the nineties and early noughties (Sudbury 2005). Despite these risks, however, Fleetwood stresses that there are also benefits available, such as empowerment and liberation of male control and a source of excitement and adventure (Fleetwood 2011, 2014), though this does little to transform the larger patriarchal cultural economy and may 'even reinforce it through the promulgation of macho/a symbolism' (Campbell 2008). Fleetwood (2014) also argued that many women involved in drug trafficking achieved status and empowerment and considered the endeavour to provide "fringe benefits", such as travelling to different countries, 'excitement and a free holiday' (pg. 8). Adler (1985) added that successful female drug traffickers had positive self-images and 'feelings of power' (pg. 99). So too, Bourgois' (2003) ethnographic study of New York street selling drug culture as highly patriarchal and misogynistic; however some women dealers can "invert patriarchy" but ultimately fall prey to and reproduce male-dominant logistics and social structures (pg. 215). In echoing this submissive position within traditionally patriarchal organisations, Sumter et al. (2017) state that, in many instances, women became involved in smuggling because of their desire to please or help a male figure in their lives.

Material girl in a material world

There has been some attention given to the influences of economic deprivation in relation to female involvement in the international drug market. This can be witnessed in Zambia, in which women engaged in illegal activity for economic reasons, as cited by the Chief Editor of the Lusaka Times (Siulapwa 2010). Furthermore, an exploration into Afghan women and their engagement in the illicit opiate trade found that they became involved in such activity for both economic and social reasons, while their continued engagement can be predominantly explained by financial motives (UNODC, 2022). Such motives are also highlighted in Harry's (2021) research, which explores the pathways of offending for women sentenced to death for drug trafficking in Malaysia. Here, it is suggested that 'due to a situation of economic insecurity, women may engage in drug trafficking as a way to make "quick money", to serve an immediate financial need' (pg:4). Davies (2003) suggests that women 'are victims who are pushed and driven into crime to escape from poverty, abuse, and hardship' (pg. 290). Similarly, according to Olmo (1990), the strive for economic gain and status was less available and achievable for women than for men in Latin American societies and thus 'developed survival strategies', in which becom-

ing involved in drug crimes became a viable solution (pg. 43). Olmo continues, arguing that in order to leave the lower economic strands, women would often occupy lower-level positions within drug organisations, and were paid very small amounts in comparison to the profits accrued by drug dealers (pg. 43). Similarly, Geiger (2006), who studied female offenders in the Neve Tirza Women's Prison in Israel, reported that the women 'struggled against intolerable socioeconomic deprivation,' using the economic gain of drug trafficking to improve their statuses (pg. 582). However, Buxton (2020) suggests that although involvement in illicit drug supply activities may enable women to maintain fragile livelihoods, such participation rarely serves to enrich women or enable them to progress to more secure, independent incomes.

Findings from Fleetwood (2014), who investigated the economic motives of female offenders incarcerated for their involvement in drug trafficking in Ecuador, also unearthed numerous economic reasons, including financing for their relative's operations, paying for their children's education, and paying off debts. Echoing this, Mnguni and Thobane (2022), who explored factors contributing to female offenders becoming drug mules/traffickers in the Kgoši Mampuru II and Johannesburg Correctional Centres, South Africa, found that a common theme was the unfavourable financial conditions and socio-economic circumstances which drove these women to traffic drugs. Furthermore, they also reported that, for the majority of these women, the key reason for this behaviour was their need for money to maintain their children and families.

Hunnicutt and Broidy (2004) suggest that the impoverishment of women leads to increased female criminal activity. Furthermore, they suggest that enhanced freedoms for some women are also associated with economic deterioration - and greater female crime - when such independence is not coupled with the proper social/infrastructural conditions and means women are required to succeed in legal occupations in class and gender-divided societies. According to Campbell (2008), whose study focused on the role of women drug smugglers on the US-Mexico border, such cultural changes and "liberations" generate more opportunities for mobility, yet this is met with greater economic obligations but with fewer opportunities to meet them in the "legitimate" economy. This paradox subsequently results in more women entering criminal enterprises in order to meet such cultural expectations and economic responsibilities. Campbell (2008) refers to this as a case of 'limited cultural liberation' (pg. 241) as men still maintain greater possession of structural power, and women's work in the drug business involves interdependence with men rather than complete autonomy (Anderson 2005: 373). A significant criticism of the work of Hunnicutt and Broidy (2004), according to Campbell (2008), is that they make no mention of income divisions in their analysis and that women are treated as a generic category. Campbell notes that specific smuggling activities women engage in are closely connected to their socioeconomic status and positions inside the hierarchies of drug organisations. In particular, Hunnicutt and Broidy (2004) note that 'female crime can be characterised as fundamentally economic in nature [and] much of women's crime is related to economic need' (pg. 131). While this may hold true for those women within particular economic strands and locations marked by low income and poverty, the same cannot so easily be said for those women operating within higher economic and hierarchical positions. As stressed by Campbell (2008):

> For upper-level women, drug crime is associated less with putting food on the table than with the ability to gain power or express themselves through style and fashion, factors that combine gender concerns (i.e. obtaining power vis-à-vis men) with aesthetic and consumption issues. Finally, in the case of female "kingpins" (Surovell's "Queenpins") crime is a vehicle for liberation, of a sort, from men rather than its cause (Campbell 2008: 242).

According to Campbell's (2008) own research on female drug lords in Mexico, such a profession allows for a pleasurable lifestyle and relative autonomy from men. These women, at least for a time, were able to avoid the trappings of "liberation" without resources and economic marginalisation and may also serve as role models and symbols of female power for those women considering such a career. Furthermore, Edberg (2004) submits that many young women are captivated by the image of the female drug dealer. These women are seen as 'powerful and celebritised for that power, via the same or similar persona currently gendered for men' (pg.103). More broadly, it is suggested by Siegel (2014) that the passive role of women within the sphere of organised criminal networks is not always limited to their knowledge and support of the criminal 'businesses'; their leading positions within criminal networks, however, are also present.

Trauma and identity transformation: beyond economic and material motivations

In moving away from solely economic motivations, Geiger (2006) states that a number of female offenders who partook in drug trafficking denoted to a 'childhood filled with emotional, physical, and/or sexual abuse' (pg. 586) and credited their criminal activity as a means to overcome negative life-long effects. De Li and MacKenzie (2003), in research in the United States, found that 'antisocial tendencies formed early in life continue to be reinforced throughout adolescence and early adulthood' (pg. 280). Furthermore, Jeffries and Chuenurah (2019), in their study of Thai women imprisoned in Cambodia for cross-border international drug trafficking, found that negative childhood experiences, extensive childhood victimisation and unstable childhood familial relationships were factors that shaped these women's choices. Thus, regardless of the form of abuse, a traumatic childhood is potentially a factor in some women's involvement in drug trafficking- mirroring that of their male counterparts. In another study that is arguably more relevant to the topic of this paper, García (2007) interviewed upper-level drug traffickers who had served time and had either Latin American or Mexican ancestry. Upon conducting this research, it was revealed that numerous participants had come from families where 'love towards them was rarely expressed by their parents, resulting in feelings of alienation and lack of self-worth' (pg. 91). Also, Geiger (2006) found that female offenders often participated in drug-related crimes due to their victimisation as adults. More specifically, findings indicated that many of the female offenders had survived an 'abusive and oppressive family' (Geiger 2006: 586); females who had been oppressed, abused, and impoverished used 'engagement in crime, drugs, and prostitution, often represent the last expression of resistance' (Geiger 2006: 591) available in order to 'negotiate a positive identity' (Geiger 2006: 592).

This exploratory review of previous literature provided some insight into why women engaged in the illicit drug trade. While the majority of research has primarily focused on the economic hardships women tried to address by engaging in the highly patriarchal drug trade, other research has emphasised past victimisation and abuse, and the need to improve one's status was a driving factor. Overall, much of the research around female involvement within the drug trade is centred along highly localised and patriarchal engagement in an often-predatory business.

Methodology

The dataset within this exploratory study was constructed utilising the search engines Nexis, Lexis and the World Legal Information Institute (WLII). Initially, Nexis searches were conducted utilising key terms. Key terms were determined by identifying keywords within journalistic coverage of females convicted of high-level organised crime involvement during the preparation for the study. Search terms included "Drug lord", "Kingpin", "Female", "organised crime", "women", and "queen". Multiple searches with combinations of these terms were conducted. Upon an initial data set being obtained, the definition of organised crime proposed by Tilley and Hopkins was utilised as a criterion for inclusion to ensure consistency across the study. Tilley and Hopkins (2008: 445) define organised crime as: 'crime that involves three or more people who come together in committing criminal offences over a sustained period of time'. Overall, 36 case studies were identified for final analysis from newspaper reports derived from Nexis.

Aware of the tendency for dramatisation (Potter and Kappeler 2006) within journalistic sources driven by a need for 'newsworthiness" (Welch et al. 2002), triangulation to quell such methodological deficits was conducted. For triangulation, multiple sources of data were utilised (Merriam 1995) to ensure the data from the study was 'conveyed as truthfully as possible' (pg. 54). Triangulation to validate the initial findings was achieved through the identification of true crime books that focussed upon those in the data set (Chepesiuk 2003; Ritz and Thompson-Hairston 2010; Smith 2013; Flores and Flores 2018; Marin 2022). Durham et al. (1995) notes how 'the true crime genre is an important, yet unstudied, aspect of popular representations of crime' (pg.144) and that its utility is increasingly demonstrated within the study of criminology (Wattis 2023). Whilst it is acknowledged that true crime accounts can often mislead the public with regard to the actualities of crime (Barkan and Bryjak 2014), the fact that they often presented a thorough biography of the offender provided a different data set in which to triangulate the previously collated information. Further triangulation was achieved, where possible, through the use of Lexis and WLII. Lexis is an online search engine that houses court reports from the US, UK, New Zealand, and Canada. Similarly, the WLII was also used due to housing such reports from countries including, but not limited to, Hong Kong, the Pacific Islands, Africa, India, and the Middle East. Specifically, such search engines, where official court transcripts were available, offered a means to either validate or question the data derived through news articles in a legal context.

Once the news articles were collated, the data from the case studies was extracted into an Excel spreadsheet. The most important factors relating to the offenders were collated, including (but not limited to) the location of operations, the organisational affiliation, nationality, previous occupation, the substance distributed, family or spousal involvement, motivations for offending, and engagement in violent acts. Categories of inclusion were guided by thematic prevalence within the literature review and availability of information.

After compiling this dataset, the spreadsheet was analysed using SPSS, and descriptive statistics were first performed on the data. The descriptive statistics provided the frequencies of the categories, and due to the fact that some of the data was not obtainable for certain categories i.e., whether there was a history of abuse, this meant that there was skew in some of the data due to 'unknown' categories. To counteract this and due to a small sample size, it was identified that a Fisher's Exact Test should be conducted on the data, with Cramer V calculations to assess the size of the effect, if any.

Results

The search identified 36 female drug lords that fit the criteria for analysis, which are listed below in Table 1. Information about some of the Queenpins was difficult to identify due to the secrecy around the drug trade and the reliance on open-source data the research method dictated. Descriptive statistics for each category were examined (see Table 1).

The locations of operation for the Queenpins included the USA (25%), Mexico (22.2%), Colombia (11.1%), Italy and Guatemala (each 8.3%), Brazil and Australia (each 5.6%), Kenya, India, Honduras, Vietnam and Bolivia (2.8%). This Sinaloa cartel (25%) has the highest frequency of Queenpins; the remaining organisations were distributed equally (2.8%), with 33.3% falling in the unknown category. The majority of organised crime groups had relatively little involvement from female actors, with most groups only having one female actor identified. However, within the Camorra, three Queenpins were identified. The Sinaloa cartel had the most significant female involvement, with 25% of those identified being affiliated with the group (see Table 2).

Occupations of the Queenpins included business owner (13.9%), previous criminal activity (11.1%), model (8.3%), sex work (2.8%), politician (2.8%), and other (13.9%). 47.2% of the sample either did not have an occupation prior to joining the organisation or this information was not available. Family or spousal involvement in organised crime groups was reviewed, with 44.4% being involved, 44.4% not being involved, and 11.1% unknown. It was also found that, of the sample, 46.9% were mothers, whereas 9.4% were not (43.8% unknown). History of abuse was also mostly unknown amongst the sample (80.6%), though of the data available in the sample, 19.4% had a recorded history of being abused, with the remainder of the sample falling into the unknown category (80.6%) (see Table 3).

The primary substances distributed by the Queenpins were mainly cocaine (52.8%), followed by marijuana (8.3%), heroin, amphetamines, crystal meth and khat

(all 2.8%). The majority of the Queenpins chose to enlist others to commit violent acts (33.3%), followed by both themselves and others committing violence (22.2%) and lastly, themselves alone (5.6%). Some of the case studies had no known violence (8.3%) however, some did not specify and so fall into the unknown category (30.6%).

The range of primary convictions received by the Queenpins varies, with the most common convictions including drug trafficking (42.9%), conspiracy to distribute drugs (8.6%), conspiracy to import cocaine (5.7%), possession (5.7%) and money laundering (5.7%). Other offences included distribution (2.9%), murder (2.9%), mafia association (2.9%), racketeering (2.9%), robbery (2.9%), distribution of drugs (2.9%), as well as kidnapping (2.9%), drug-related charges (2.9%) and conspiracy to smuggle drugs (2.9%). Some of the case studies were awaiting sentencing at the time of data collection, and therefore, this criterion was not applicable (2.9%).

Fisher's exact test

Due to the nature and size of the dataset and many cells having an expected count below 5, Fisher's Exact tests were conducted with 5000 iterations and a 95% confidence interval to reveal any associations present between variables.

Many significant associations were found with primary location including strong associations with organisation ($p < .001$, $V = 0.72$), nationality ($p < .001$, $V = 0.94$), and substance ($p = .002$, $V = 0.80$). Queenpins located in the USA were involved with the Central Jamaican Florida Organisation (1/9%), Mexican mafia (1/9), BMF (1/9%) and the Cali cartel (1/9%). Those located in Mexico were mainly within the Sinaloa cartel (7/8), followed by the Tijuana cartel (1/8%). Colombia contained Queenpins who were in the Sinaloa cartel (25%), Medellin cartel (25%) and Rastrojos cartel (25%). Italy contained Queenpins only from the Camorra (100%). Australia contained Queenpins associated with the Pettingill family (50%), and Kenya contained a Queenpin associated with the Al-Amin Women's group (100%). Guatemala was associated with the Los Zetas cartel (33.3%) and Los Charros cartel (33.3%). Honduras contained one Queenpin from the Sinaloa cartel (100%), with Bolivia containing one Queenpin from La Corporacion (100%). The remainder of the sample had unknown locations (33.3%). The main exports from the USA included cocaine (55.5%), Marijuana (33.3%); from Mexico, the main export was cocaine (87.5%); this was similar for Colombia (75%) but also included amphetamines (25%). Brazil mainly exported cocaine (50%), as did Bolivia (50%), Guatemala (33.3%) and Honduras (100%). Australia mainly exported crystal meth (50%), with India mainly exporting Khat (100%).

The number of organisations the Queenpins were affiliated with had a strong association with the organisation ($p < .001$, $V = 0.73$) and a moderate association with nationality ($p = .028$, $V = 0.57$). Those involved with one organisation were associated with the Sinaloa cartel (34.8%) and the Camorra (8.7%). Those associated with two organisations were affiliated with the Sinaloa cartel (100%). The Queenpin with two known organisation links was Mexican (100%). Those with only one organisation were mainly Mexican (39.1%), Colombian, Italian (each 13%), Guatemalan (8.7%) and Jamaican, American, Australian, Honduran and Bolivian (each 4.3%).

Table 1 Cases of those meeting the definition of a Queenpin included in data analysis

Name	Location(s)	Years active	Organisation	Nationality	Occupation	Current age	Age at time of arrest	Substance	Family/ spousal business	Reason for offending	Mother	Convicted of	Sentence (in years)	History of being abused	Who committing violence
Temitope Ayoni Olaiya	USA, Sao Paulo	Unknown	Unknown	African	Other	43	40	Cocaine	No	Unknown	Unknown	Conspiracy to distribute	10	Unknown	No known violence
Sandra Ávila Beltrán	Mexico	1980s-2007	Sinaloa cartel, Norte del Valle cartel	Mexican	Other	61	47	Cocaine	Yes	Family involvement	Unknown	Possession, drug trafficking	5	Unknown	Others
Enedina Arellano Felix	Mexico	2003-present	Tijuana cartel	Mexican	N/A	61	N/A	Cocaine	Yes	Family involvement	N/A	Distribution	3.3	Unknown	Self
Griselda Blanco	Colombia	1980s-2012	Medelin cartel	Colombian	Previous criminal activity	Deceased	42	Cocaine	No	Family involvement	Yes	Drug trafficking, murder	10	Unknown	Others
Rosetta Cutolo	Italy, Brazil, Venezuela	1970s-1993	Camorra	Italian	Unknown	85	57	Unknown	Yes	Family involvement	Unknown	Mafia association	9	Unknown	Both
Charmaine Roman	USA, Jamaica	2006-2013	Central Florida Jamaican Organisation	Jamaican	Unknown	51	42	Marijuana	Unknown	Unknown	Yes	Drug trafficking, racketeering	6	Unknown	Others
Jemeker Thompson-Hairston	USA	1980s	Unknown	American	Business owner	56	31	Cocaine	No	Money	Yes	Conspiracy to distribute, money laundering	15	Unknown	Others
Simone Farrow	Australia	1993	Unknown	Australian	Sex worker, model	45	32	Crystal Meth	No	Money	No	Drug trafficking	11	Unknown	Others
Angie Sanclemente Valencia	Colombia, Argentina	2009-2010	Unknown	Colombian	Model	42	30	Cocaine	No	Unknown	No	Drug trafficking, racketeering	6	Unknown	No known violence
Elizabeth Barrer	USA, Canada, Ukraine	2007-2014	Unknown	American	Unknown	Deceased	N/A	Marijuana	No	Unknown	Unknown	Money laundering	N/A	Unknown	Unknown

Table 1 (continued)

Name	Location(s)	Years active	Organisation	Nationality	Occupation	Current age	Age at time of arrest	Substance	Family/ spousal business	Reason for offending	Mother	Convicted of	Sentence (in years)	History of being abused	Who committing violence
Jasiane Silva Teixeira	Brazil, Bolivia, Venezuela, Colombia, Rio de Janeiro, Peru	2014-2019	Unknown	Brazilian	Unknown	34	31	Unspecified	Yes	Spousal involvement	Unknown	Robbery, drug trafficking	Not yet sentenced	Unknown	Others
Thelma Wright	USA	1977-1991	BMF	American	Previous criminal activity, Business owner	71	N/A	Cocaine, Heroin	Yes	Spousal involvement	Yes	N/A	N/A	Unknown	Self
Estrella Ramos	Mexico	2001-2004	Sinaloa Cartel	Mexican	Other	unknown	unknown	Cocaine	Yes	Family involvement	Yes	Murder, drug trafficking	8	Unknown	Others
Sareye Budul Shafat	Kenya	1997-present	Al-Amin womens group	African	N/A	54	N/A	Khat	No	Money	Yes	Conspiracy to smuggle	12	Unknown	Others
Maria Licciardi	Italy	1993–2001, 2009–2021	Camorra	Italian	Previous criminal activity	71	49	Unknown	Yes	Family involvement	Unknown	Drug trafficking, money laundering, racketeering	25(life)-released 2009 rearrested2021	Unknown	Others
Marllory Dadiana Chacon Rossell	Guatemala, Andes, USA	2008 -2014	Los Zetas Cartel	Guatemalan	Business owner, other	48	43	Cocaine	No	Unknown	Yes	Drug trafficking, money laundering, Conspiracy to distribute	6	Unknown	Both
Mery Valencia de Ortiz	USA	1980-1997	Cali cartel	Colombian	Other	68	44	Cocaine, Heroin	No	Association with cartels	Unknown	Drug trafficking, money laundering	Life (released 2012)	Unknown	Both

Table 1 (continued)

Name	Location(s)	Years active	Organisation	Nationality	Occupation	Current age	Age at time of arrest	Substance	Family/ spousal business	Reason for offending	Mother	Convicted of	Sentence (in years)	History of being abused	Who committing violence
Kath Pettingill	Australia, Rio de Janeiro	1970s- Unknown	Pettingill family	Australian	Business owner, prostitute	86	Unknown	Unknown	No	Family involvement	Yes	Drug trafficking	6	Unknown	Both
Raquel Santos de Oliveira	Brazil	1988–1990 s	Unknown	Brazilian	N/A	61	N/A	Cocaine	Yes	Spousal involvement	Yes	Racketeering, conspiracy to distribute	8.3	Yes	Both
Maria Chata Leon	USA	1980s-2008	Mexican mafia	Mexican	Unknown	58	44	Cocaine	No	Unknown	Yes	Racketeering, conspiracy to distribute	Unknown	Yes	Others
Lisette Lee	USA	2009–2010	Unknown	South Korean	Model	41	28	Marijuana	No	Money	No	Drug trafficking	6	Yes	Both
Raffaella D'Alterio	Italy	2006–2012	Camorra	Italian	Unknown	56	46	Unknown	Yes	Spousal involvement	Yes	Drug trafficking, murder	15	Yes	Both
Shashikala Patankar	India	1980s-2015	Unknown	Indian	Other	61	54	Mephedrone	No	Association with cartels	Yes	Possession	6.5	Yes	No known violence
Blanca Cazares Salazar	Mexico, USA	Unknown-2007	Sinaloa Cartel	Mexican	Unknown	59	53	Unknown	Yes	Family involvement	Unknown	Money laundering	N/A	Unknown	Unknown
Emma Cornell Aispuro	Mexico	2011–2017	Sinaloa Cartel	Mexican	Model	33	32	Cocaine, Methamphetamine	No	Spousal involvement	Yes	International drug trafficking	3	Unknown	Unknown
Digna Valle	Honduras	1990s- 2014	Sinaloa Cartel	Honduran	Business owner	61	53	Cocaine	No	Family involvement	Unknown	Drug trafficking	11 (released 2018)	Unknown	Unknown

Table 1 (continued)

Name	Location(s)	Years active	Organisation	Nationality	Occupation	Current age	Age at time of arrest	Substance	Family/ spousal business	Reason for offending	Mother	Convicted of	Sentence (in years)	History of being abused	Who committing violence
Luz Fajardo Campos	Mexico	2010–2017	Sinaloa Cartel	Mexican	Unknown	60	57	Cocaine, methamphetamine	No	Unknown	Yes	Conspiracy to distribute	22 (Life)	Unknown	Others
Guadalupe Fernandez	Mexico	1990–2016	Sinaloa cartel	Mexican	Unknown	62	59	Cocaine, methamphetamine	Yes	Family involvement	Unknown	Drug trafficking, money laundering	10	Unknown	Unknown
Sebastiana Hortensia	Guatemala	Unknown-2014	Los Charros	Guatemalan	Unknown	67	59	Unknown	Yes	Spousal involvement	Unknown	Drug trafficking	5 (Released 2019)	Yes	Both
Marixia Lemus Perez	Guatemala	Unknown-2017	Unknown	Guatemalan	Politician	52	45	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Yes	Kidnapping, murder, running a criminal organisation	94	Yes	Others
María Particia Rodríguez	Colombia	2007–2010	Sinaloa Cartel	Mexican	Unknown	Unknown	28	Cocaine	Yes	Spousal involvement	Unknown	Conspiracy to import cocaine, manufacturing and distributing cocaine	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown
Perrion Roberts	USA	1984–2004	Unknown	American	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Yes	Family involvement	Unknown	Drug related charges	21 (pardoned after 2 years)	Unknown	Unknown
Vũ Hoàng Oanh	Vietnam	Unknown-2022	Unknown	Vietnamese	Unknown	65	65	Heroin, methamphetamines, ecstasy	Yes	Family involvement	Unknown	Unknown	Not yet sentenced	Unknown	Unknown

Table 1 (continued)

Name	Location(s)	Years active	Organisation	Nationality	Occupation	Current age	Age at time of arrest	Substance	Family/ spousal business	Reason for offending	Mother	Convicted of	Sentence (in years)	History of being abused	Who committing violence
Sonia Sanjinez De Atalala	Bolivia	1980s- unknown	La Corporacion	Bolivian	Unknown	71	N/A	Cocaine	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	N/A (under witness protection)	N/A	Unknown	Unknown
Dolly de Jesus Cifuentes Villa	Mexico	2003–2011	Sinaloa Cartel	Mexican	Money laundering	58	47	Cocaine	Yes	Family involvement	Unknown	Conspiracy to distribute cocaine	4	Unknown	Unknown
Beatriz Elena Henao	Colombia	Unknown-2009	Rastrojos	Colombian	Business owner	57	46	Amphetamines	Unknown	Spousal involvement	Unknown	Drug trafficking	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown

Table 2 Organisation affiliated with case studies from data

Organisation	*n*	%
Sinaloa cartel	9	25
Tijuana cartel	1	2.8
Medelin cartel	1	2.8
Central Jamaican Florida Organisation	1	2.8
Al-Amin Women's Group	1	2.8
Los Zetas cartel	1	2.8
Cali cartel	1	2.8
Mexican mafia	1	2.8
Camorra	3	8.4
Los Charros	1	2.8
La Corporacion	1	2.8
Rastrojos	1	2.8
BMF	1	2.8
Unknown	12	33.3

Table 3 Family or spousal involvement in the cartel, if the case study was a mother, and if there is a history of abuse

	Family or Spousal involvement		Mother		History of being abused	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Yes	16	43.2	15	40.5	7	19.4
No	16	43.2	3	8.1	0	0
Unknown	5	13.5	19	51.3	29	80.6

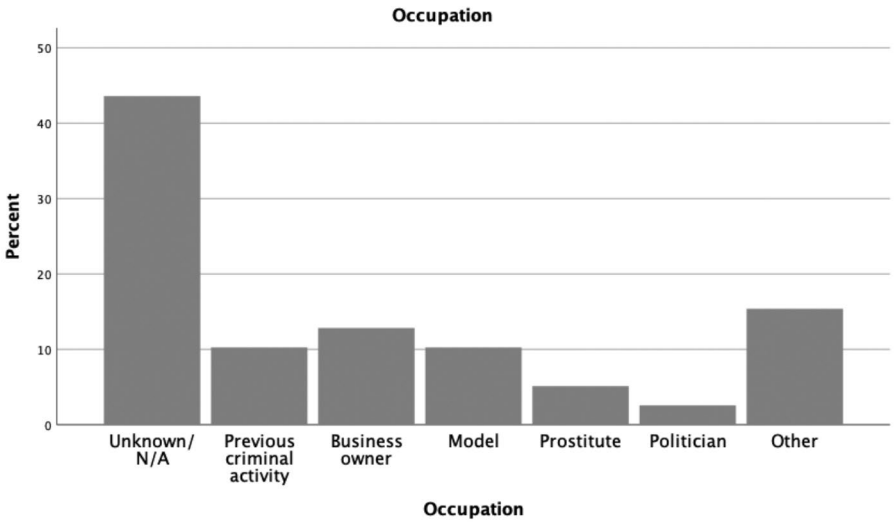

Fig. 1 Percentage breakdown of occupations held by the case studies before joining cartels/ organisations/ gangs

Table 4 Fisher's Exact test results

Variables	Sig (*p*)	Cramer's V
Location*Number of organisations associated with	0.098	0.530
Location*Organisation	<0.001	0.721
Location*Nationality	<0.001	0.937
Location*Occupation	0.919	0.498
Location*Substance	0.002	0.796
Location*Family/ spousal involvement	0.088	0.641
Location*Reason for offending	0.068	0.651
Location*Mother	0.845	0.492
Location*Convicted of	0.726	0.642
Location*History of abuse	0.152	0.632
Location*Who is committing violence	0.701	0.522
Number of organisations associated with*Organisation	<0.001	0.732
Number of organisations associated with*Nationality	0.028	0.574
Number of organisations associated with*Occupation	0.141	0.455
Number of organisations associated with*Substance	0.322	0.382
Number of organisations associated with*Family/ spousal involvement	0.652	0.185
Number of organisations associated with*Reason for offending	0.326	0.320
Number of organisations associated with*Mother	0.098	0.335
Number of organisations associated with*Convicted of	0.170	0.665
Number of organisations associated with*History of abuse	0.349	0.254
Number of organisations associated with*Who committing violence	0.238	0.366
Organisation*Nationality	<0.001	0.703
Organisation*Occupation	0.788	0.595
Organisation*Substance	0.265	0.672
Organisation*Family/ spousal involvement	0.078	0.765
Organisation*Reason for offending	0.323	0.671
Organisation*Mother	0.899	0.518
Organisation*Convicted of	0.975	0.611
Organisation*History of abuse	0.319	0.662
Organisation*Who is committing violence	0.021	0.753
Nationality*Occupation	0.510	0.592
Nationality*substance	<0.001	0.793
Nationality*family/ spousal involvement	0.015	0.751
Nationality*Reason for offending	0.257	0.665
Nationality*Mother	0.677	0.637
Nationality*Convicted of	0.497	0.587
Nationality*History of abuse	0.116	0.718
Nationality*Who is committing violence	0.313	0.597
Occupation*Substance	0.408	0.533
Occupation*Family/ spousal involvement	0.021	0.562
Occupation*Reason for offending	0.258	0.473
Occupation*Mother	0.044	0.661
Occupation*Convicted of	0.870	0.606
Occupation*History of abuse	0.381	0.444
Occupation*Who is committing violence	0.374	0.406
Substance*Family/ spousal involvement	0.036	0.545
Substance*Reason for offending	0.066	0.578

Table 4 (continued)

Variables	Sig (*p*)	Cramer's V
Substance*Mother	0.272	0.518
Substance*Convicted of	0.497	0.606
Substance*History of abuse	0.382	0.458
Substance*Who is committing violence	0.844	0.416
Family/ spousal involvement*Reason for offending	<0.001	0.600
Family/ spousal involvement*Mother	0.026	0.398
Family/ spousal involvement*Convicted of	0.233	0.635
Family/ spousal involvement*History of abuse	<0.999	0.050
Family/ spousal involvement*Who is committing violence	0.371	0.363
Reason for offending*Mother	0.042	0.506
Reason for offending*Convicted of	0.961	0.549
Reason for offending*History of abuse	0.082	0.412
Reason for offending*Who is committing violence	0.245	0.369
Mother*Convicted of	0.955	0.531
Mother*History of abuse	0.043	0.424
Mother*Who was committing violence	0.098	0.418
Convicted of*History of abuse	0.447	0.645
Convicted of*Who was committing violence	0.103	0.668
History of abuse*Who was committing violence	0.067	0.481

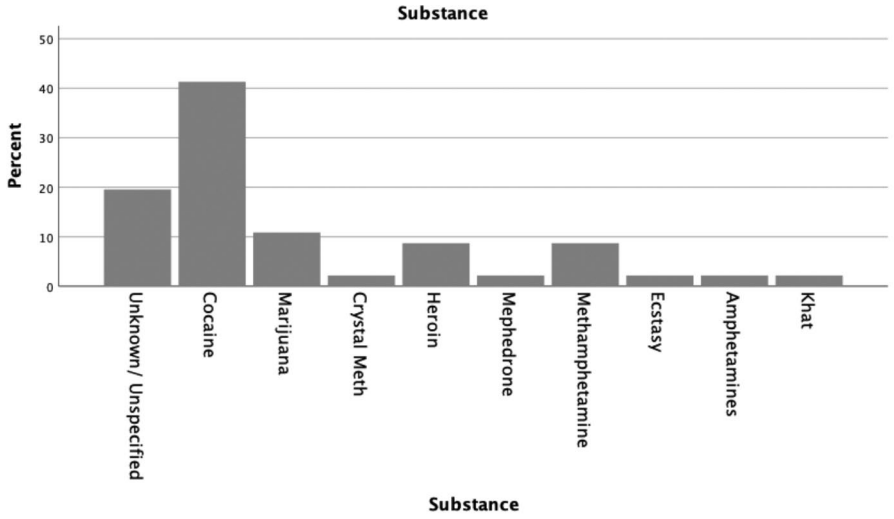

Fig. 2 Percentages of the different substances distributed by the case studies

Organisations were also found to have strong associations with both nationality ($p<.001$, V=0.70) and who is committing the violence ($p=.021$, V=0.75). Those committing the violence themselves were in the Tijuana cartel (50%) and the BMF (50%). Those who instructed others to carry out violent acts were mainly in the Sinaloa cartel (25%), Medellin cartel, Central Jamaican Florida Organisation, Al-

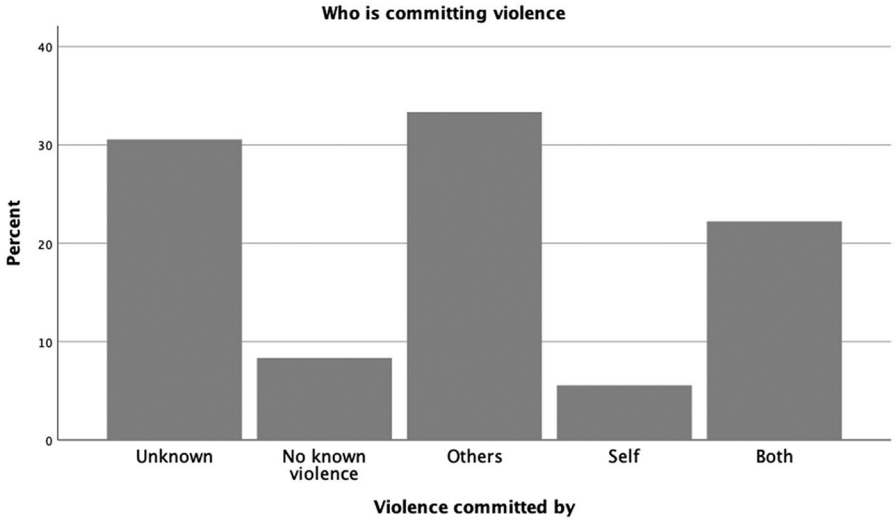

Fig. 3 Percentages of who is committing violence within the cartels/ organisations/ gangs

Amin women's group, and Mexican mafia (each 4.3%). Those who both committed violence and enlisted others to commit violence were associated with the Camorra (25%), Los Charros cartel, Pettingill family, Cali cartel and Los Zetas cartel (each 12.5%).

Family/ spousal involvement in cartels had multiple associations, including a strong association with nationality ($p = .015$, $V = 0.75$), with moderate associations with reason for offending ($p < .001$, $V = 0.60$). Those who had family or spousal involvement stated their offending was due to family involvement (62.5%) and spousal involvement (37.5%). Those who did not cite their reasons as money-related (25%), prior association with cartels (12.5%), family involvement (18.8%) and spousal involvement (6.25%). 25% of the population fell into the unknown category.

Family/ spousal involvement was also related to occupation ($p = .012$, $V = 0.56$), substance ($p = .036$, $V = 0.55$), and whether the Queenpin was a mother ($p = .026$, $V = 0.40$). Those who had family or spousal involvement in the cartels included previous occupations such as previous criminal activity (75%) and other (8%). Those who did not have family/ spousal involvement had previous occupations such as business owner (25%), model (18.8%), previous criminal activity (6.25%) and other (18.8%). Of those who were mothers, 26.6% had family involvement/ spousal involvement, and 60% did not. Those who were not mothers did not have family or spousal involvement in the cartels (100%).

Occupation was also found to be moderately associated with being a mother ($p = .044$, $V = 0.66$). Previous occupations that were associated with being a mother were previous criminal activity (13.3%), business owner (20%), model and politician (each 6.6%) and other (13.3%). The occupations held by those who were not mothers were model (66.7%) and sex worker (33.3%). A moderate association was also found between being a mother and reason for offending ($p = .042$, $V = 0.51$). Those who were mothers cited spousal involvement (4/15%), family involvement (3/15%),

money (2/15%) and previous association with cartels (1/15%) as reasons for offending. Those who were not mothers mainly cited money (66.7%) as the reason for offending. The remaining samples fell into the unknown category (43.7%).

Substance was found to have a strong association with nationality ($p < .001$, $V = 0.79$). These associations mirrored those found within the location and substance association.

History of abuse was moderately associated with being a mother ($p = .043$, $V = 0.42$). For The majority of those who were mothers (66.7%), it was unknown whether they experienced abuse prior to or during their time in their organisations (38.5%). History of abuse was not associated with who was committing the violence, however, Monte Carlo results for this test were significant ($p = .017$) suggesting this may be significant for future Queenpin cases.

Discussion

Overall, the majority of the 36 Queenpins identified within this study were based within the global south, with only 14 operating in countries classed as the global north (USA, Australia, Canada, Italy, Ukraine and the USA). Echoing global drug markets, in which hegemony over much of the global supply chains is dominated by cartels, the majority of women within the study found to be operating at high levels within organised crime groups were born in and operated in countries in South and Central America. Jurisdictional differences made sentencing and offence comparisons difficult. Overall, though, the vast majority of offenders were convicted of offences relating to drug trafficking, money laundering, racketeering or, within the context of the United States, RICO. Violence-related offences, including murder and robbery, were also evident. As with the atypical, male-dominated organised crime markets, offending was not exclusive to drug-related crime. For example, Maria Chata Leon was involved in both drug trafficking and human trafficking.

Mirroring global supply chains, the Cartels of Latin America dominated cocaine supply, which accounted for (41%) of overall Queenpin activity. Marijuana was the main product supplied by three of the offenders. Each of these was based outside of Latin America, in areas from which Marijuana trafficking is well documented, including Jamaica (Bagley 2004) and the USA (Adler 1985; Desroches 2005; Gundur 2022). Those involved in Heroin trafficking operated within domestic markets in the USA (Griffin 2007; Gundur 2022) and Vietnam (Chin 2009; Luong 2020), as well as cartel supply routes from Mexico into the United States (Serrano Cadena 2003; Lynch 2017). Methamphetamine supply was as frequently evidenced as heroin trafficking, overwhelmingly involving the Sinaloa Cartel (Grundetjern 2023; Paoli et al. 2023). Both ecstasy and heroin markets run by Queenpins were also concentrated in Vietnam's domestic markets (Luong 2017). Crystal Methamphetamine was evidenced within the Domestic markets of Australia (McKetin et al. 2010), as was Khat in Kenya (Griffiths et al. 2010; Raineri and Strazzari 2023). As is typical of highly developed organised crime groups in nations with underdeveloped security governance, infiltration of political structures was evident (Jonsson 2017; Pereda and Décary-Hetu 2023). This was rare, though, and was only evident within the life

course of one Queenpin. Similarly to the atypical, male-dominated, global supply chains, violence was prevalent, though the data was limited. Of those whose data could be attained, the majority of Queenpins relied upon other members of the organised crime groups to commit violence on their behalf. Some Queenpins engaged in violence with the aid of others, whilst a small proportion engaged in violence alone.

A detailed understanding of the prevalence of abuse within the lives of the Queenpins was difficult to deduce due to the limitation of open-source data utilised within the review. From the information available, though, there was a moderate association between those who had a history of abuse and those who committed violence when involved in the drug trade. This data, whilst limited, did show a marginal correlation between violent victimisation and later violent criminality. The influence of violence, though, was demonstrated as framing the development of OCGs to include female members within positions of influence. Echoing the observations of Allum (2007), the three women involved in Mafia activity of Italian descent were aligned with the Camorra. No Italian Queenpins identified within the dataset were linked with the Sicilian Mafia. As the detailed account of female involvement in Camorra activities by Allum (2007) describes, following the Mafia wars in the eighties, the female members took a more active role in all activities, including violence. Changes in the forms of their involvement were driven by arrests and deaths of key Camorra figures in these periods. From the data available, it appears Licciardi was involved in the solicitation of violence on her behalf by others. Conversely, both Cutolo and D'Alterio not only engaged in violence through others but also engaged in violence themselves. D'Alterio, who became a Queenpin after her husband's assassination, was later convicted of murder. Overall, confirmation of the use of violence to control drug markets (Reuter 2009; Atuesta and Ponce 2017; Chomczyński and Guy 2021) was scant. Aside from the aforementioned cases, women embedded within Latin American drug cartels often participated in and directed violence, though not always directly related to drug market governance. The murder conviction of Griselda Blanco, for example, was related to the assassination of her ex-husband due to a custody battle.

As detailed within the literature review, historically, 'drug markets were described as gender-stratified and hierarchical, reflecting patriarchal power and gender stereotypes' (Fleetwood and Leban 2022: 2). Undoubtably the upper echelons of international drug supply are dominated by male actors. Notably, some regions around the globe do not appear to have any detected participation by females, such as countries in Eastern Europe and some regions of Southeast Asia. This confirms the belief that women are not able to formally participate within the dominant organisations such as the Yakuza (Alkemade 2014) or the Bratva (Galeotti 2012).

Fleetwood (2009) previously proposed that the drug trade was increasingly feminised, though the women involved are disproportionately subjected to violence, manipulation by male drug traffickers, and as warehouse (wo)men for drug stashes. She noted that these exploited women profit very little from such activities. As the literature suggests, within localised markets, this is indeed the case (Fleisher 1995; Bourgois 2003; Briggs & Gamerio, 2017; Marsh 2020; Harding 2020). The notion of an increasingly feminised drug market over the previous decades is evident. Globally, the incarceration rates of women for drug-related offences have risen substantially (Caixiong 2012; Tandon 2012; Álvarez 2018, 2019; UNODC 2014). Whilst

the patriarchal nature of Eastern Europe seemingly nullified the ability for women to operate within the higher echelons of organised crime groups, in other regions with seemingly strict patriarchal cultures, such barriers were not as pacifying. Singular cases of Queenpins emerged in India (Shashikala Patankar), Jamaica (Charmaine Roman) and Kenya (Sareye Budul Shafat). Within Southeast Asia, the prevalence of Queenpins was rare, with only two offenders (Vũ Hoàng Oanh and Ji Yeun Lee) detected. Notably, Ji Yeun Lee, aka. Lisette Lee, whilst South Korean by birth, grew up in the USA, and her drug-related offending seemingly began from a Bonnie and Clyde-style relationship with a fellow drug dealer and co-kidnapper David Garrett.

As with Southeast Asian regions, Latin American nations have also observed a steady rise in women incarcerated in relation to drug offences (Giacomello and Youngers 2020), undoubtedly driven by the apprehension of drug mules at the lower rungs of the markets (Fleetwood 2011, 2014). Within the dataset analysed within this paper, though, the majority of Queenpins were found to operate from and within Latin American nations such as Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, Bolivia, and Brazil. All these countries are recognised as being highly patriarchal with high rates of femicide (McGinnis et al. 2022; Global Database on Violence against Women, 2023; United Nations, 2022; Wilson Center, 2019). Despite the highly machismo-oriented cultures of Latin America, amplified within the narco-culture of the cartels (Sanchez 2022), it appears that with spousal or familial engagement within the upper echelons of the cartel, women routinely operate at high levels within such organisations. Comparative to women outside of Latin America, the onset of organised crime activity was rarely as reliant upon familial or spousal bonds, with the exception of women involved in the Camorra. This does, though, highlight the interdependence with men noted by Anderson (2005: 373), countering the relative autonomy from men asserted in the research by Campbell (2008) and highlighting the assertion by Sumter et al. (2017) that female involvement in drug smuggling is driven by a desire to aide or please male figures within their lives. Queenpins seemingly proliferate within organisations such as the Sinaloa and Los Zeta Cartels, though this has done little to transform the patriarchal cultural economy. Rates of femicide did not decline in the time that women such as Estrella Ramos or Marllory Dadiana Chacon Rossell were actively engaged in organised criminal activity (National Citizens' Observatory on Femicide, 2012; Thomson 2013), lending credence to Campbell's (2008) assertation an increasingly feminised drug economy may reinforce machismo centric symbolism. Here, we see echoes of the "inverted patriarchy" Bourgois' (1995: 215) observed within the Puerto Rican-dominated drug economies of East Harlem in which female drug dealers routinely reproduced patriarchal structures.

Olmo (1990) observed that women involved in drug supply within Latin America did so as a survival strategy to escape deprivation and, once involved, occupied the lower strata with little economic benefit. From this data, however, it is evident that the motivation for involvement within the upper echelons of Latin American (and Italian) Queenpins is underpinned by familial and spousal connections. Within this context, the illicit economies seemingly mirror licit economics (Hobbs 1998), with the senior positions in organisations often attained through nepotism rather than meritocratic means. More widely, this bolsters the validity of the study by Mnguni and Thobane (2022), which cited motherhood and the need to provide for children as a

driver for the drug market involvement, with a significant number of those involved being mothers (though often such data was unavailable). Those who were not mothers were significantly less likely to be involved within the organised crime groups due to spouse or familial connections, again indicating higher echelon involvement is likely nepotistic and the masculine cultures they exist within may influence this. The matriarchal nature of motherhood and its influences upon acceptance into senior positions within organised criminal groups warrants specific and extensive attention.

Overall, Hunnicutt and Briody's (2004) assertion that female criminal activity is motivated by impoverishment offers a valid insight into the participation of organised crime groups. As noted, the majority of those included within the dataset were from and operated within the global south. As Campbell (2008:242) denotes, though, within the higher echelons of drug crime, female involvement is less about providing for family against economic marginality and more materialistic, based on aesthetics and consumption as a means to achieve liberation from men. This is perhaps best demonstrated by the prevalence of Queenpins within the dataset that were involved in modelling (and sex work) prior to engagement with the drug market and were also those without parental responsibility. Edberg (2004) suggests many young women are captivated by the image of the female drug dealer, perceived as 'powerful and celebritised for that power, via the same or similar persona currently gendered for men' (pg.103). A fact seemingly confounded when it is demonstrated that 50% of Queenpins involved in modelling and 100% of those involved in sex work evidenced engagement in violence whilst working within their respective organised crime groups. Such criminal actors echo the observations of Geiger (2006) that crime, drugs, and prostitution represent the last expression of resistance as female offenders negotiate a positive identity of self.

Conclusion

Unlike women in the lower strata of the global drug markets, that is demarked by violence and exploitation, the Queenpins who inhabit the upper echelons of organised crime groups are far removed from the usual motivations of participation - poverty and addiction. The markets these women operate within offer very little to no difference to the wider organised criminal markets across the globe. Generally, they focus on drug trafficking, though they often diversify into other markets, such as human trafficking. The substances they traffic are dictated by atypical global forces: supply, demand and availability.

Participation at such levels is largely based upon nepotism, with affiliations and inclusion dependent upon familial and spousal connections. In highly patriarchal societies, the initial inclusion of women within OCG structures is likely dictated by external pressures applied to the group through successful law enforcement initiatives or due to fatal violence borne from competition with opposing groups. These external influences transform the dynamics of such groups over prolonged periods. Queenpins who are actively involved at the higher levels of transnational organised crime groups but lack familial or spousal ties prior to engagement are likely more violent. The use of violence is one of the varied avenues that women can use to invert

the patriarchal nature of organised crime groups. The increasingly feminised drug markets, ever more recognised in media depictions, offer routes of identity formation that subvert the machismo cultures that actors seek approval from through participation. We label this narco-feminism.

Interpreting the data through a lens informed by the current, though limited, literature around female involvement in drug distribution offered obvious limitations to this exploratory study. Firstly, the acknowledgement must be made of the inherent bias of the data examined here, with the search terms utilised undoubtedly framing the data analysed and perhaps marginalising (or excluding) female participation in organised criminality outside of the remit of illicit drug supply. The data sample within this paper was also relatively small, and often, only partial information could be identified from open sources. As such, conclusions informed by the literature and data are inferred, but further investigation is essential. Despite the limitations, this paper offers fresh perspectives that complement the existing literature (Allum 2007; Campbell 2008; Siegel 2014; and Fleetwood 2011; 2014; 2022) to highlight the necessity for a sustained focus on female participation in all levels of the international drug markets.

Declarations

Compliance with ethical standards The authors know of no conflicts of interest in regard to this study. The research does not involve primary data involving Human Participants or Animals. Informed consent was not needed as all data utilized within this research paper has been collected using open source data.

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