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Women's Involvement in the Drug Trade: Revisiting the Emancipation Thesis in Global Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This article undertakes a global review of women's involvement in cultivation, processing, transporting and selling drugs. It is underpinned by twin theoretical concerns. First, we recap and critique the emancipation thesis, especially from a global perspective. Secondly, we examine how diverse global contexts shape women's involvement and the roles they occupy in these economies, challenging the notion that women's involvement in the drug trade is novel, increasing, or attributable to emancipation. Our review shows that women are ubiquitous to the drug trade and women's labor is fundamental to it. Rather than emancipation, we find that contextually-embedded experiences of gender shape women's involvement. We conclude by identifying and thematizing factors better able to explain women's participation in the illegal drug trade and guide future work.

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> There is a persistent need for feminists to participate in what Geertz calls "intellectual weed control", or "hastening the demise of moribund notions." Such weed control can be a full-time job because old theories continue to appear in new forms, to wit, the varied ways in which "emancipation" is linked to increases in female arrest rates.
>
> (Daly and Maher, 1998: 12).

Introduction

Women's deviance has historically been under theorized in comparison to men's (Heidensohn 1968; Klein 1973). Sociological theories paid little attention to women, perhaps assuming that women's domestic roles offered little opportunity or incentive for deviant behavior (Heidensohn 1968). Freda Adler's 'liberation thesis' (Adler 1975) challenged this orthodoxy, casting a long shadow over the theorization of women's deviance and criminality. She claimed that as women gained access to the world of work they would seek security and status 'criminal as well as civil, through established male hierarchical channels' (Adler 1975: 11). Emphasizing the women's movement in the 1960′s as a turning point she argued that 'as the position of women approximates the position of men, so does the frequency and type of their criminal activity' (Adler 1975: 251). Adler's theory is not race neutral. She states 'in a grimly sardonic sense, the black female has been 'liberated' for more than a century' (Adler 1975: 140) due to their greater participation in paid labor. This contentious premise leads her to propose that: 'if one looks at where black women are as criminal today [higher arrest rates], one can appreciate where white women are headed as criminals in the coming years' (Adler 1975: 153).

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The 'liberation' thesis was comprehensively critiqued at the time, not least for Adler's dependence on recorded crime statistics, which are notoriously unreliable as a measure of crime (Box and Hale 1983; Smart 1979). Scholars showed that changes in women's offending patterns predated the women's movement of the 1960′s (Steffensmeier 1983). Furthermore, women's liberation was certainly *not* about women becoming more like men in their behavior (i.e., seeking status in similar ways) (Smart 1979), nor was participation in male-dominated criminal networks an indicator of liberation (Daly and Chesney-Lind 1988: 511). Indeed, criminal justice involved women tend to have benefitted the least from women's increased access to education and work opportunities (Smart 1979). Yet, despite its problematic conceptualization of liberation, the emancipation thesis persists as a seemingly intuitive and common-sense explanation for women's deviance. Furthermore, the emancipation argument is squarely embedded in notions of liberation specific to white women in Western nations. Liberation, according to this thesis, is evidenced by (white) women's increased involvement in the labor market and the rise of the women's movement of the 1960s (Adler 1975). These social changes are not universal, but particular to the industrialized global north-west.

Despite critique, emancipation often figures in explanations for women's involvement in the drug trade, and so here we revisit the emancipation thesis. Our international review also responds to criminology's growing awareness of its bias toward studying the developed global north, and the problematic tendency to make universal claims on rather specific contexts (Aas 2012; Connell 2007). This tendency is doubly problematic regarding women; western researchers too often discursively construct a generic 'third world woman' as a 'singular, monolithic subject' typically lacking in education and personal agency (Mohanty 1988: 61). Our approach to gender is summarized by Campbell and Herzberg (2017: 253), 'gender is relational, not categorical. The bodies, identities, practices, and ideas associated with gender do not occur naturally but are actively produced and reproduced socially in dynamic tension with historical circumstances and relational inequalities.' Likewise, we recognize women's agency within ideologies and structures of gender (Miller 2002). As such, our review extends our understanding beyond the global north to include women who grow, manufacture, cook, transport or distribute drugs, as well as those who traffic or sell to customers, attending to the diversity of gendered structures and women's experiences internationally.

Our review is organized as follows. Firstly, we recount claims about women's supposed emancipation in the drug trade. Secondly, our approach is outlined. Thirdly, we review research on women's involvement in cultivation, processing, international transporting/trafficking and street-level drug selling. Our review shows that women are ubiquitous to the contexts in which drugs are cultivated, brokered, transported and sold. Women's labor is fundamental to all aspects of the drug trade (Anderson 2005). Women's varied roles and experiences reflect diverse gender orders, and meanings given to gender across the world (Connell and Pearse 2014). We show that such contextually-embedded experiences of gender shape women's involvement in the drug trade, rather than notions of emancipation. We conclude by identifying and thematizing factors better able to explain women's participation in the illegal drug trade and guide future work.

The emancipation thesis and research on women in the drug trade

Early research tended to focus on men, portraying the drug trade as men's work (for a review, see Maher and Hudson 2007). Whilst women have long been subject to public concern about drugs (Carey 2014; Kohn 1992) academic discourse on the drug trade said little about women until the latter half of the 20th century when the 'war' on drugs in the USA, and concern over rising heroin and crack cocaine problems prompted a new wave of drug research. Studies, particularly in the USA, showed that women were indeed involved in the drug trade, albeit as a minority undertaking marginalized and minor roles (e.g., Dunlap, Johnson, and Maher 1997; Rosenbaum 1981; Sommers, Baskin, and Fagan 1996). Drug markets were described as gender-stratified and hierarchical, reflecting patriarchal power and gender stereotypes (e.g., Adler 1993; Dunlap and Johnson 1996; Maher 1997; Waldorf, Reinarman, and Murphy 1991). Women's involvement in the drug trade was attributed to lack of choice or coercion

from men (Rosenbaum 1981). Moreover, in these male-dominated environments women were often sexualized, exploited and faced rampant threats and victimization (Adler 1993; Bourgois, Prince, and Moss 2004; Maher 1997).

In the 1990s, researchers studied an apparent increase in women in drug selling. Whereas previously research emphasized women's powerlessness and vulnerability, an emergent discourse emphasized opportunity and emancipation. Writing about New York City, Fagan (1994) argued that expanding crack cocaine markets offered women 'new opportunities,' unlike stable, highly stratified heroin markets. Noting the rise of female-headed households, and the importance of the informal economy for women living in the inner city, he wrote:

> the cocaine economy has provided new ways for women to escape their limited roles, statuses and incomes in previous eras. It also provides an outlet for women to achieve conventional goals for family through illegal work (1994: 210).

Likewise, drawing on fieldwork in New York's East Harlem in the early 1990s, Bourgois claimed: 'greater female involvement in crack reflects in a rather straightforward manner the growing emancipation of women throughout all aspects of inner-city life, culture and economy' (Bourgois 1989: 643) although he also acknowledged women's victimization. Whether he was aware of it or not, Bourgois' echoes Adler's problematic claims that black women had experienced 'emancipation' earlier (Adler 1975).

The 'emancipation' thesis emerged in the USA but is echoed in international research. Drawing on ethnographic research in Ciudad Juarez/El Paso on the US/Mexico border, Campbell argued that women's participation in cross-border cocaine trafficking can paradoxically 'be linked to the interacting effects of greater social freedoms for women *and* economic marginalization' (Campbell 2008: 259, our emphasis). Women already occupying privileged social positions were better able to profit from trafficking, earning money and a degree of independence and personal freedom. Nonetheless, most were mules; a role offering few prospects for 'moving up' the career ladder and out of poverty (Campbell 2008).

Often used simplistically, the concept of emancipation has been roundly critiqued (inter alia Denton 2001; Fleetwood 2014a; Maher 1997). Whist *some* women may exercise agency and occupy positions of relative power and control, it is not clear how this relates to wider social processes of emancipation, if at all. As Maher succinctly observed: 'activity is confused with equality, and presence is read as participation' (1997: 18). We further note that the emancipation thesis has been applied largely to women living in large urban centers in the global Northwest, whilst global south women are framed in terms of poverty, naiveté and exploitation (Fleetwood 2014a). Vague notions of emancipation are therefore based on European and United States perspectives on changes in women's social status.

In light of the Anglo-centric biases of the emancipation thesis, this paper aims to provide a global review of women's involvement in the drug trade. Examining global research illuminates the shortcomings of this narrative, and challenges two key assumptions: firstly, that women's involvement in the drug trade is novel or increasing, and secondly, that women's involvement in the drug business stems from, or is otherwise connected to, their emancipation.

First, research from Central and South America demonstrates women's historic involvement. From the 1920s to the 1970s, women played an integral role in the heroin and morphine trade in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico including in senior or leading roles (Campbell 2008, 2010; Carey 2014). Seeking to recuperate the histories of women in the drug trade in, Carey argued that: 'The great male narrative, whether of the capo or the cop, is only a small part of the story' (2014: 197). Thus, looking 'south,' women's drug trade involvement cannot be considered novel. Furthermore, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime reported that women represent around 20% of those involved in drug seizures worldwide (UNCND 2011). Further, they report that the number of women '*has not increased* disproportionately in comparison with that of men' (2011: 1, our emphasis). Whilst this is an imperfect measure (Fleetwood and Haas 2011), it is nonetheless instructive.

Second, taking an international view problematizes the theory that women's participation in the drug trade results from, or offers emancipation for women. Cognizant of the problems of western-centric notions of 'emancipation,' our review takes a different theoretical perspective. Rather than asking whether women's position is changing (which is anyway impossible without historic data), we take up Deitzer et al.'s proposition that 'the contextual circumstances of drug economies affect women's ability to enter specific markets and the positions they enjoy within them' (Deitzer, Leban, and Copes, 2019: 271). As such, we examine how diverse 'gender orders' and meanings given to gender internationally (Connell and Pearse 2014) shape women's involvement in the drug trade. The notion of 'gender order' refers to localized, ongoing arrangements of gender generated through institutions, beliefs and ideas about gender. Gender figures here not as a static category nor is women's involvement predicated solely on their social position (Campbell and Herzberg 2017). Rather, we emphasize the dynamic process in which people actively or 'do gender' through their everyday actions (West and Zimmerman 1987), including through drug trade activities. Thus, gender is both produced and reproduced in line with the normative expectations of the social and structural context in which one is embedded. We draw attention to gender as a complex social structure contingent on individual and contextual characteristics, such as age, class, urban/rural contexts, institutions, and industries. We were unable to conduct a truly intersectional analysis, although we acknowledge its importance in international criminology (see Henne and Troshynski 2013). 'Race'/ethnicity is absent from many analyses reviewed. In some cases, it may be that race is not especially apparent, but we also note problematic silences regarding race in feminist scholarship (Parmar 2017). We note analyses of race/gender where we find them, however we avoid theoretical generalization, wishing to avoid reifying 'race' as social category. Whilst it is certainly true that – taken in global view – the drug trade is populated by women with black and brown skin, the meaning of 'race' is highly varied worldwide.

Several reviews of women's role in drug dealing and drug trafficking exist (Anderson and Kavanaugh 2017; Buxton 2020; Fleetwood 2015; Maher and Hudson 2007), however we note two limitations. Firstly, they tend to focus on research from and about the developed global north, that is: the UK, Europe, Australia and the USA (cf. Buxton 2020). These are contexts in which concepts of 'emancipation' fit Adler's theory (i.e. equal opportunities for education, participation in a wide range of occupations, etc.). But, secondly, these are nations in which drugs are mostly *consumed* rather than *produced*, representing only part of the drug trade. We might also add that such reviews tend to privilege developed urban contexts (rather than rural ones) in their analysis.

Review methodology

Our review draws on qualitative data, noting that global attempts to quantify women's involvement in the drug trade often rely on recording and reporting by agencies such as the police and border force and so reflect policing and drug policy as least as much as women's actual involvement (Fleetwood and Haas 2011). We acknowledge women's criminalization internationally under the war on drugs,[1] especially foreign women and women of color (Boyd and Faith 1999; Bush-Baskette 2004; Giacomello 2013b; Green 1996; Green, Mills, and Read 1994; Iakobishvili 2012; Joseph 2006; Mauer, Potler, and Wolf 1999; Reynolds 2008; Sudbury (Oparah) 2002), and the rising numbers of women receiving the death penalty for drug offenses (Cornell Centre on the Death Penalty Worldwide 2018; Fleetwood and Seal 2017; Harry and Girelli 2019). But, our focus here is not on women's criminalization but rather on understanding the contextual and cultural factors underpinning women's involvement in the drug trade.

[1]The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) (2018: 9) reported that of the 714,000 women in prison worldwide, 35% are in prison for drug related offenses, compared to 19% of men. In contrast, only 19% of men imprisoned worldwide are serving sentences for drug-related offenses.

To do so, qualitative research is absolutely essential. In practical terms, laws for drug offenses rarely differentiate between i.e. selling and cultivation and are therefore arrest data offer little insight into what women are actually doing. More importantly though, qualitative research captures the local and specific meanings of gender (necessarily contingent on 'race,' class, sexuality, nationality and so on) and how they shape women's involvement in the drug business. We located relevant research for our review in several stages. Cognizant that academic journals tend to be dominated by research from the global north (Aas 2012), we searched broadly. We first searched academic databases (Academic Search Premier, SocINDEX, Social Sciences Citation Index, and Sociological Abstracts) using search terms relating to women and gender, aspects of the drug trade and drug names. Our search was not limited by date and included research in both journal articles and books, as well as 'gray' literature (such as reports by governmental or other organizations and theses and dissertations). We extended our search to Google Scholar using the same search parameters. After thoroughly exploring academic sources, we engaged in 'berry-picking' (Bates 1989), to expand our review. This involved examining bibliographies of key works for relevant work, as well as using forward and backward citation searches in Google scholar. We include publications in English and Spanish (languages in which we were proficient, and also one key article in French) using qualitative methods, related to women involved in the drug trade. We did not employ strict criteria as to which 'drugs' were included. Although much of the works included in this review focus illegal drugs, we also include work on decriminalized/legalized drugs such as cannabis. The same substance may be considered legal or illegal in the same country (depending on context and use), and the extremely wide range of drug legislation internationally. The search process ultimately yielded just over a hundred publications.

In synthesizing this research, we critically review and summarize works in line with standard methods for content analysis. We reviewed and noted the general details of the study, theoretical framing, setting/context in which study was conducted, data collection techniques and sources, data analysis approach, and insights from results. Our appraisal of this literature identified three topical areas: 1) women's roles in drug production, cultivation, and manufacturing; 2) women's role in the street-level drug trade; and 3) women's role in the international drug trade. The following section describes the results of our review based on these three topical areas.

There are several caveats. We do not claim that this is a systemic review but it reflects extensive searching and is as rigorous and complete as possible given limitations on language and the geopolitical nature of knowledge production (Aas 2012). It is possible that there are omissions. For example, Russia imprisons twice as many women for drug offenses as in the European Union (Iakobishvili 2012), yet research about these women (in English) is almost non-existent. A further problem is that strong qualitative research on participation in the drug trade often fails to include women, or to consider gender in analysis. The following review focusses on research that gives sufficient analytical space to consider the position and role of women in the drug trade, and attempts to employ gender as an analytical concept rather than a descriptive category. Readers are invited to take this article as a starting point, rather than the final word.

Drug cultivation, processing and manufacture

Women's participation in drug production, especially manufacture, is under-researched in comparison to the street-level drug trade. Research documents women's extensive participation in the cultivation of plant-based drugs such as coca (the organic base for cocaine), cannabis, and opium (poppies), reflecting women's integral role in subsistence farming in the global south. Indeed, they constitute up to half of the workforce involved in harvesting opium poppies in Turkey, India, Laos and Burma (Mansfield 2002: 10). Yet, women's involvement varies widely. Writing about South America, Olivera et al. (2020: 131) stated:

> The women who grow crops for illicit markets share characteristics and interests, but nonetheless make up a heterogeneous group. The diversity of these women—rural, indigenous, Afro-descendant women—is manifested in the activities they carry out, their ways of life and social organization, their age, their background in terms of participation, and their origins, among other factors.

Coca cultivation offers a subsistence income in South America where it is typically a small, family business (Bautista Revelo et al. 2018; Carrillo González 2014; Gómez Fernández 2017). Rural areas in South America offer little economic opportunity or education, especially for women (Olivera et al. 2020). Women undertake manual labor, i.e. transferring seeds, planting and harvesting leaves but can also be found undertaking all jobs, including as 'chemist' processing leaves into paste (Carrillo González 2014; Gómez Fernández 2017; Olivera et al. 2020). In Colombia, 'coca leaf production has a woman's face' (Quesada 2020: 179). Women's prominent role reflects decades of conflict; many have lost husbands or fathers, and assume financial responsibility for their families (Quesada 2021). Nonetheless, women's participation is not on equal terms: women are underpaid compared to men and the work environment may be hostile to them, including harassments and threats of sexual violence (Gómez Fernández 2017). But, for some women, coca cultivation provides an opportunity for paid work, potentially increasing their power within the household as well as in public and economic life (Bautista Revelo et al. 2018; Olivera et al. 2020).

Poppy cultivation is also labor intensive, and internationally women undertake weeding, clearing the fields, lancing poppy heads, and preparing opium gum for sale, often unpaid (Olivera et al. 2020; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) 2018). Despite traditions that would normally confine women to the home (Purdah), women in Afghanistan involved in cultivating, harvesting and processing (Mansfield 2002: 10). Amongst the Hmong people in Lao, women are responsible for most farming and household tasks including opium farming, although they do not keep or control earnings (Oparaocha 1998). In Cambodia, low level opium buying is framed as 'women's work' (Chin 2009). Women described the role as an accepted manner of doing gender, involving waiting around to buy small quantities of opium at the market. Women made a moderate amount of money for this job; some women reported having a boss, but many others worked independently (Chin 2009).

Women are also involved in domestic cultivation of cannabis in Africa where it is often planted alongside food crops, as coca is in South America (Afsahi 2011; Diarisso and Goredema 2014; Hübschle 2014). In Senegal, women are often in charge, and farming cannabis can earn a good income (Diarisso and Goredama 2011), but involvement varies. Afsahi's ten year-long research on rural cannabis production in the Rif region of Morocco stands out (Afsahi 2011, 2015). Since the 1970s, European demand for cannabis has intensified, consolidating gendered divisions of labor. Cannabis cultivation and processing involves the whole family, but the work is gender-stratified: men manage the land, family finance and selling while women undertake menial and domestic tasks such as cooking food for the workers as well as weeding and harvesting (Afsahi 2015). As one woman explained: 'While we are working in the fields, the men spend their time smoking in the village cafes. This is where they do business' (Afsahi 2015: 79, our translation).[2] Even within the Rif, women's varied roles reflect family size, local economy, and environment. Rarely, involvement in cannabis production can enable women to improve living conditions: children can be sent to school, basic infrastructure and homes can be improved. But, overall cannabis production has had little impact on the status of women (Afsahi 2015).

Women comprise 40% of Vietnamese cannabis cultivation suspects in the Netherlands, where small-scale cannabis sales have been decriminalized but production remains illegal (Schoenmakers, Bremmers, and Kleemans 2013; Schoenmakers, Bremmers, and Wijk 2012).[3] They act as 'trusted representatives' and partners in crime; setting up cannabis plantations; undertaking gardening and

[2]Pendant que nous travaillons dans les champs, les hommes passent leur temps à fumer dans les cafés du village, c'est là qu'ils font des affaires.

[3]By comparison, women comprise between 10–30% cannabis cultivators in the UK (Potter 2010: 138).

odd jobs, and transporting and guarding cannabis and cash (Schoenmakers, Bremmers, and Kleemans 2013: 329). Far from being human trafficking victims, most have regularized legal status. The average age is 40; most are on low income or state benefits and became involved through debts, especially gambling (Schoenmakers, Bremmers, and Wijk 2012). Gambling debts were also a pathway for Vietnamese women's involvement in tending cannabis farms in Australia (Le and Gilding 2016). Although some described themselves as being forced, others continued to be involved long after repaying their debt.

Women are also involved in cannabis production in north America. Bouchard, Alain, and Nguyen (2009), estimated that adolescent girls comprised almost half of youth laborers in cannabis farms in rural Quebec. They are also employed in various 'behind-the-scenes' jobs, including cleaning equipment and grow rooms, tending to plants, and cooking 'edibles in northern California (August 2013). August reported 'while women occupy many of the same roles as men, their experiences are markedly different from those of their male counterparts' (2013: 93). For instance, women entrepreneurs often relied on men to sell their cannabis as a way of managing misogynistic culture. Women were favored as 'trimmers'; a tedious, time-consuming job clipping harvested cannabis plants for sale (see also Stoa 2021). Women were considered less likely to steal or reveal the location of the farm to others (August 2013). Often required to live on-site in remote rural locations, trimmers are vulnerable to sexual harassment and exploitation, including expectations that they be sexually available, or work topless (August 2013).

Anderson and Kavanaugh (2017: 346) argue that 'the upward mobility and success of women in the emerging legal cannabis industry in the USA is a notable departure from their subordinate positioning in past illegal cannabis networks,' citing that women represent 36% of all executives in the burgeoning legal cannabis trade in the USA, far surpassing the national average. Nonetheless, these opportunities have been afforded primarily to middle-class, white women – quite a distinct cohort from those involved in cultivation and harvesting. Stoa (2021) cautioned that despite legalization, women and undocumented migrants continue to work in exploitative conditions, 'under-the-table,' paid in cash and denied benefits such as healthcare. Likewise, Kittel (2018) notes gender stereotypes persist in illegal and legal cannabis industries.

Changes in US drug policy indirectly increased women's participation in methamphetamine production. Tighter regulation of precursor chemicals and harsher penalties for manufacturing and distributing methamphetamine slowed large scale production (Carbone-Lopez 2015), but high demand popularized 'shake and bake' methods of production (Deitzer, Leban, and Copes, 2019). This low cost, low-tech process combines pseudoephedrine (a decongestant) with reactants in a plastic bottle that is shaken and 'burped' to release gasses from the chemical reaction. This accessible, portable method produces relatively low yields, creating a decentralized market in which women could become producers. Although men still outnumber women in 'shake and bake,' cooking roles and responsibilities are the same for men and women (Erickson, Hochstetler, and Copes 2019). Deitzer, Leban, and Copes, (2019) found marked variation in women's positions and styles in manufacturing shake and bake methamphetamine. While some women worked alongside men in traditional caretaking or supporting roles, others worked independently or in a lead role. Some cooked and used methamphetamine in friendship groups offering relative freedom and autonomy. Likewise, Miller and Carbone-Lopez (2015: 700) found that although the role of 'cook' had once been high status, the shift to 'shake and bake' opened up new, admittedly low-status roles for women. Fewer women reported exchanging sex for drugs and seemingly lower levels of sexual violence as a direct function of changes in the methamphetamine trade. Whilst making meth could offer women greater autonomy over their drug use, it did not shift conservative gendered expectations about women's role as caregivers and partners (Miller and Carbone-Lopez 2015). These changes have mainly affected white women in the rural American south (Sexton et al. 2006, see also Boeri 2013).

Overall, women undertake a wide variety of tasks in the cultivation, production and manufacture of diverse illegal drugs. Gender is always significant but plays out differently, reflecting diverse gender orders and normative ways of doing gender. Women's role in subsistence farming often creates

opportunities for women in drug production. While most roles are poorly paid, or unpaid, women do rarely carve our spaces for autonomy and independence. Such opportunities do not equate to their increased 'emancipation,' however.

Women in the street-level drug trade

Women's participation in the street-level trade in drug in cocaine, crack and heroin is comparably well-researched especially in the USA. In what follows, we review research, drawing on work from beyond the USA where possible.

Gendered motivations

Research tends to ascribe women's involvement in drug selling to economic imperatives reflecting their traditional social position as caregivers for men, children and parents. Common themes include the rise in female-headed households and the feminization of poverty. Like cultivation, selling drugs offers a meager income, but often enables women to provide for their families in diverse contexts including Rwanda (Bikorimana 2020), Costa Rica (Campos 2011); Burma (Chin 2009), Chile (Ortiz and Barriga 2015). Writing about Costa Rica, Campos notes that gender norms responsibilize women for the care of their loved ones (2011). Barriers to entry may be low: in Burma (Chin 2009) women reported local dealers giving them drugs on credit to start selling (see also Fleetwood 2014b). In Norway, a strong welfare state ensured housing and necessities but the cost of living was high and drug selling was typically necessary to fund drug use (Grundetjern 2015). In the USA and Australian, researchers report that drug selling can offer women stability, routine and control over their lives (Denton 2001; Morgan and Joe 1996), as well as a sense of self-efficacy and empowerment (Deitzer et al. 2021; Grundetjern and Miller 2018; Hutton 2005). In Holligan's study, working class women in Scotland with a longstanding history of being socially and economically dependent on men found drug dealing as a way to gain agency (2019). In Chile, Ortiz and Barriga reported that selling cannabis and cocaine was an adaptation to poverty and maternal caring roles, but likewise enabled women to establish some autonomy from their male partners (2015).

Although much work has focused on women's caregiving roles as motivations for their drug selling, the realities of these motivations vary considerably, particularly internationally. In fact, women's motivations for drug selling are more nuanced. Although fulfilling the caregiving duties embedded in traditional notions of femininity may serve as motivation, women's drug selling is also response to autonomous decisions rooted in desire for status, power, and a means to support one's own drug use. Researchers increasingly appreciate that selling drugs may also be a purposeful choice for women, albeit in constrained circumstances.

For some, selling drugs may fund a drug habit. For the English user-sellers in Moyle and Coomber's study, 'drug supply also offered an opportunity to temporarily avoid or reduce their involvement in sex work, and thereby moderate their exposure to the risk of violence and abuse' (Moyle and Coomber 2015: 546). Lisa Maher's (1997) research on drug using women in a Brooklyn drug market found that women were generally excluded from drug selling, but carved out roles for themselves, including helping affluent visitors to the neighborhood buy drugs. Helping people 'cop' was preferable to sex work but white women were more able to access this role than black or Latina women.

In the recreational drug scene, women – like their male contemporaries – are generally less motivated by poverty and more by entrepreneurial opportunism. Ward's (2010) ethnography of the London rave scene describes women who are employed or studying; they were seldom motivated by caring responsibilities and instead drifted into dealing through relationships and their own recreational drug use. Social supply generally involves webs of reciprocity and friendship, and blurs the distinction between drug sharing and selling. Three quarters of the young people in England interviewed by Coomber and Turnbull (of whom a quarter were girls) 'chipped in' to buy cannabis with

friends, and a similar portion shared with friends (Coomber and Turnbull 2007: 856). Women who share drugs with friends or via prescription, do not easily fit the notion of a drug 'market.' Murphy et al. (2018) describe social supply amongst 'off-prescription' stimulant drug users (i.e. Adderall) in the San Francisco Bay area. A third of respondents were women; prescription drugs were often exchanged for favors, gifts, or other drugs. Many were motivated by positive beliefs in the medication rather than by profit (Murphy et al. 2018). Online settings host novel, 'not for profit' forms of drug supply including tele-medicine to support abortion where it is otherwise unavailable (Jelinska and Yanow 2018). A UK study found that around one in four trans women self-prescribe sex-hormones sources from the internet before attending a physician (Mepham et al. 2014), but scant qualitative research on the experiences of trans-women or trans-men in drug markets exists.

In sum, the street-level drug trade encompasses an extremely wide array of activities, not all of which involve making money. Whilst economic need may drive some women's involvement, or may offer an alternative to sex work in supporting a drug habit, dealing can also offer financial independence and autonomy. Women's motivations are not solely determined by their gender, but reflect women's social class, 'race' and age as well as available opportunities in local drug markets (of which more below).

Gendered styles

Women deal drugs differently than men, reflecting gendered stigma and hierarchies (discussed in the following section). Johnson and Manwar (1994) ethnography of Rachel, a 'successful' crack dealer in New York City was groundbreaking in considering *how* women sell, rather than why. At the time, Rachel, a 40-year-old black woman sold to a small number of middle-class customers in her home, capitalizing on her gender to create a niche market, offering a safe place to consume crack as part of the 'deal.' Rachel also prepared meals, and ensured customers did not over-spend. Publicly, Rachel was invested in a conventional identity, and ran her business discretely, avoiding attention from police, neighbors or other dealers.

Subsequent research describes women drawing on conventional gendered performances in their dealing – much like Rachel. Jacobs and Miller describe this as 'contextual assimilation' (1998). Their respondents carried shopping bags around while dealing, or – in one case – hosted a barbeque to provide cover for dealing. These activities reflect the inner-city context, and women's activities there (see also Ludwick, Murphy, and Sales 2015; Morgan and Joe 1996). By contrast, Bikorimana (2020) describes women in Rwanda selling cannabis as sex-workers, or transporting cannabis under the cover of carrying fresh milk (traditionally a woman's job),

Some women dealers make a point to do gender in ways that explicitly accentuate their femininity. Women in Ludwick and colleagues' study of illicit sellers in San Francisco, CA avoided detection from the police and border patrollers by dressing and behaving feminine (2015). Similarly, Maher (1997) reported on women 'copping' drugs for middle-class men who drove to the neighborhood to buy drugs. As women they were seen as more trustworthy than men although white sellers tended to favour white women . Likewise, black women in England invested in maintaining a respectable front, and typically avoided dealing from home and switching off their 'dealing phone' in the company of family (Fleetwood 2014b). Thus, by doing gender conventionally, contextual assimilation may allow women to avoid stigma. Such gendered performances are especially significant for racialized minorities who are over-policed. But, enacting 'emphasized femininity' – servility, sexuality, and a caretaking nature – may have a cost for women sellers. They may be less likely to deal autonomously and commonly occupied subordinate or secondary dealing roles (Deitzer, Leban, and Copes, 2019; Grundetjern 2015).

Like Rachel (Johnson and Manwar 1994), women dealers may develop niche markets offering reliable, prompt service and high-quality drugs (see also Denton 2001; Fleetwood 2014b; Morgan and Joe 1996). This style of dealing tends to avoid sources of conflict, such as offering credit . Some women dealers believe they have particular skills by virtue of being women. Holligan et al.'s Scottish female

sellers viewed hyper-masculinity and fighting as a distraction from drug selling, argueing that women's position at the periphery of masculine street culture allows them to avoid being 'handicapped by a need for public status and recognition' common among men dealers (2019: 9). Deitzer et al. describe a group of women methamphetamine cooks who displayed a similar gendered business dealing style that they dubbed 'matriarchal control,' in which women relied on interpersonal and caretaking skills to maintain good relations with customers and avoid conflict (2019).

Grundetjern and Sandberg (2012) describe such business-focused personas as 'service-mindedness. Grundetjern described this dealing style as the 'feminine business model' after identifying a group in her sample of Norwegian women who combined displays of both femininity and business, and organized their drug selling around care, sociability, and professionalism (2015). Denton theorizes this as a 'soft' form of managerial power enabling them to develop trust via extended social networks (2001). Denton and O'Malley's research on women sellers in Melbourne Australia found that family was a resource for 'core' workers in the drug business; when women were arrested their family put into action the contingency plan (1999). While some relied on actual family, others set up quasi-familial relationships based on trust and mutuality. For example, two women set up house together and shared childcare. Women in Holligan and colleagues' study on dealers in Scotland (2019) similarly described involving kin in dealing. Women saw drug selling as a family business and emphasized emotional labor, inclusivity, and family values.

Alternatively, some women dealers do gender in ways that adopt masculine traits and create reputations for violence in their dealing as a way to gain respect (Denton and O'Malley 1999; Grundetjern 2015; Grundetjern and Sandberg 2012; Jacobs and Miller 1998; Maher 1997). Indeed, the threat of being physically overpowered and victimized is a notable concern for women dealers (Holligan et al. 2019; Hutton 2005; Molony, Hunt, and Joe-Laidler 2015). However, displays of violence tend to be less common, and women dealers may instead use relational skills to avoid potential violence (Denton and O'Malley 1999; Dunlap, Johnson, and Maher 1997; Maher and Hudson 2007; Mieczkowski 1994). Cultural context likely plays an important role in decisions to perform masculine dealing styles. Contrary to some studies in which women dealers displayed violence, Deitzer et al.'s study of gender performances of women meth cooks in the rural USA south revealed no displays of masculinity or violence (2019), potentially an artifact of traditional notions of femininity common in this cultural context. Moreover, some women dealers may instead rely on social networks to draw on the violent capital of partner and family rather than personally engaging in violence (Denton 2001; Hobbs 2013; Hutton 2005).

Many of the strategies employed by women dealers in their diverse contexts draw on traditional or stereotypical women's roles. These homologous practices reflect a drug trade that is almost uniformly male-dominated, and where violence may be employed to resolve conflicts and debts. Interestingly there may be some settings in which gender performances were not required. Deitzer, Leban, and Copes, (2019) research on women manufacturing methamphetamine found small, nonhierarchical groups and some women drug sellers in Norway performed relatively-gender neutral roles as small business managers (Grundetjern 2015: 272). Ward's study of London raves describes a pluralistic, friendly setting where gender seems to matter less than in 'street' markets (2010). Unique contextual factors may have lessened the need to explicitly perform gender in some settings.

Gendered hierarchies/institutional sexism

Women's role in the street-level drug trade is (with some exceptions) confined to peripheral activities due to a combination of mutually reinforcing system of institutional sexism and gendered-hierarchies (Maher and Daly 1996; Maher and Hudson 2007; Steffensmeier 1983). Women are often seen as lacking qualities such as toughness and violent potential to successfully manage employees or customers, and 'heart' for a fight (Maher 1997; Steffensmeier 1983). Our international review likewise finds women undertaking a variety of supporting or peripheral roles in the drug trade. However, as Anderson noted, women have significant power in the drug economy, even in such roles (2005). In

addition to selling drugs, women play a variety of important supporting roles such as providing housing, where drugs may be processed, packaged and stored; and by purchasing drugs, including for male partners. Despite occupying marginal roles, women's labor is vital for the functioning of the drug trade (Anderson 2005).

In Mexico City, Zamudio found women involved packaging drugs or taking care of administration in small-scale drug selling (2013). In the UK, researchers described a novel form of drug selling called 'county lines,' whereby dealers from large cities send out individuals to sell from small, rural towns 'renting' private households as temporary bases, typically in return for drugs (Moyle and Coomber 2015). Some women described renting their house as 'mutually beneficial,' but for others it was highly exploitative (Moyle 2019). Some described it as the least bad way to support their drug habit (Moyle 2019). Women's 'power' as householders (Anderson 2005) tends to generate little income, often at risk of arrest or exploitation. Yet women respond to institutional sexism in a variety of ways. As we described above, some women in the drug trade find that being female makes one less suspicious, offering an advantage. Nonetheless, this gendered advantage is also structured by 'race' with white women often retaining the advantage of apparently appearing less suspect.

Drug trades are heterogenous, and women's entry into dealing is not always met with resistance from men. Drawing on decades of ethnographic fieldwork on criminal cultures in the East End of London, Hobbs argued that cultural shifts in serious crime – from 'traditional' masculine criminal associations to loose networks – have created opportunities for women (1995, 2013). He describes Yvonne, who cared and provided for her children and grandchildren through selling cannabis, thereby fulfilling her traditional gender role (2013). Women may be valued for particular roles. In the 1990s, the invention of pagers revolutionized drug dealing in New York City (Curtis and Wendel 2007). Then, women were employed in customer-facing roles to take phone calls and dispatch male 'runners' to deliver drugs. Likewise, women found it relatively easy to start dealing in a small city in England (Fleetwood 2014b). Many were 'fronted' (given drugs on credit which they sold to repay the seller) by friends, boyfriends or dealers and worked on a freelance basis, able to stop and start selling whenever they wanted. Yet, even in this apparently less-sexist market, none progressed 'upward' in the careers. Most drifted out of dealing, decide to stop or limit their drug use, or move into legitimate careers or education. Similarly, Robin, one of Ward's club drug-dealers, left behind her dealing career to start a new job (2010). Academics might ask whether a glass ceiling exists in drug dealing, but perhaps that is the wrong question. Having made money (and usually spent it), had 'free' drugs and a good time (mostly), they got out before they got arrested (mostly). In this respect, those women could be said to have had very successful drug selling careers.

Online drug markets may present novel opportunities for women. Researchers document less violence in comparison to on-street markets (Morselli et al. 2017) and women report feeling safer buying drugs online than in person (Ormsby 2016). Online markets may enable women sellers to avoid stigma (Fleetwood, Aldridge, and Chatwin 2020). Online forums, like other technological and social changes, have the potential to disrupt drug market hierarchies. Yet, although a decade has now passed since the first cryptomarket, Silk Road, emerged (Barratt 2012), little qualitative research exists on women in online markets. Possible reasons include assumptions that women's participation is of a minor nature, or that gender becomes invisible online (Fleetwood, Aldridge, and Chatwin 2020). Given the prevalence of online misogyny, it is all too easy to assume that online drug markets remain a man's world. Scant research gives a glimpse of women's involvement in online drug markets. Ormsby (2016: 63) found that 'the more popular [Silk Road] vendors required a team of staff to keep up with demand. They would split tasks across the team, so that those who ran the computer side of the business were never in possession of drugs.' This division of labor may be gendered. In 2018, a man and woman in South Carolina were arrested in connection with selling a synthetic opiate on Alphabay (a

cryptomarket) (Greenville News 2018). The woman was apprehended while posting drugs concealed in pregnancy test boxes, hinting at a continuation rather than a departure from gendered hierarchies in the drug trade.

In summary, Maher's claim applies to our international review: 'Drug economies take complex and multiple forms, but cultural practices within them remain embedded in broader relations and structures of gender, race and class' (1997: 193). Women's motives and styles of dealing reflect local norms. But, nor is women's involvement in the drug trade determined by these norms. Their dealing styles especially reflect how women can 'do gender' (Miller 2002) in order to do dealing. Women's motivations also suggest that women can deal as a way of doing gender. And while we find gendered hierarchies to be commonly present, women likewise employ normative ideas to carve out opportunities for themselves.

Women in the international drug trade: drug mules

The phenomenon emerged in the 1980s, largely in media reports about women from Jamaica, South America and Nigeria arrested in the UK and the USA, as so-called 'drug mules.' That is, carrying drugs for someone else across an international border whether for financial reward, pressure or in response to a threat (EMCCDA 2012; Fleetwood 2014a: 74). With some exceptions (e.g., Del Olmo 1986; Klein 2020; Mnguni 2020), research on drug mules tends to be framed in Eurocentric ways. They often to appear as foreign others, usually women, washed up in European prisons; a 'problem' for Western states' (Cunneen 2011: 251). Further, whilst drug trade scholarship tends to be skewed toward men, scholarship on drug mules is skewed toward women, even though they represent only about 20–30% of those arrested crossing international borders with drugs (Fleetwood 2014a: 6).[4] Most research draws on all female-samples, with some exceptions (e.g., Fleetwood 2014a; Green 1998, 1998; Harper, Harper, and Stockdale 2002). This bias reflects gendered assumptions about men as willing criminals, and women as involuntary victims (Fleetwood 2014a, 2015).

Given that drug mule research tends to describe women from the global south, poverty dominates explanations for their involvement. For example, drawing on interviews with women serving long sentences for drug importation on Rikers' Island, NYC, Huling said, 'it is *obvious* that the poor and unfortunate women of Jamaica have become yet another cheap and expendable labor in the deal' (1996, 57, our emphasis). The notion that women are forced to traffic drugs, especially by swallowing them, often appears as received wisdom. And while researchers do report women being 'groomed' (Dorado 2005) or otherwise 'tricked, trapped and compelled' by men (Sudbury (Oparah) 2005a: 181, see also Mnguni 2020; Sumter et al. 2017) this is only part of the picture. Women may become involved in drug trafficking through familial networks as well as through female friends, dealing networks or romantic relationships. Indeed, these relationships and their connections to drug trafficking routes reflect histories of colonialism and post-colonial migrations (Van San and Sikkens 2017).

Women who traffic drugs are a heterogenous group, but the main explanation for their involvement is economic need exacerbated by precarity and the feminization of poverty, according to research in the Caribbean (Bailey 2013), Venezuela (del Olmo 1986, 1990), Mexico (Giacomello 2013a), the UK (Sudbury (Oparah) 2005a; Dorado 2005; Green 1998), the USA (Huling 1995), Cambodia (Jeffries and Chuenurah 2019), Malaysia (Harry 2021), Australia (Le and Gilding 2016), Thailand (Jeffries and Chuenurah 2016) and South Africa (Hübschle 2014; Klein 2020; Mnguni 2020). Desperate poverty is part of the picture, but Olmo rightly emphasized that, 'times of crisis and unemployment, pushes them towards illegal activities which provide greater employment' (1986: 167). Yet, the meanings of poverty and womanhood are context specific and vary according to 'race,' social class and age. Put simply, the experience of poverty does not mean the same thing to a Latina woman in NYC as it does to a black woman who grew up under apartheid in South Africa.

[4]Vietnam is a rare exception, where women comprise the vast majority (Luong 2015).

Yet, gendered poverty does not rule out women's agency. Torres (2008) life histories of three women imprisoned for drug trafficking in Quito, Ecuador highlighted women's agency as partners, wives and girlfriends. She proposed that love be taken seriously as a purposive motivation for drug trafficking, even in the context of gendered inequalities. Following Torres, Fleetwood examined how culturally significant notions such as love and caring figured in women's motivations (Fleetwood 2014a). Women involvement in the drug trade was both an outcome of social structural inequality, *and* women's self-narratives about themselves as caring mothers, daughters and partners (Fleetwood 2014a). Gendered roles also shaped women's labor in the drug trade.

Research mainly focuses on *why* women become involved in drug trafficking rather than what they do. Harper et al.'s analysis of arrested drug traffickers in the UK found that, counter-intuitively, women were carrying drugs of a higher class[5] and a greater quantity than men (2002). Drawing on interviews with women and men who had been employed as drug mules and with recruiters and managers, Fleetwood found that gender mattered much less than might have been expected (Fleetwood 2014a). In fact, drug mules – regardless of their gender – had little to no control over their work. Both men and women were misled about what they were carrying and because packages arrived tightly sealed, they were often carrying vastly larger quantities than agreed. Contextualizing women's experiences in the drug trade shows that the role of mule is absolutely characterized by a lack of control, and vulnerability to exploitation. In this sense, exploitation was not a gendered phenomenon. How then can we explain the trend found by Harper, Harper, and Stockdale (2002)? One answer may simply be that men are more likely to carry their own drugs, and women more likely to carry for someone else.

Women in the international drug trade: beyond drug mules

Women's involvement in international drug trafficking has lasted at least a hundred years. Carey described women's participation in smuggling cannabis and opium across the US/Mexico border in the 1920s and 30s, some with their partners but others independently. One, Maria Wendt, was arrested in San Pedro, California carrying over 800 ounces of heroin concealed in secret compartments in her luggage (Carey 2014: 79). After absconding from custody and nearly escaping to Germany onboard a ship before being apprehending at sea, Maria's case received widespread media attention. Wendt claimed she had been 'used,' but Carey suggest that her contacts and education may have allowed her to undertake a more instrumental role in international trafficking than she admitted (Carey 2014: 86).

Between the 1920s and the 1970s La Nacha (Ignacia Jasso Gonzalez) dominated the heroin and morphine trade in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico (Campbell 2010; Carey 2014). Although her husband also sold drugs, her career long outlasted his (Campbell 2010; Carey 2014). La Nacha began selling in 1920s Ciudad Juarez, which was then a tolerance zone in which alcohol and sex were sold to both US citizens and locals. Academics disagree as to whether her business was merely local (Campbell 2010), or extended into the USA (Carey 2014). Nonetheless, the USA set up sting operations in the effort to arrest and extradite her (Carey 2014: 130). Although La Nacha is perhaps one of the best well-known (perhaps because of her interest to US law enforcement) she is one 'exceptional' woman of many described in Carey's historical account of women traffickers in the USA/South America. Griselda Blanco Restrepo (Medellin/Miami) and Lola 'La Chata' (Mexico City) also had long careers, not to mention their modern equivalents, such as Sandra Avila Beltran the Reina del Pacifica (Carey and Cisneros Guzmán 2011). However, historical research sheds little light on the realities of women whose careers may have been shorter, less notable or less successful.

[5]For international readers, sentencing of drugs reflects quantity and drug class. Class A (the highest class) includes drugs like heroin and cocaine; Class B includes drug such as cannabis and ketamine, and Class C includes anabolic steroids and benzodiazepines.

Contemporary women undertake a variety of roles in the international drug trade. They may recruit others as drug mules, mind them, train them how to swallow capsules of cocaine, dress them in underwear containing concealed cocaine or heroin, or act as 'minders (Fleetwood 2014a; Hübschle 2014). Women also work in a variety of 'invisible' roles: as secretaries in legitimate companies where money is laundered, receiving international shipments of legal goods (and cocaine), employed to play the role of secretary for a trafficker transporting cocaine in a false-bottomed briefcase, as well as minding money and drugs (Fleetwood 2014a). These roles both reflect, and take advantage of, local gender orders.

Women are of course still present in the upper echelons of drug trafficking organizations. Adler's (1993) ethnographic research on a community of cocaine traffickers in California enabled her to observe roles undertaken by women in the social milieu in which trafficking took place. As wives, they sometimes took over business when their partners were arrested, as women into the upper echelons of criminal organizations may do (Allum 2007; Arsovska and Begum 2014). Yet, drugs are not only trafficked by hierarchical criminal organizations but also in loose familial arrangements as in Curaçao, where women actively support and encourage trafficking-involved men as girlfriends and wives (Van San 2011).

Echoing the popularity of 'narco-culture' in Mexico (Mondaca Cota 2015), there are many biographical accounts of women in the drug trade (García 2011; Gómez 2012; Valdéz Cárdenas 2009). These fabulous tales of beautiful, daring women making their way as *sicarios* (assassins), drug traffickers and 'Queen pins' may be entertaining, but offer little gender analysis (Bórquez 2015). Howard Campbell's ethnography of women in the drug trade on the US/Mexico border depicts women involved as mules, brokers and as organizers (Campbell 2008). His analysis, drawing mostly from women who were not arrested, describes a heterogenous group who may both benefit from, and be disadvantaged by their involvement in the drug trade.

Conclusion

It is customary to conclude reviews like this by stating that the subject is under-researched, but our review shows that a great deal has been written on women in the drug trade internationally. The question of whether women are involved is no longer up for debate: they clearly are (Anderson and Kavanaugh 2017; Campbell and Herzberg 2017; Maher and Hudson 2007). This is especially apparent in our international review which includes production, transportation and dealing. Women are present wherever drugs are grown, cooked, transported, brokered or sold. They are often in a minority, but their involvement is far from inconsequential. Echoing Anderson's call to note the vital but often invisible role of women in the street-level drug trade (2005), we draw attention to sheer scale and variety of women's labor worldwide: they labor in the fields cultivating coca, cannabis and opium, transport drugs across borders and sometimes recruit others to do so too. Women are involved in selling drugs also – renting out spaces where drugs are prepared, and are of course involved in selling and buying drugs also. Women are ubiquitous to the drug trade: scholarship can no longer continue to describe the drug economy as if women were absent or insignificant.

Our global review refutes the persistent narrative that women's increased involvement in the drug trade arises from women's social and economic emancipation. Women have long been involved in the drug trade, although our understanding of their presence and the nature of their participation has varied throughout waves of research. The global drug trade is still dominated by and mainly controlled by men: they own the land that women labor on to grow coca and cannabis; the cocaine smuggled into JFK, Heathrow and Schiphol. Women often occupy lower-status, low-reward roles, but they may also find opportunities for control and autonomy in the drug trade: recall that women dominate opium brokering in rural Burma (Chin 2009) and dispatching drug dealers in New York (Curtis and Wendel 2007). In the US South, changes in meth manufacture enabled 'matriarchal' control (Deitzer, Leban, and Copes, 2019). Involvement in drug dealing can, perhaps counter-intuitively, offer women stability and routine (Denton 2001; Morgan and Joe 1996). In rural Morocco (Afsahi 2015), Senegal (Diarisso

and Goredema 2014) and Mexico (Campbell 2008) involvement in the drug trade can offer women degrees of financial independence and autonomy. But, such opportunities have little to do with women's emancipation; their involvement bears no correlation to women's increased economic, political and cultural power.

Having challenged the moribund notion of emancipation as explanation for women's involvement in drug trafficking, we conclude by arguing for the importance of understanding and theorizing contextual and cultural factors regarding women's participation in the illegal drug trade. Future theoretical work could map the diverse contexts of 'women's power' in a global context, after Anderson (2005). This would entail exploring and perhaps adapting her typology. Our review shows that the domestic remains an important site of women's power in drug cultivation, for example.

Rather than women's power, we are concerned with identifying and thematizing factors shaping women's involvement in the drug trade. Our aim was not to sketch out a global theory, however. Global theorizing tends to problematically lump together women's diverse experiences, generalizing on the basis of assumptions about gender originating in, and pertaining to the global north (Mohanty 1988). Instead, we follow anthropologist Abu-Lughod's (1991) call for studies of 'the particular.' Writing against the concept of 'culture,' which she critiques for tending to reify social difference, Abu-Lughod encourages researchers to 'show the actual circumstances and histories of individuals and their relationships' (1991: 475). Drawing on our review, we identify important factors shaping women's involvement in the drug trade. Many studies in our review attend to only one or two of these factors but future research could explore these more fully.

Geo-politics

Geography, politics and history shape the drug trade, and women's social position within it. Simply put, the drug trade – and women's experiences in it – occur at particular geographical and historical junctures. La Nacha's initiation into drug trafficking happens at a particular time and place – Ciudad Juarez in the 1920s – then a tolerance zone for the sale of alcohol and sex (Carey 2014). Given that contemporary globalization (and the global movement of many illegal drugs) tends to mirror colonial patterns of extraction/exploitation, research might explore the long shadow of colonial and imperial projects on women's involvement in the drug trade. Connectedly, social hierarchies underpin the drug trade. As such, researchers should attend to gender as it is locally co-constituted by class, race, gender, sexuality (Connell and Pearse 2014). The state, institutions and traditions shape both the structural conditions in which women live and the meanings afforded to being a woman in that time and place. Whereas the emancipation thesis is premised upon an inevitable and linear progress toward women's emancipation, our approach would instead identify and thematize the particular junctures where women have or can become involved in the drug trade.

Drug policy/policing

Global and national drug prohibition regimes are particularly important in shaping women's involvement. Maher describes women in New York collecting, cleaning and selling injecting equipment – a role that makes sense only where clean syringes were not available to buy (1997). More recently, USA drug policy changes prompted a temporary move to 'bake and shake' and so for a time, small-scale, female-led meth production replaced more hierarchical meth labs (Deitzer, Leban, and Copes, 2019; Miller and Carbone-Lopez 2015). The legalization of marijuana in some US states has created opportunities for middle-class white women, although those with a criminal record (who are disproportionately of color) are excluded in many states. Thus, future research might thematize how drug policy shapes women's opportunities for drug trade involvement. Within a policy lens, research might consider which kinds of interventions dial down or exacerbate violence against women connected to the drug trade.

Division of labor/drug trade technologies

Labor practices and technologies reflect local notions of gender and the division of labor (Connell 2007: 102). Researchers can therefore examine the gendered division of labor. Particular roles may be constructed as 'women's work', for example trimming marijuana (August 2013), or brokering small quantities of opium (Chin 2009). Further, technological changes can create opportunities for women's involvement. Recall that women became involved as dispatchers in early delivery models of drug dealing in New York City in the late 1990s (Curtis and Wendel 2007). Scholarship can therefore explore the ways the division of labor reflect ideas about gender (as well as race, sexuality, and so on). Furthermore, they can explore how novel technologies (like crypto markets) may perpetuate or perhaps disrupt gendered divisions of labor.

How women make sense of their involvement

The drug trade is embedded in social structures and ideologies about gender but they do not, in a straightforward sense, predict how women become involved, what they do, or their motivations. Despite the widespread feminization of poverty, most women do not embark on a career in the drug trade. Gender is mutable, and women construct a wide array of meaningful roles for themselves in the drug trade. They may draw on, adapt or subvert gendered ideologies. Researchers can therefore attend to how women understand their involvement. That is, women's own 'arguments about, justifications for, and interpretations of what they and others are doing' (Abu-Lughod 1991: 475), thereby centering women's agency. Fleetwood examined drug mules' personal narratives, showing how women drew on gendered ideologies in talking themselves into trafficking cocaine (Fleetwood 2014a). Personal narratives are not freely chosen but are constrained by normative gender ideologies and reflect material realities. Fleetwood's research draws on interviews with women from diverse global contexts. Although our review found that poverty and providing for children are common motivations for women in the drug trade, the meanings of womanhood, motherhood and providing (and legal opportunities to do so) reflect local institutions and gender ideologies. At the same time, global media proliferates novel and hybrid gender identities that co-exist with local gender ideals. It is only through qualitative research that we are able to understand how gender is 'done,' shaped by both ideological and material relations, contingent on context. The above is meant as an indication of a future direction of travel, but of course it is not exhaustive.

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