

Chapter 16

Women as Actors in the Drug Economy

Julia Buxton

Women have always participated in illegal drug economies, yet their roles in drug crop cultivation, psychoactive substance manufacture, trafficking and distribution activities (wholesale and retail) have been under-researched and marginalised. In her historical analysis of cross border Mexico–US trafficking, Carey (2014) refers to the participation of women as a ‘public secret’ (p. 10). Their absence in the historical scholarship is a sizable omission – she estimates that women accounted for an extraordinary 60% of drug flows in the 1920s. In neglecting the role of women in drug supply activities, academic scholarship and drug policy-makers perpetuate a simplistic model of illegal market actors and motivations. This fails to meaningfully engage with the drivers of illicit market entry and it precludes the development of policy responses that enable effective and sustainable market exit or formalisation.

The marginalisation of women in research and policy is beginning to change, largely owing to the influence of advocacy organisations that have played an important role in tracking escalating rates of female incarceration, the disproportionate sentencing imposed on women and the rights violations suffered in detention and imprisonment regimes across the world. Three factors have brought greater visibility to the drivers, roles and levels of female participation in supply and distribution chains.

The first is more sophisticated attention to the gendered impacts of neoliberal economic adjustment and the coping strategies adopted by urban and rural women in contexts of austerity, privatisation and land grabs. This includes their engagement in drug crop cultivation, drug supply and distribution. The informalisation of labour and erosion of social protection regimes and land rights from the 1980s onwards imposed a disproportionate cost on women. Neoliberal processes layered onto existing and gendered burdens of care and structural

The Impact of Global Drug Policy on Women: Shifting the Needle, 147–158

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doi:10.1108/978-1-83982-882-920200021

discrimination, for example in relation to unpaid labour, remuneration and land ownership. Economic orthodoxy drove a ‘feminisation of poverty’ (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 1995; United Nations Fund for Women (UNIFEM), 1995) most acutely manifest in the rising numbers of single and female-headed households. This trend was exacerbated by the rupturing of resilience and kinship networks driven by migration, and also conflict in the ‘new’ and ‘uncivil’ wars of the 1990s and 2000s. These decades also saw the rise of the ‘penal state’ and mass incarceration regimes crafted around policies of punitive containment. For Wacquant, neoliberal governance in the post-Keynesian era of insecure employment, protest and social fragmentation relied on a neutralising and ‘warehousing’ of ‘those rendered wholly superfluous by the recomposition of the demand for labour’ (2009, p. 7). The escalation of drug ‘wars’ across a range of geographical contexts drug ‘wars’ was an important mechanism for criminalising and incarcerating swathes of young men, and disproportionately men of colour in the US, Latin America and some European country contexts (Walmsley, 2016), in turn fuelling an increase in the numbers of single and female heads of households.

Economic exclusion and financial vulnerability rendered engagement in drug economies and drug crop cultivation an important livelihood option for women experiencing cash, land and social capital constraints and limited access to formal economic opportunities (Brant Sommers, Baskin, & Fagan, 2000; Miller, 1986). However, while enabling women to maintain fragile livelihoods, participation in drug supply activities rarely serves to enrich women or enable them to progress to more secure, independent or formal incomes. As the numbers of women participating in supply activities expanded, this increased their visibility to NGOs, scholars and policy-makers and encouraged researchers to engage in more sophisticated analysis of the specific gendered dynamics of supply activities. It also revealed the profound gender blindness of programmes and initiatives that were intended to reduce supply volumes. As discussed in the second section of this chapter, this has most particularly been the case with Alternative Development (AD) strategies that were tentatively embraced by international drug control authorities in 1998 through the *Action Plan on International Cooperation on the Eradication of Illicit Drug Crops and on Alternative Development*.

As a note of caution, and as discussed by Chant (2003), the assumption that the ‘feminisation of poverty’ is due to the progressive ‘feminisation of household headship’ requires critical interrogation. This ‘stereotyping’ of women-headed households as the ‘poorest of the poor’ can be a tool to reassert traditional ‘family values’ and heteronormative and patriarchal structures. It also overlooks the diversity of female households and the impacts of intersecting factors of exclusion. Most saliently, and in the context of drug supply discussed below, this conceptualisation also overlooks women’s initiative and flexibility in developing coping strategies.

The global expansion and dissipation of illegal drug markets, detailed in Chapter 1, was another factor influencing the heightened role and visibility of women as actors in the drug trade. The increase in the number of men using drugs and involved in drug supply drew more women into illegal markets as a factor of

their relationships with men. This included, for example, women as users of drugs under the influence or pressure from male partners; women as less conspicuous carriers of drugs for male partners; women drawn into trafficking activities either as a means of livelihood support, under coercion from men or both (Youngers and Giacomello in this collection; Adler, 1985; Rosenbaum, 1981) or women substituting for male suppliers removed from the drug scene by arrest, incarceration or lethal violence (Farfán Méndez in this collection). For some women, engagement in drug supply and distribution activities served as a mechanism to maintain the costs of dependent drug use (Maher, 1997).

Finally, the adoption of more punitive drug laws – including in relation to possession offences, conjoined with the growing engagement of women in drug use and drug supply activities, elevated the exposure of women to law enforcement. This led to an upsurge in the numbers of women incarcerated for low level, non-violent drug offences over the past two decades. While men constituted the overwhelming majority of the global prison population, a higher proportion of women were incarcerated for drug-related offences than men. Figures from Walmsley (2016, 2017) and cited in the 2018 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) World Drug Report (p. 9) demonstrate that of the 714,000 female prisoners, 35% were incarcerated for drug-related offences. By contrast for the prison population of 9.6 million men, 19% were incarcerated for drug-related offences.

The dynamics of drug market shifts and neoliberalism in the post-Cold War era has neutralised those factors that had traditionally marginalised women in drug supply activities (Brant Sommers et al., 2000). Law and order and criminal justice based responses have, in turn, highlighted the different and disproportionate impacts of draconian drug laws on women. As discussed in contributions to this collection, and the growing body of scholarly and policy research, policy interventions that emphasise punitive measures over engagement with the structural causes of women's participation in drug markets are unjust, short-termist and create new forms of violence, risk and rights violations for women. These punishment regimes undermine progress towards international commitments on gender equality and sustainable development, and they fuel the intergenerational transmission of poverty and exclusion.

Drug Supply and Drug Markets: A Man's Occupation and Preoccupation

Investigation of drug trade actors faces multiple methodological and ethical constraints as this relates to both women and men. This includes issues of locating and accessing research subjects, personal risk, and responsibility for reporting known criminal actions to authorities. Where these have been navigated, analysis has been dominated by accounts of male activities with a paucity of research addressing women's roles. For Fraser and Valentine (2005), this gender blindness in part reflects the reality that men overwhelmingly dominate supply (and demand) side activities, but it can also be attributed to the over-representation of male researchers, journalists and policy-makers in this area.

The securitisation of drugs, the conceptual paradigm of the drug ‘war’ and the elision of the wars on drugs and terrorism in the 2000s has further embedded the deeply gendered profile of drug market and drug policy analysis, reproducing the masculinist norms of security that pervade conflict, military, security and counter-terrorism strategy, discourse and research (Cockburn, 2013).

In its gender blindness, drug histories and research have traditionally reproduced hyper-masculinised and frequently sensationalist accounts of men’s experiences. Through this lens, female participation has been bypassed as marginal, anomalous and deviant. Research has tended to focus at either ‘high’ or ‘low’ end. The former focusses on cartel leaders and kingpins, perpetuating an outdated paradigm of hierarchical, transnational and vertically organised supply networks, in which women are irrelevant by default of their lack of leadership roles. ‘High’ end accounts tend towards biography, if not hagiography, variously romanticising and sensationalising criminal careers and drug-related violence. Akin to discussing market actors in capitalist economies through the prism of Donald Trump, Jeff Bezos or Elon Musk, these approaches justify Americanised crime fighting responses that emphasise decapitation of ‘capos’ as a means of staunching illegal drug flows. As discussed in Chapter 1, the unintended consequences of this ‘Kingpin’ strategy – that was pursued with particular vigour during the administration of Ronald Reagan – was the splintering of organisations, not their elimination. This has resulted in smaller and more agile supply networks, a trend conceptualised as a shift from cartels to *cartelitos* (Bagley, 2013) that has driven increased access to psychoactive substances globally. As discussed in the chapter by Farfán Méndez, this ‘elite’ focussed approach has overlooked the important senior leadership and management roles that women have historically played both within the pyramid structures of ‘traditional’ criminal organisations and independently from them. It also neglects their capacity to maximise the benefits of their anomalous deviance and sustain their operations by remaining outside of the purview of the media, law enforcement and academic scrutiny (see also Carey, 2014).

Conversely, ‘low end’ research has focussed on street-level dealing, most usually in traditional consumer countries of North America and Western Europe. These accounts have been configured around criminological and sociological theory of male youth, gangs, subcultures and ‘hegemonic masculinities’ (Brown, 1998; Connell, 1995). Perceived as bereft of ‘subcultural capital’ and masculine attributes of aggression, toughness and risk-taking associated with criminal enterprise (Campbell, 2000), women remained on the periphery. This began to change in the 1980s, a trend linked to drug market shifts and the emergence of crack cocaine (Maher & Hudson, 2007). This moved retail distribution networks away from male-dominated heroin supply chains and opened up space for new participants – and increasingly for women. While the extent to which crack markets enabled female entry into manufacture (home-based cooking) and sales is contested (Maher & Hudson, 2007; Maher & Daly, 1996), the advent of crack cocaine widened the base of ethnographic investigation to include exploration of the role and position of women in drug supply activities. Chronologically, this coincided with a neoliberal lurch and, following Wacquant, the rise of the penal state.

These early accounts emphasised the position of women as relational and subordinate to men, drawing attention to their lack of masculine 'qualities' essential for survival and success in wholesale procurement and retail sales (Adler, 1985; Steffensmeier, 1983; Steffensmeier & Allan, 1996). Women were variously depicted as 'addicts, mules, lovers or victims' (Carey, 2014, p. 3), with attributes and characteristics that precluded them performing any meaningful role in drug markets including due to women being unreliable, untrustworthy, weak, passive and powerless. Those roles that were identified as female occupied were low level, seen to be acquired through coercion and vulnerability, and were most usually linked to a woman's drug dependence. Female access to psychoactive substances was mediated by men, including through sex work, pimps and escort work for male dealers (Adler, 1985).

Innovation, Creativity and Autonomy

Research focussing specifically on the experience of women gained traction in the 1990s and 2000s and as the increase in women using drugs illuminated wider connections with illegal markets. Within these analyses, there was consensus that drug markets, like the formal economy, were highly gender stratified. Echoing earlier research, women were found to occupy the lowest positions, they performed marginal roles and were unequally remunerated for their work and services (Adler, 1985; Denton & O'Malley, 1999; Dunlap, Johnson, & Maher, 1997; Waldorf et al., 1991). A recurrent theme was women's increased vulnerability to exploitation and different forms of violence and intimidation in drug markets than that experienced by men, including sexual predation by older men (Bourgois, Prince, & Moss, 2004).

Distinguishing this more recent body of scholarship was the attention to those strategies employed by women to navigate the sometimes violent and always precarious illegal drug economy; the types of social capital women mobilised and acquired in drug market participation; and the salience of low-level positions to the smooth functioning of male-dominated activities. For example, Hutton (2005) and Anderson (2005) highlighted the interdependent relationship between men and women in fluid and fragmented drug markets, with women playing important supporting roles that were key to distribution tasks and networks (Anderson, 2005). In interrogating the skills that women employed to address their disadvantageous position in gendered drug markets, their agency and capacity for success as drug market actors were increasingly recognised (Denton, 2001; Denton & O'Malley, 1999) and their specific vulnerabilities better understood.

Grundetjern and Sandberg (2012) identified a range of measures and attributes deployed by women to enable them to maximise their revenues and autonomy, and reduce vulnerability to both male violence (from suppliers, competitors and buyers) and risk of arrest. This ran counter to the narrative of women as powerless and victimised, with women emerging instead as creative and resourceful (Anderson, 2005; Denton, 2001; Denton & O'Malley, 1999; Mieczkowski, 1994; Morgan & Joe, 1996). A key strategy included performance and building of 'street capital', for example, by enacting 'masculinity' and being 'one of

the guys'. This acquisition of masculinised characteristics extended to emotional detachment and the use of excessive violence by women to protect their market share (Denton & O'Malley 1999; Dunlap et al., 1997; Miller, 2001). Desexualisation and the avoidance of sexual relationships was another strategy identified in a number of ethnographic analyses. This was important for women to uphold trust and their status as dealers. On a related note of women's personal conduct, some research emphasised the importance of keeping personal drug use in check (Morgan & Joe, 1996; Sterk, 1999), and being 'service-minded' (Dwyer & Moore, 2010; Morgan & Joe 1996; Waldorf, 1991) by demonstrating qualities of reliability, trustworthiness, budgeting know-how and ethical standards in market transactions.

By way of contrast to the uptake of 'masculinities', women's ability to exploit their sexuality, biology and gendered roles was also emphasised. Contextual assimilation, being less suspicious and conspicuous than male peers, enabled women to remain outside of the purview of law enforcement, in turn providing them with a valuable advantage in some trafficking and distribution activities. Family and caring responsibilities for children provided a veil of normalcy that enabled some women to conduct their activities below the radar of public or law enforcement scrutiny. Gendered stereotypes were thus mobilised as a form of risk management (Carey, 2014; Jacobs & Miller, 1998; Mieczkowski, 1994). Home ownership or tenancy in female-headed households was a positive factor influencing the ability of women to maintain market engagement and run their operations (Maher, 1997; Wilson, 1993). For some women at both the high and low end of drug markets, sexualisation also served as a means of negotiating and ensuring supply of drugs for distribution and for personal use, and for ensuring protection and status from men (Adler, 1985; Bourgois & Dunlap, 1993; Denton, 2001; Maher, 1997; Waldorf et al., 1991).

While some of the research demonstrated that drug market activities could provide women with autonomy and independence (Morgan & Joe, 1996), it was most usually the case that female drug market participation was initiated, facilitated, mediated and sponsored by men and occurred under male 'tutelage' (Bourgois et al., 2004; Dunlap & Johnson, 1996; Fagan, 1994; Maher, 1992; Mieczkowski, 1994; Wilson, 1993). For example, the employment of men, and support from male relatives and partners (business and sexual) played an important role in protecting women, from high to low market level, from the violence of competitors, suppliers and purchasers, (Mieczkowski, 1994; Waldorf et al., 1991). This perpetuated gendered illicit market inequalities and the dependence of women on men for market access, position and profit. As a result of this ongoing precarity, women tended to generalise rather than specialise as drug market actors, shifting tasks, roles and responsibilities. To insulate their financial positions, women were found to diversify their income sources, moving between informal and formal economic activity and supplementing 'bottom of the ladder' positions with other income generation strategies (Denton, 2001; Maher, 1997; Mieczkowski, 1994; Morgan & Joe, 1996; Sterk, 1999).

Women's entry and persistence in illegal drug supply is influenced by a diversity of push and pull factors, but as emphasised by Zajdow and Denton

(2001), their choices are structurally constrained. For Sandberg (2008), a 'middle position' helps interpret the role of women as drug trade actors, one that recognises individual agency but within the framework of wider structural constraints. Factors such as social context, class, ethnicity, age and type of drug market influence the opportunities, risks and positions of women (Sterk, 1999). The type of drug market and dealing network shape different prospects for women and their ability to successfully navigate male gatekeepers and hyper-masculinity in illegal drug economies. Heroin and crack cocaine markets, for example, were associated with high levels of violence and coercion, structural contexts that tended to keep women at the bottom end of market chains. Conversely, cannabis and synthetic drug markets such as methamphetamine and 3,4-methylenedioxy-methamphetamine (MDMA) were associated with less violence, lower entry costs, and user cultures that were more favourable to female entry thereby facilitating opportunities for middle-level market positioning by women (Denton, 2001; Dunlap & Johnson, 1996). Distribution within friendship networks was in particular advantageous to women. The ability to be more discerning about suppliers and customers was most prevalent among women of higher class and social status, who could draw on alternative income sources and who were most usually engaged in supply on an irregular basis.

Market Change, Future Trends and Research Limitations

While increased attention to the role of women in drug markets is to be welcomed, there remains a dearth of research. We cannot talk about evidence or research-informed drug policy, contributing to the characterisation of drug policy processes as a 'fiasco' (Buxton in Chapter 1). As acknowledged by the UNODC (2018a), there is a crippling lack of quantitative and qualitative data that would enable a better understanding of women's roles and their motivations or the benefits and risks of participation as understood by women themselves. The research that has been collated to date is overwhelmingly dominated by North American, Australasian and West European experiences. Sample sizes are small, and the research centralises street-level dealing. Very little is known about women's experiences internationally despite global dissipation of the trade in illegal psychoactive substances, and the small amount of information that is being collated is largely drawn from women who are already incarcerated. Particular lacuna relate to the different experiences, opportunities and structural constraints in drug markets faced by minority ethnic and migrant women in the Global North and South, and by older women.

As highlighted by the work of NGOs such as WOLA, Equis Justicia, Prison Reform Trust and in contemporary academic research on trafficking (Carey, 2014; Fleetwood, 2014), women incarcerated for supply offences are overwhelmingly from migrant, minority ethnic and poor backgrounds. The majority are serving punitively long sentences under mandatory minimum processes in facilities that are gender insensitive, inappropriate and unsafe, where they are vulnerable to violence and sexual violence, receive little to no treatment for drug-related problems and are most usually located far from home without access to children or families (Giacomello, 2019a).

Those involved in supply activities are usually seen as the least deserving of public sympathy or judicial leniency. But as the lived experience of women behind the statistics are heard, this serves to substantiate the argument that the drug ‘wars’ are being fought against the poor, the most vulnerable and without any appreciable progress in reducing supply volumes. Owing to the care roles of women, and due to the high number of single and female heads of households caught up in drug policy enforcement, their experience of incarceration impacts the security, welfare and prospects of their children. The stigma and discrimination around drug use, drug-related convictions and incarceration severely impede women’s reintegration after release from prison, locking them into informal economic activities and cycles of recidivism (van Olphen, Eliason, & Freudenberg, 2009).

Current dynamics and future trends in drug markets add further importance to the need for improved research on women in drug supply. As with drug control itself, much of the existing literatures have focussed disproportionately on the market for plant-based drugs and their derivatives (cocaine, crack cocaine, heroin and cannabis). This framing needs to extend to the role of women in the supply and distribution of diverted pharmaceutical substances (see contribution by Box in this collection) and synthetic drugs. Synthetic markets work to a fundamentally different dynamic to plant-based drugs, with telescoped manufacture and distribution chains, relative ease of manufacture and – some information suggests – smaller and localised distribution networks. This also includes ‘party scene drugs’. The ‘normalisation’ of these substances among new generations of drug suppliers and consumers, and home – as opposed to street-based – purchase and consumption and within friendship circles reduces the costs and risks of market entry to women (Parker, Williams & Aldridge, 2002; Pearson & Hobbs, 2004; Sales & Murphy, 2007). The diversification of drug markets necessitates a broadening of research sampling with greater attention to the social characteristics of sellers and drug types in order to provide a more rounded understanding of gendered dynamics in drug markets and women’s incentives (or forms of coercion) within them.

Arguably the most salient factor that may lead to a neutralising of gendered dynamics is the rise of cryptomarkets (Bartlett, 2014; Martin, 2014). According to Aldridge and Décary-Héту (2016, p. 2) ‘drug cryptomarkets may have some capacity to reduce the harm caused by drug markets by reducing the violence sometimes associated with these markets by virtue of their virtual location’. By platforming entrepreneurship, technical skill and anonymity in drug market activities, drug market transformations may offset the many risks and challenges that women have traditionally experienced as drug supply actors.

The manifest complexity of women in supply activities is not reflected in drug policy processes or enforcement responses. Women and men involved in these activities (current or previous) are not engaged as stakeholders in drug policy, despite the insights that can be provided from lived experience. Drug policy remains law enforcement oriented and configured around strategies that are

gender blind in design and implementation, with negligible attention paid to how women are differently impacted than men. Tentative endorsement of international obligations in relation to the promotion of gender equality and mainstreaming of gender sensitivity has not translated into meaningful uptake and implementation, with the result that the ongoing pursuit of eradication, interdiction and punishment strategies is doing more harm than good for women's inclusion, autonomy and empowerment. This is most acutely represented in the case of drug crop cultivation.

Women and Plant Supply

As outlined in Chapter 1, international drug control emerged from concerns surrounding the trade and use of psychoactive plants and derivative substances. Critics of the centuries-old trade in opium and coca viewed it as a moral harm rooted in colonial exploitation. In the run-up to the first international conference on the 'opium problem' in 1909, opium production in China was an estimated 35,353 metric tons, with output overtaking British controlled India, traditionally the dominant opium poppy cultivator and opium producer. In Persia (Iran), opium production was estimated to be in a range of 450–900 tonnes, while the Ottoman region was producing 150 tonnes (UNODC, 2008a, 2008b, p. 34). Coca cultivation was experiencing a similar boom. As with opium and its derivatives morphine and heroin, this was driven by mass-market demand for coca and cocaine based patent medicines and new pharmaceutical products as well as beverages and tonics. Coca leaf exports from Peru increased from 8 tonnes in 1877 to 1,490 tonnes by 1905 (Gootenberg, 2001), while in Java (Indonesia) Dutch investment drove an increase in coca leaf exports from 26 tonnes in 1904 to 430 tonnes by 1910.

The nascent international regulatory regime was successful in dramatically reducing cultivation levels in the inter-war period. The systems for the reporting and monitoring of cultivation, and restricting exports and imports to medically and scientifically authorised stock and as set out in the international drug conventions of the period led to a steep fall in cultivation. Markets were further decimated by national-level legislation prohibiting unauthorised consumption, the subsequent descent into global war and the resulting disruption of supply routes (1939–1945). Going into the post-war period, the United States was positioned to further squeeze traditional cultivator states, using diplomatic and economic leverage to press Turkey and Iran into robust cultivation controls (Gingeras, 2012, 2013). In China, cultivation collapsed in the context of an aggressive and violent anti-opium campaign led by the Maoist regime in the 1950s (Zhou, 1999). The 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs saw international agreement to criminalise engagement in unauthorised cultivation, which was to be a punishable offence 'when committed intentionally', with serious offences 'liable to adequate punishment particularly by imprisonment or other penalties of deprivation of liberty' (Article 36). A 15-year time frame was established for the achievement of zero illicit opium poppy cultivation and 25 years in the case of

coca, including the elimination of recreational, religious and cultural consumption practices, with state authorities required to destroy unauthorised planting.

Fast forward 70 years, and the UNODC is reporting record levels of drug crop cultivation. Rural women play a crucial role in these illicit agricultural economies in countries that include Myanmar, Laos and Mexico (opium) and Peru, Colombia and until recent reforms (although with political reversal in 2020), Bolivia (coca) (see Farthing & Kohl, 2015). In Morocco, Lebanon and India, women are important actors in illegal cannabis cultivation, that plant having been conjoined with coca and opium poppy under robust controls introduced by the 1961 Single Convention (UNODC, 2004). As with drug distribution activities discussed in the previous section, poverty, insecurity and the lack of viable economic alternatives are the key drivers of women and men's engagement in the risky venture of illegal drug crop cultivation. Deficits of land, credit, citizenship and infrastructure render cultivation of these cash crops a rational livelihoods option for rural communities in territories characterised by a weak state presence, limited access to markets, poor irrigation, insecurity, conflict and violence (Boonwaat, 2001; Buxton, 2015). Cultivation provides access to land, employment, security and also credit based on future harvests.

The criminalisation of unauthorised cultivation in the 1961 Convention transformed otherwise worthless plants and shrubs into high-value commodities. The value added that is created by criminalisation reduces the viability of poor rural communities engaging in the cultivation of alternative, legal agricultural crops such as coffee, cereals, fruits, flowers and vegetables, as these require quality soil, good irrigation, storage facilities, speedy market access (to prevent rotting) and connections to transnational market chains. A principle advantage of opium poppy and coca is the short planting to harvest cycle, a valuable characteristic for the land insecure and communities displaced by conflict (Kurtz-Phelan, 2005).

As with distribution and trafficking activities, illegal cultivation can support fragile livelihoods, but it rarely presents a sustainable route out of poverty, violence and insecurity. It locks cultivating communities into environments of coercion and food insecurity, and risks of crop destruction, pillage, violence and displacement by law enforcement and non-state actors. The location of key global cultivation zones in areas of civil and international conflict and/or control by informal powers exacerbates these risks of violence to cultivators and their reliance on illicit crops. It is a vicious cycle that neither hard nor soft anti-drug strategies have succeeded in breaking. After a century of supply focussed drug policy, from the gentlemanly national agreements of the 1930s to a fully militarised war on opium poppy, coca and cannabis cultivation in the 1980s, the international community is no closer to achieving ambitions of zero unauthorised cultivation. Targets and schedules are repeatedly set and always missed (Rojas, 2003).

As with other supply and distribution elements of illicit drug supply, plant cultivation activities are gender stratified and they reinforce existing structural disadvantages experienced by rural women. As outlined by Garcia Romero et al. (2020), rural women

play a decisive role in sustaining and improving rural livelihoods and in strengthening communities by participating in tasks related to agriculture, food security and nutrition, land and natural resource management, unpaid work, and domestic care.

Despite these significant burdens, women in informal and formal agricultural sectors receive a fraction of the income generated, they rarely own land or assets and they are excluded from male-dominated market structures and household decision making. They have a disproportionate vulnerability to poverty and gender-based violence and high levels of exclusion from education and health care services (UN Women, 2018). Rural women engaged in coca and opium poppy face additional stigma linked to their engagement in criminalised activities. In many growing areas, this is reinforced by discrimination and exclusion based on ethnicity and race. Conflict, poverty and informality in cultivation areas present gender-specific risks and different types of violence for women than men, and political and security arrangements in these territories reinforce the exclusion of women.

As with women's involvement in distribution activities, the research on women in cultivation is thin and limited. UNODC and country data are gender blind and do not capture the complex political economy of women in cultivation. UNODC metrics are focussed on counting hectares cultivated or eliminated. There is a dearth of qualitative and quantitative data on rural livelihoods in cultivation zones and in particular in relation to the roles of women cultivators, the contribution that their activities make to household incomes, the amount of time they dedicate to the formal and informal and the public and private spheres, and the specific types of structural constraints and vulnerabilities that they face in cultivation areas (land titling, access to markets, seeds and credit). At a national level

the state has done little to learn about and document rural women's living conditions, even though it is precisely the precariousness of life in the countryside, the high indices of poverty, and the lack of access to public services and lack of civilian state presence that drive them to take part in the drug economy. (Garcia Romero et al., 2020)

Anti-drugs strategies that have focussed on coercive repression of cultivation, including the use of chemical eradication, manual destruction of crops by enforcement agencies, and the arrest, repression and forced displacement of cultivating communities have been ineffective in reducing global volumes of cultivation. Instead, they have displaced cultivation activities (Buxton, 2015, p. 10) and resulted in human rights violations, exacerbated cultivator insecurity and led to an escalation of violence within rural communities in conditions of security sector and enforcement agency impunity (beatings, torture, arbitrary detention and extrajudicial killings) (Jelsma, 2001; Windle, 2017). In the case of women, coercive eradication has been linked to ill health and spontaneous abortion (Glyphosate spraying in Colombia), vulnerability to disease and gender-based violence (sexual violence, rape), including in processes of flight and displacement

(Afghanistan, Laos, Bolivia and Myanmar) and entry into other forms of informal and coerced activities such as sex work and illegal migrant domestic labour (Clemencia Ramirez, 2005; Dion & Russler, 2008; Leons, 1993).

Acknowledgement of the regressive and counterproductive impacts of coercive eradication did lead international drug control authorities to endorse 'softer', development-led approaches after 1998 and as advocated by the European Union and the Organisation of American States member countries (Buxton, 2015; Jelsma, 2001; UNODC, 2005). Over the past two decades, Alternative Development (AD) has been through various iterations of programming and conceptual refinement, a broadening out of strategies to move cultivators into sustainable and viable formal economic activities. This includes through attention to citizenship deficits, market constraints and structural exclusion (Brombacher & Westerbarkei, 2019). In an important sign of drug policies engagement with wider international development agendas, such as the Millennium and Sustainable Development Goals, Women in Development and gender mainstreaming obligations, guidelines on best practice in gender-sensitive AD have been developed (UNODC, 2004). While these are ambitious and sophisticated in objectives, a sizeable gap exists between their design, rhetoric and actual implementation. Oversight has been poor, there have been problems of corruption, weak coordination, and these soft strategies have been operationalised alongside continued hard repression (Farthing & Kohl, 2005; Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), 2018; UK Independent Commission for Aid Impact, 2014; Vargas Meza, 2011). The experience on the ground has been for programming, including training programmes, financial disbursements and stakeholder engagement, to continually overlook women as cultivators and heads of household. As such, AD has reinforced female marginalisation and rural poverty, including by creating new cleavages in rural communities driven by funding disbursement patterns and the conditionalities attached to AD distribution.

As discussed in the next chapter in this collection, female cultivators show creativity, adeptness and resilience despite the weighty structural and proximate factors of exclusion that they face. The current period is one of strengthening organisation and resistance in some cultivating areas, led and organised by women (David, Gil Pinzón, Lorenz, & Schmidt, 2019; Garcia Castro, Cruz Olivera, Ledebur, & Pereira, 2020). As argued in relation to women in drug distribution and trafficking, the voices of female cultivators must be heard and engaged in the drug policy process. Their continued marginalisation and exclusion perpetuates ongoing challenges of inappropriate policy responses, causing tremendous and counterproductive harm.