The Mexican Drug War’s Collateral Damages on Women

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Abstract

This paper examines the Mexican drug war from a postcolonial and feminist perspective. The postcolonial framework serves to expose how the U.S.-led War on Drugs is a new instrument of colonial practice that allows the U.S. to maintain a political and economic sphere of influence in Latin America. In addition the feminist perspective enables to examine how the collateral damages of this drug war affect people different depending on the intersection of their sex, gender, race or class. Consequently women have become more vulnerable to be the target of rape, kidnapping and human trafficking. Moreover, even though men engage more often with drug cartels women are more likely to be imprisoned for drug offenses. Focusing on women in this particular situation serves to explain that the drug trade is more than just a problem of criminality. It is an issue that stems from social and economic injustices.

Key words: Collateral damages of the drug war; feminist and postcolonial theory; Mexican drug war; War on Drugs; women and drug war.
Introduction

According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) 2014 report, the United States is one of the highest consumers of drugs in the world. The UNODC estimates 16% of the population aged 12 and older have used illicit drugs in the United States. Also, North America (Mexico and the U.S.) has the largest seizures of the cannabis herb; accounting for 69% of the global herb seizures in 2011 (UNODC 2013). Today, Mexico is the largest foreign supplier of marijuana and methamphetamines to the United States. The Mexican government estimates drug traffickers earned $132 billion between 2006 and 2010. With the eradication of the drug trade in Mexico, the Mexican economy will shrink by 63% (Morton 2010). These statistics are indicative of an enormous illicit drug market. To that extent, Mexico has been imbued in violence for the past eight years.

Just six days after taking office as Mexico’s president in 2006, Felipe Calderon announced a war, backed by the United States, against organized crime, specifically drug cartels. Overall, Calderon’s strategy consisted of the militarization of law enforcement in the country to fight drug cartels. Nonetheless, very far from dismantling drug cartels, during his administration more cartels emerged, spread, and some became even more powerful. At the beginning of this war in 2006, six cartels existed in Mexico. Recently, the Attorney General reported that nine cartels now exist and they have split into 43 criminal gangs operating throughout the country (Ramírez 2014). Edgardo Buscaglia (2013) criticizes Calderon’s strategy of militarization. He argues that organized crime is a social and economic phenomenon and not just a military one that can be battled with the army.

This paper seeks to respond whether the collateral damages of the drug war have struck different men and women. Many authors agree the strategy has been unsuccessful up to this point (Buscaglia 2013; Correa-Cabrera 2013; Francis and Mauser 2011; Hernández 2010; Mastrogiavanni 2014; Mercille 2014; Morton 2012). Moreover, many people have died. The Mexican Institute of Geography and History INEGI reported that from 2006 to 2012, 121,683 violent deaths occurred in Mexico. Of these deaths, according to the current secretary of the interior Miguel Ángel Osorio Chong, about 70,000 deaths were related to drug trade violence (CNN México 2013). However, sources coming from nongovernmental organizations claim that the number of violent deaths related to drug trade violence during the Calderon administration is even worse. They argue 116,100 deaths were related to the drug trade (Libera 2013). In addition, drug cartels have extended
their illicit activities to human trafficking, kidnappings, and extortion (Office of the High Commissioner in Mexico 2012). It has been documented that drug cartels forced women to become sexual slaves, couriers, watchers, and assassins (CATWLAC, 2012).

An analysis of the dynamics that has led Mexico to this violent precipice will give insight into Mexico’s grim situation. Taking a postcolonial and feminist approach is important; this allows the examination of the violence in terms of power dynamics, class, gender and race. This approach can give a close look at the impact of the drug war on vulnerable women in Mexico. The postcolonial framework is useful for two reasons. First, it places the drug trafficking within the entangled dynamics of international cooperation. Second, it sheds light on how imperialist states lead postcolonial states to assume foreign policies that do not necessarily benefit the majority of the population. In addition, feminist theory acknowledges that imperialist policies have a different impact over people depending on the intersection of their sex, gender, class, race or religion.

In Mexico, cartels have turned poor women into a commodity to possess or use in trade. They have done this with impunity. Drug traffickers have raped women (Castellanos 2013) and have added the trafficking of women to their illicit activities (O’Connor 2011). Focusing on women in this particular situation provides a lens to understand that the drug trade is not just a problem of criminality and legal justice, but it is also about inequality and social injustice. Consequently, the significance of this paper rests on presenting the U.S.-led war on drugs as a new instrument of colonial practice that violates people’s most fundamental rights. Given that women are the most affected by tears in the social fabric, it is important to examine the particular ways in which the drug war has struck them.

The Mexican government has not provided clear and accurate information. They have not reported on the impact and collateral damage of the drug war. This paper will attempt to fill gaps in information provided by the Mexican government. It will further show how the government’s drug strategy has affected vulnerable women. In addition, although many authors have examined organized crime and drug trade in Mexico, none of them approach the issue from a postcolonial and feminist perspective. As a result, the assumption is that the failure of the drug war strategy is solely a Mexican problem and not a transnational issue. This paper argues the collateral damages related to the drug war are a transnational issue because drug trafficking networks operate internationally. Those who
have examined the collateral damages of the drug war do not describe the specific ways in which this strategy strikes women.

This paper is organized to speak to several issues. First, a review of the literature that has examined the drug trade in Mexico as well as U.S. foreign policy. As a contributing factor, an analysis of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) is offered in order to grasp Mexican economy. Secondly, the post-colonial and feminist framework is described. Next, I discuss the drug war as an instrument of colonial practice that allows the U.S. to create a political and economic sphere of influence in Latin America. Lastly, the impact that the drug war has had on women is discussed.

**Historical Development of the U.S.-led War on Drugs**

To better understand the Mexican drug strategy it is important to examine the relationship between Mexico and the U.S. Lorenzo Meyer (2006) states that the political and economic relationship between the United States and Mexico has historically been a relationship of elites. However, Meyer asserts that the drug trade and Mexican emigration to the US has served to shape the bilateral agenda between these two countries as well. Let us start with the U.S.-led War on Drugs.

The US and Mexico have employed drug prohibition policies. These policies are rooted in the idea that drugs and alcohol are bad for individuals’ health and are also amongst the ills of society (Campos 2011; Ogbonna 2012). Over the last 80 years, different governments and political parties from around the globe have supported drug prohibition. In 1914 the U.S. Congress passed the Harrison Act, which prohibited the sale of heroin, cocaine and their derivatives without a doctor’s prescription; these kind of drugs are known as psychoactive substances. Later, in 1920, even the medical control of psychoactive substances was banned making the sale or possession of these drugs a crime. In 1937, marijuana also became illegal (Bertram, Blachman, Sharpe and Andreas 1996). In Mexico, the cultivation of marijuana and poppy became illegal in 1925 (Campos 2012). Since the mid-1930s Mexican President Lázaro Cardenas (1936-1940) fought the drug trade, coordinating the Mexican Judicial Federal Police and the U.S. Federal Bureau of Narcotics (Lopez 2011).

In 1971 President Richard Nixon launched the War on Drugs. He declared the abuse of drugs a “national threat” and drug trafficking as “Public Enemy Number One” (Bertram et al 1996:105). This strategy sought to impede the supply of drugs in the US by
expanding law enforcement. It also reinforced the drug strategy abroad. One of the main targets was the border with Mexico, where vehicles entering the US were searched for drugs. Subsequently, in 1986 President Ronald Reagan elevated drug trade as a national security threat and commanded the Defense Department to enhance its counterdrug efforts. One year later, on the other side of the border, Mexican President Miguel de la Madrid also declared drug trafficking a national security issue allowing the military to get involved in counterdrug efforts (Freeman and Sierra 2005). After the Ronald Reagan and George W. H. Bush administrations, the war on drugs intensified. Part of this intensification meant rigid legislation, enhanced law enforcement and elevated rates of incarceration.

As part of the intensification of the drug war, President George H.W. Bush launched the first major increase in counter-drug foreign military assistance in 1989. It was called the Andean Initiative. The Andean Initiative empowered police forces and militaries in Latin America by providing training and support. They specifically focused on Peru and Bolivia. Overall the U.S. foreign drug policy in Latin America has been “militarization” (Youngers and Rosin, 2005). Unfortunately, history has demonstrated that drug traffickers can adapt and recover after major drug-enforcement seizures. The adaptation of the traffickers even has names. The “balloon effect,” for instance, is the shifting of the cultivation and production of drugs to places without the threat of drug enforcement. Also, the “cockroach effect” is the movement of smuggling activities to countries without drug strategies (Bagley 2013).

When the Andean Initiative hit Peru and Bolivia to eradicate coca leaf crops, the coca cultivation shifted to Colombia in the mid and late 1990s. Consequently, by 2000 Colombia became the largest producer of cocaine in the world, sinking the country into violence due to drug trafficking. As a result, Colombia became one of the most dangerous countries in the world (Bagley, 2013). In July 2000, President Bill Clinton backed Colombian President Andrés Pastrana, and launched Plan Colombia. Since 2000, this strategy has provided Colombia with more than $5 billion in military aid (Amnesty International 2013). The strategy worked. By 2010 Colombia had significantly decreased violence related to drugs (Bagley 2013). Nonetheless, Plan Colombia led to the “balloon effect” and “cockroach effect” amongst drug traffickers. This time, they shifted their operations to Mexico.

In 2007, the U.S. backed Mexican President Calderon’s drug war with the Merida Initiative. According to the US. Department of State (2012) this initiative was a partnership
between Mexico and the US with the purpose of “strengthening institutions, improving citizen safety, fighting drug trafficking, organized crime corruption, illicit arms trafficking, money-laundering and decreasing the demand for drugs on both sides of the border.” The Merida Initiative also provided $2.1 billion to Mexico in their anti-drug activities.) This initiative has provided hardware, inspection equipment, and information technology, besides direct and indirect training to different police departments and federal agencies. However, it is not clear what, exactly, this bi-national partnership does to undermine corruption within Mexico.

Despite bi-national cooperation, partial victories and drug enforcement efforts to impede the supply of drugs within the U.S., a huge illicit drug market still exists that it is able to offer drugs to 23.9 million of consumers in the U.S. –16% of Americans age 12 and older (UNODC 2014). It is noteworthy that the highest consumption corresponds to cannabis. The U.S. has 18.9 million consumers of cannabis. (National Survey on Drug Use and Health by the US Department of Health and Human Services 2012). In comparison, according to the 2011 Mexican National Survey of Addictions, Mexico has 1.5% of consumers of illicit drugs age 12 and older. Cannabis represents 1.2% out of this total (Cruz 2013).

The effects of the drug war have fallen far short of what was expected. The consumption of drugs has increased instead of decreased in the past decade. Many scholars have criticized the policy of prohibition in the U.S. (Alexander 2010, Bertram et al 1996; Campos 2012; Francis and Mauser 2006; Ogbonna 2005; Youngers et al 2005). However, despite the shortcomings of the War on Drugs the U.S. has not changed its strategy and continues to support anti-drug efforts abroad.

**Mexican economic growth with North American Free Trade Agreement**

Now, let’s explore the economic relation the U.S and Mexico have. During the 70s a “restoration of class powers worldwide” occurred (Harvey 2005: 31). David Harvey (2005) argues that the restoration of class power does not mean monetary power was restored to the same people who held it in the past. New powerful entities emerged. An example of these entities would be the Wall Street investment banks. During the mid 70s these banks focused on lending capital to foreign governments. Set in U.S. dollars, these loans carried convenient interest rates for the banks. When developing countries had trouble paying back the loans, the U.S. Treasury, operating under the Reagan
administration and the IMF allowed countries to reschedule their debt. In return, indebted countries would have to abandon their Keynesian policies and move towards neoliberalism (Harvey 2005). Mexico was one of the first countries that accepted this proposal. Thus, in the mid 90s Mexico shifted its domestic economic model to a neoliberal model in accordance with the Washington consensus (Meyer 2006).

The Washington consensus refers to the international economic policies promoted by the U.S., U.K., International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank (Cypher and Delgado 2010). These policies were presented as the answer to solve the global problems (Harvey 2005). The purpose was to pressure countries to follow the neoliberal road. The neoliberal economic model proposed that free market and free trade is the best scenario to advance the human well-being. This framework promoted the maximization of the individual entrepreneurial skills as the path to liberalization. Competition among individuals, privatization of national assets and private property rights was essential in this model as it still is today.

As a consequence, Canada, the U.S. and Mexico signed the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994. This agreement set up a free trade area among these three countries. Since then the Mexican economic growth has been tied to the consumer market in the U.S. (Cypher and Delgado 2010). NAFTA opened Mexico to direct foreign investments coming form the U.S. NAFTA proponents describe the model as a “win-win” situation that would be beneficial for the economic growth of the three countries. Nonetheless, far from achieving this goal, the Mexican economy has been stagnant. It has only grown at an average rate of 0.9% (per capita) from 1994 to 2013 under NAFTA (Weisbrot, Lefebvre and Sammut 2014).

Moreover, in 2013 Mexico ranked 18th on average annual economic growth out of 20 Latin American countries from 1994 to 2013 (Weisbrot et al 2014). In addition, NAFTA had a particular negative impact on agricultural employment, producing a net loss of 1.9 million jobs. Full time jobs have decreased as well. According to INEGI (2015) out of the total of employed population 57.9% of employees are employed in informal jobs. This means their jobs do not offer such benefits as health care, paid vacation retirement plans, etc. Moreover, 63.5% of the employed earned less than $14.13 USD a day. The minimum wage in Mexico is $70.10 pesos ($4.71 USD)1 for an 8-hour day of labor. These numbers

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1 Exchange rate in February 2015 1 US dollars = 14.88 Mexican pesos

- 36 -
demonstrate that the neoliberal policies adopted by Mexico since the mid 90s have maintained economic stagnation.

**Method and Theoretical Framework**

One of the purposes of this paper is to examine the effects of the drug war policy from a postcolonial and feminist perspective, with a focus on how this strategy has impacted vulnerable women. In order to display how criminal organizations have targeted women I examine through different media sources, government documents and non-governmental organizations’ reports the situation of violence that Mexico faces. I assert that due to the drug war has not decreased the consumption of drugs in the US cartels have become more powerful and now they have expanded their illicit activities.

In addition, this essay places Mexico in its relation with the US-led War on Drugs In Latin America. Thus, the purpose is to present a broader picture of the elements that have led Mexico to reach its current condition. Having more research on the key factors that have contributed to the expansion of drug trafficking will serve to design policies that effectively battle the illegal drug market. I acknowledge the postcolonial framework serves to read social issues taking into account power dynamics among international relations. Thus, let me clarify in what sense it is used the postcolonial and feminist perspective.

**Postcolonial and Feminist Approaches**

Much of the history of colonialism is fraught with Western domination (Narayan 1997). Historically, colonizers became the ruling class, while the colonized were left powerless with little to no autonomy. Presently, few countries still live under a situation of colonization, or, as the United nations defines them, non-self-governing territories. (UN 2015) Many countries, such as the U.S., England, France, Spain, Belgium and the Netherlands acquired and maintained colonies because of needed natural resources or strategic military location. In effect, they exploited the resources of their colonies and helped accumulate wealth for the upper classes. At some point in their history, colonies were granted independence but were unable to maintain a viable economy for various reasons, one of which was the fact that their resources had been taken from them. A negative effect of years of colonization followed by independence was that the newly independent countries became economically dependent. (Fanon, 2004).
A closer look at the relationship between colonial and postcolonial approaches encourages an examination of social phenomena taking into account the asymmetric power relations between the ruling class and the powerless people. In doing this, one needs to focus on the dynamic of international relations of nation-states and the relations of power within the states. Since the West is presented as a model of the natural way of life, its values are widespread worldwide. In addition, colonialism is also about the history of the creation of racial distinctions and oppressed populations (Narayan 1997). Hierarchy was set by the colonizer when the colonizer considered the colonized as inferior. Chandra Mohanty (2003) asserts that the colonial discourse defines the colonized people as incapable of self-governing and thus the colonial rule creates and “ideal imperial agent [that] embodie[s] authority, discipline, fidelity, devotion, [and] fortitude” (p.59). Hence, white men are seen as naturally born to rule. Race, ethnicity, sexuality, and class display the difference between the powerful, the colonizer, and the powerless, the colonized.

Some feminists have approached gender issues from postcolonial perspectives. Feminist theory centers on gender analysis. It addresses how women are oppressed because they are women. Feminist and postcolonial perspectives together focus on the “various ways in which women from different culture, ethnicities, races, and classes experience patriarchy and oppression” (Tong 2013:231). In order to grasp how women are oppressed it is important to pay attention to all the particular ways in which women from different cultures experience oppression. This is called intersectionality. Intersectionality encompasses the intersections of race, sex, gender, age, ethnicity, nationality and citizenship that together cause the oppression of women. As Patricia Hill Collins (2000) puts it “oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type and oppressions work together in producing injustice” (p.18). In developing countries injustice is seen as the result of inappropriate domestic policies. Nonetheless, in a global world ruled by capitalism, domestic policies are driven by imperialists’ interests.

The Mexican government adopted the neoliberal model driven by the West, which has increased income inequality within the country. The literature that presents Mexico as a failed state (Correa-Cabrera 2013, Grayson 2011) asserts that the increase of drug trade in Mexico is explained in terms of corruption and failed policies of the Mexican state. On the contrary, I argue that the violence which has exploded exponentially in Mexico is the result of the mistaken international policies of drug prohibition as well as the failure of the wealthiest countries to decrease the consumption of illicit drugs. In a hierarchical relation
where the colonizer, or imperialist, is superior to the colonized, it is better that developing countries pay the social costs that policies of prohibition produce. Today Mexico suffers the consequences the drug trade produces. Interestingly this drug trade is possible mainly due to a foreign demand of drugs. Mexico did not strengthen drug cartels by itself. Thus, it is essential to focus on the dynamics of Mexico and the U.S. The following section presents an analysis on how the US-led drug war is a new instrument of colonial practice.

The drug war as a colonial practice

Mexican economy has been stagnant under the neoliberal model. As a developing country heavily reliant on the U.S. market, Mexico’s sovereignty can be questioned. Some authors claim that the U.S. foreign drug policies have had negative effects for the consolidation of democracy in Mexico, and that Mexico and the U.S. were able to have a military relation due to the drug war (Francis and Mauser 2011; Freeman and Sierra 2005). Moreover, despite knowing the human rights violations and torture cases the Mexican police have committed, the U.S. continues to support the Mexican drug war and continues to train some Mexican officials (Chew 2014).

It is also suggested the military relationship these countries have, serves to keep NAFTA secure from the menace of popular mobilization (Mercille 2014; Morton 2012). Thus, in this way the U.S. maintains a sort of military intervention in Mexico. In case Mexican social movements escalated to violent riots throughout the country causing instability, the army backed by the U.S. will have the means to easily deter these riots. One historical example is, during the late 70s the U.S. knew about the corrupted practices within the intelligence units towards drug traffickers. However, the U.S. remained silence because these units were also fighting communists and left wing guerrillas in what was known as the ‘dirty war’ (Freeman and Sierra 2005). Therefore, it appears that during the cold war, the U.S. was more concerned in combatting Communists than drug traffickers. This may explain why the U.S. continues to support a Mexican strategy that is not succeeding in dismantling drug cartels.

Cooperation between the U.S. and Mexico to fight drug trafficking has been going on for decades. However, Mexico strongly felt the impacts of such cooperation after 2006 when violence in the country spiked at unprecedented levels. It became apparent that cartels were gaining strength and an increased power to corrupt the justice system, politicians and public servants (Hernández 2010; Mercille 2014; Ravelo 2013). It is known
that various members from the Revolutionary Institutional Party (PRI), the party that has mainly ruled Mexico since the 30s, has connections with drug kingpins. Bruce Bagley (2013) documents that the PRI “developed almost tributary relations” with drug cartels (p.114). Hence, in terms of battling organized crime, a strategy that does not account for undermining corruption within the state is doomed to failure. The support the U.S. offers to Mexico does not include a clearly defined strategy against corruption and corrupted high profile state officials.

The past decades in Mexican history have demonstrated that cartels are quite capable of co-opting officials at all levels, no matter how many new special anti-drug units appear. Following are some historical examples of this. In 1985, after the assassination of a DEA agent, Enrique Camarena, by a drug cartel, the Mexican government disbanded the Dirección Federal de Seguridad (Department of Federal Security) because of the connections some of its members had with drug traffickers. Later, under U.S. pressure, Mexico created special units to dismantled cartels. In 1988, it created the Instituto Nacional para el Combate a las drogas (National Institute to Combat Drug). This institute was dissolved under allegations that some of its members were part of the Juárez cartel narco payroll. It was replaced by the Fiscalía Especial para Atención a Delitos contra la Salud (Special Prosecutors for Crime Against Health). This unit of special prosecutors was subsequently replaced by the Agencia Federal de Investigación AFI (Federal Investigation Agency) in 2003, because it was discovered its members were extorting drug traffickers (Freeman and Sierra 2005). Another case of corruption involved the AFI, which was supposed to be a more specialized police unit for dealing with drug trafficking occurred. Thus, the AFI was disbanded in 2009. The current police unit specializing in drug trafficking is the Policía Federal Ministerial (Ministerial Federal Police).

It is clear that drug policies have had devastating outcomes. However, the government still maintains the prohibition strategy instead of moving towards more comprehensive reforms. Meanwhile, corrupted officials continue unabated, the cartels’ finances remain untouched, and the justice system remains un-reformed, current drug war policies will not succeed in eradicating the cartels and the drug problem. Thus, it is possible to conclude the U.S. has being using the drug war as a colonial practice that serves to intervene politically and militarily in Latin America.

Both the U.S. and Mexican government need to reevaluate the drug strategy and adopt a strategy that considers drug trade an issue of human security instead of national
Edgardo Buscaglia (2013) recommends using the human security approach proposed by the United Nations Development Program in 1994 in order to decrease organized crime. This approach centers the efforts in the individual well-being and not the state and its territory as the national security approach does.

Buscaglia also points out that Mexican politicians have not had the political will to fight organized crime. The main reason for this is that the ruling classes seem to enjoy an impunity from prosecution that stifles the will of anyone wishing to fight or expose them. Although Mexico is a democracy, it is an “elitist democracy” (Meyer 2013). In other words, the citizens elect their political officials. However, citizens’ votes count only when the competing forces have similar agendas, as in the case of the 2000 presidential election when the PRI allowed the Patido Acción Nacional (National Action Party) PAN presidential candidate Vicente Fox to take office. The 2006 PRI presidential candidate Roberto Madrazo claimed that former President Ernesto Zedillo (1994-2000) set up an agreement with the PAN and Vicente Fox to allow a peaceful succession in 2000 (Garrido 2008). This was not the first time that the Mexican people voted a party other than the PRI. Documentation exists that points to electoral fraud in the 1988 elections (Fish 2005). It is believed that Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas from the National Democratic Front NDF won the election. However, suspiciously, when the votes were counted and the NDF was winning, the system shut down suddenly. Later the PRI candidate was announced winner.

Other suspicions of fraud in presidential elections existed in 2006. Although some feel that the 2006 election had inconsistencies that did not constitute fraud (Aparicio 2009), others felt that the 2006 election was clearly a fraud (Díaz-Polanco 2012). Whether the 2006 election was a fraud or not, it was clear that the Mexican state supported the PAN candidate, Felipe Calderón at the time. Moreover, the Fox administration sought to derail the leftist leader Andrés Manuel López Obrador with several strategies such as corruption scandals, impeachment and more, even before he announced he was running for president (Meyer 2013).

These examples demonstrate that impunity is not unique to the drug war in Mexico, but Mexican political figures have been empowered by impunity to keep their hold on power in ways that are highly suspect. Hence, the question is, how authentic is a drug strategy that was launched by a president who achieved the presidency because weak democratic institutions legitimated his winning in 2006. In other words, why would Felipe Calderón be interested in battling corruption and strengthening institutions when he
himself benefited from corruption and weak institutions to achieve the presidency? In order to battle drug cartels from the perspective of prohibition it is necessary to undermine corruption, strengthen institutions and follow the rule of law. If the rule of law had been present in 2006, the results of the 2006 election would have been negated due to abundant evidence that pointed to fraud (Diaz Polanco 2012).

Drug war impact on women

As mentioned previously, the Mexican policy started in 2006 of direct confrontation between the state and drug cartels caused drug cartels to venture into other criminal activities in order to increase their power. Among these criminal activities were kidnappings and human trafficking. Human trafficking and kidnappings struck women, especially poor women, with severity.

The Global Report of Trafficking in Persons reports that women and children are more vulnerable than adult males to become victims of human trafficking. 75% to 80% of trafficking victims are women (UNODC, 2012). Human trafficking is considered a contemporary form of slavery because people are exploited by forcing them to work against their will. Although the work may be some form of labor, it is also sex. In the case of sex, women are more likely to be sexually exploited than men. The Regional Coalition Against Trafficking in Women and Girls in Latin America and the Caribbean (CATWLAC) (2012) stresses that it is difficult to obtain accurate statistics of this form of slavery. However, they assert that in Mexico, trafficking in women for sex is one of the activities of drug cartels. Besides sexual slavery, CATWLAC asserts that drug cartels forced women to become, drug couriers, watchers or lookouts, and assassins.

Most of the victims of human trafficking in Mexico are Guatemalans (UNODC 2012). This follows the general pattern that the UNODC report describes. That is, the victims come from poorer countries and end up in wealthier neighboring countries. Thus, in Mexico, Central American migrants are recruited for this trafficking networks operated by drug cartels. The U.S. Department of State Trafficking in Persons Report (2014) has confirmed that organized criminal groups have forced migrants to work in the production, transportation and sale of drugs. It is estimated that at least 47 Mexican criminal organizations are in the business of trafficking in persons (Flores 2014). The profit to the drug cartels from human trafficking in 2012 was $10 billion (Cota 2013).
Due to its border with the U.S., Mexico is a country of transit for migrants coming from Central America or other parts of the world. It is estimated that hundreds of thousands of undocumented migrants transit Mexico to reach the U.S. every year (Vogt 2013). However, there is not accurate data on the exact number of migrants transiting Mexico without a visa. Undocumented migrants seek to hide from immigration authorities and thus are not registered on their entrance into Mexico. The most common transportation used by undocumented migrants is the freight train. Because of the abuses suffered by undocumented migrants who use this form of transportation, the train has been given the name, La Bestia (The Beast.)

Women who use La Bestia as their mode of transportation to reach the U.S. are usually raped or abducted for the purpose of being exploited sexually. Amnesty International (2010) estimates that out of the total of undocumented migrants going through Mexico via the freight train, one fifth are women and young girls. Moreover, human trafficking networks capture six out of every ten female migrants (UNODC 2014b). Amnesty International and media have documented life stories of women who have being sexually assaulted in their journey through Mexico (Amnesty International 2012; Mariscal 2011; Mariscal 2014).

Andrea Smith (2005) claims that women who are considered “dirty” are labeled as “rapable.” Smith points out that sexual abuse of native women, prostitutes and migrant women crossing the U.S.–Mexican border are rarely prosecuted. Thus, poor women are targeted as “rapable.” Undocumented migrants are poor people with few opportunities in their countries of residence. They reside at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder. Therefore, they become even more vulnerable to state abuses or trafficking gangs while they are moving through countries that do not guarantee their rights as in the case of Mexico.

Feminists have warned about the sexual objectification of women and have argued that male dominance is sexual. Catharine MacKinnon (1989) asserts “all women live all the time under the shadow of the threat of sexual abuse” (p.149). Thus, when social conditions become more dangerous the intersection of gender, nationality, race and class turn women into an easy target for organized crime. Drug cartels find it easier to harass people who are invisible for the state.
One of the main reasons Mexico is not capable of responding effectively against organized crime is impunity. The UNODC National Diagnosis of Trafficking in Persons Mexico (2014) reports that in Mexico many crimes are not reported to police because people are afraid of organized crime intimidation and revenge. Impunity at every level of the Mexican political hierarchy and intimidation from cartels are quite effective at stopping people from reporting crime. This report highlights that most of the human trafficking cases reported in Mexico come from states with less presence of crime related to drug cartels. Therefore, if crime is ignored, strategies and interventions to end such activities become non-existent. This is beneficial for criminal organizations.

Corruption within the police departments also fosters people mistrust in the judicial system. Indeed, corruption creates weaker institutions. Thus, this environment of impunity where judicial institutions do not ensure citizens safety breeds more crime. One example is the number of femicides—femicide refers to homicide of women—that have occurred in Mexico in the past decade. As violence spiked throughout the country femicides have spiked as well. Since 2006, femicides rose 40%. It is estimated 6.4 women are murdered in Mexico everyday; just in 2010 there were 2335 femicides. The northern state of Chihuahua has a femicide rate of 34.73 per 100,000 people. In this state the femicide rate rose 877% from 2006 to 2010 (UN women 2012).

It is also noteworthy that in some cases women just disappear and their bodies are never found. During Calderon’s administration 26,121 people went missing (Torres 2013). Out of this total women account for 6,385. Missing women are usually younger than missing men. The average age of the female victims is 21 years old while disappeared men average age is 29 years old (Merino, Zarkin and Fierro 2015)–however, one needs to be cautious with these numbers because they change depending on the source.

Women have also joined to cartels voluntary. However, they are more likely than men to be imprisoned for drug offenses. 80% of women in prisons is due to drug crimes, compare to 57.6% of men (Turkewitz 2014). The rate of women incarcerated rose 400% between 2007 and 2011. Women who join the cartels are usually poor. Some of them decided just to transport a pack of drugs in order to get some money to feed their families and they got caught (Turkewitz 2014).

In short, the Mexican case demonstrates that the consequences of the drug war are gendered, and race and class also play a role on who is more likely to become the target of
collateral damages. The Mexican state is sunk in an environment of impunity, which makes women and girls more vulnerable to become the target of murder and sexual crimes or be recruited to serve as mules or scapegoats.

Concluding remarks

Social inequalities, economic policies, and lack of policies to undermine corruption are part of the reason why Mexican drug trafficking has not decreased. This essay attempted to examine the Mexican drug war strategy from a postcolonial and feminist perspective. In so doing, it was highlighted that the Mexican drug trade supplies 16 percent of Americans. In addition, Mexico was examined in relation to the U.S.-led war on drugs in Latin America and its economic dependency on the U.S. consumption. It was also documented how NAFTA has maintained Mexican economy stagnant leaving many Mexicans with few job opportunities other than joining the drug cartels.

Through a feminist postcolonial lens this paper highlights that the U.S.-led drug war in Mexico is a new mode of colonial practice that affects people differently according to the intersection of their sex, gender, race and class. Consequently, the collateral damages of the drug war are gendered. The impacts have struck women differently from men. The femicide rate in Mexico rose 40% since 2007. Moreover, women have become more vulnerable to become the target of rape, kidnapping and human trafficking. And even though men engage more often with drug cartels women are more likely to go to jail for drug offenses.

Despite the consumption of drugs has not decreased in North America, the U.S. and Mexican governments perpetuate the status quo and do not seem to undertake a different path from prohibition policies. Perhaps this is because ultimately the drug war serves as a vehicle to maintain some sort of control politically and militarily in Latin America. Hence, as researchers it is our duty to properly document the effects of the U.S. led War on Drugs on Mexico.
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- 46 -


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