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# AFGHAN WOMEN



## and the Opiate Trade

**AOTP**  
Afghan Opiate  
Trade Project

**UNODC**  
Research

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## Introduction

For nearly two decades, Afghanistan has been the major source of the world's illicit opium production. While there has been considerable research on opiate production in Afghanistan, there are few detailed studies on how opiate manufacture or trafficking occurs in Afghanistan, and no dedicated study on women's involvement in these areas. In 2020, UNODC produced a report based on interviews with active male Afghan drug traffickers – *Quchaqbar* in Dari/Farsi – who were directly involved in the trafficking of opiates in Afghanistan and abroad.<sup>1</sup> Accessing women traffickers – or *Quchaqbar zan* in Dari/Farsi- in the cultural environment of Afghanistan was challenging, and the initial assumption was that women had little role to play in the opiate trade, beyond cultivating, harvesting opium and anecdotal evidence of female drug mules. However, in the 2020 study, many male traffickers commented that Afghan women's involvement in the opiate trade had increased in the five years from 2015 to 2020, and that women performed many roles in the business.<sup>2</sup> To better understand the role of Afghan women in opiate trade in Afghanistan, the UNODC's Afghan Opiate Trade Project initiated the current study, utilising a similar methodology to interview Afghan women.

The nine interviews featured in this study were conducted in June 2022, following the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021, an event which has profoundly altered the lives of women and girls, including those interviewed in this study<sup>3,4</sup>. The collapse of the Afghan economy and the subsequent humanitarian crisis have taken a significant toll on the Afghan population, with women and girls facing additional burdens, and are particularly vulnerable to economic shocks.<sup>5</sup> A lack of alternative licit employment, food insecurity and poverty have been identified as drivers for engagement in opiate trafficking by male traffickers. Millions of Afghan women and girls are internally displaced, and many have had to flee the country.

At the time of writing, the de facto authorities have introduced a ban on opium poppy cultivation, the impact of which remains to be seen. Reports from Afghanistan indicate that, since August 2021, the Taliban have escalated restrictions on women in the regions of Afghanistan that they have taken over and which do not have a strong historical association with the organisation (generally Central, Western, Northern and North-Eastern Afghanistan). This includes, but is not limited to, closing schools for girls, banning women from travelling alone (without a male companion), and imposing restrictions in workplaces.<sup>6</sup>

The study is predominately qualitative and used a semi-structured interview questionnaire to interview nine Afghan women in and outside Afghanistan, exploring their role and involvement in the drug trade, motivations for entering and remaining in the trade, the business model and drug trafficking networks. The report also draws upon secondary data from multiple sources, including UNODC's previous research, publications and academic literature on women's involvement in drug trafficking at a global level.

Previous studies of women involved in drug trafficking, have largely been based around interviews with prison inmates convicted for drug related offences. As with the interviews with male traffickers in 2020, the interviews with Afghan women traffickers in this study, are based on active or former traffickers who are not in prison or who have not been brought into contact with the criminal justice system. To the best of our knowledge no such interviews with this segment of the population have ever been done in the context of Afghanistan and the region.

1 UNODC, *Voices of the Quchaqbar* 2020 [https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/AOTP/AOTP\\_Voices\\_of\\_Quchaqbar\\_2020\\_web.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/AOTP/AOTP_Voices_of_Quchaqbar_2020_web.pdf)

2 Ibid.

3 Refugees International, "Now there is nothing safe A roadmap for investing in Afghan women and girls," April 2022, <https://www.refugeesinternational.org/reports/2022/3/30/now-there-is-nothing-safe-a-roadmap-for-investing-in-afghan-women-and-girls>

4 Interviews 1-9

5 Refugees International, "Now there is nothing safe A roadmap for investing in Afghan women and girls," April 2022, <https://www.refugeesinternational.org/reports/2022/3/30/now-there-is-nothing-safe-a-roadmap-for-investing-in-afghan-women-and-girls>

6 UN Women Gender Alert 1: "Women's rights in Afghanistan. Where are we now?" December 2021. <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2021-12/Gender-alert-Womens-rights-in-Afghanistan-en.pdf>



## Contribution to the SDG and Strategy for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women

This report provides research that supports the implementation of several Sustainable Development Goals:



### No Poverty.

Poverty has many dimensions, but its causes include unemployment, social exclusion, and high vulnerability of certain populations to disasters, diseases and other phenomena which

prevent them from being productive. All the women traffickers in this report stated that they started, and remained, in the illicit drug trade to earn money, with a few specifically mentioning a lack of legal alternative employment opportunities. The link between drug trafficking and poverty is complex and can only be understood if multiple social and economic factors are considered. In the Afghan context it is important to keep in mind that women face additional restrictions and barriers in terms of access to education and to the licit economy, which hinders their ability to escape poverty.



### Gender Equality.

Ending all discrimination against women and girls is not only a basic human right, but also crucial for a sustainable future; it is proven that empowering women and girls helps

economic growth and development. All the women interviewed for this report stressed the challenges and difficulties women face in Afghanistan in every aspect of their lives, including with the opiate trade. The arrival of the Taliban has been a major setback for women's rights in Afghanistan. Within the opiate trade women reported a degree of equality, in that they were free to decide how to spend the funds obtained from trafficking.



### Decent work and economic growth.

In the face of the current economic, financial and humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan, the reconstruction of the country and the economy is an

imperative objective to enable the population to live in dignity and to be able to access decent work and safe and secure working environments. As with male traffickers, women traffickers reported that they entered the drug trade because of a lack of licit opportunities. Women may be pushed further into the illicit economy, including the opiate trade, if continued restrictions on women's participation in work remains curtailed.



### Peace, justice and strong institutions.

Corruption, bribery, theft and tax evasion remain a considerable concern in Afghanistan. Among the institutions most affected by corruption are the

judiciary and police. The rule of law and development have a significant interrelation and are mutually reinforcing, making it essential for sustainable development at the national and international level. This report illustrates how the opiate trade continues to be part of the Afghan economy under the Taliban and how it contributes to undermines the rule of law within Afghanistan.

Within the framework of the **Strategy for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (2022–2026)**, UNODC strives to ensure and promote the effective mainstreaming of gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls throughout its normative, research and technical assistance work. UNODC aims to strengthen knowledge and capacities for mainstreaming gender equality and human rights principles to ensure that policies and programmes address and prioritize the needs of those who are furthest behind. The objective of this study is to provide insights into Afghan women's experiences within the illicit drug trade based on their own accounts in order to inform policies and other interventions. A comprehensive strategy to reducing drug supply needs to consider the experiences and motivation of women involved in the opiate trade and address the needs of this neglected population.

## Key Findings

**The nine interviewed women are involved in a range of activities in the illicit opiate trade and often perform multiple roles, with trafficking outside Afghanistan and selling to users most frequently identified in interviews.**

- › Based on the interviews, transporting opiates outside of the country and retail distribution were the two most frequently listed activities by women, followed by taking care of inventories and morphine and heroin production. Women are also involved in various other roles, including gathering intelligence and recruitment.

**The interviewed women entered the illicit opiate trade for a combination of economic and social reasons while their continued engagement can be primarily explained by financial motives.**

- › Seven women had multiple reasons for joining the opiate trade. Earning an income and the involvement of family members were cited as reasons for entering the illicit opiate trade. None of the women explicitly mentioned coercion or deception as motives for joining, although some mentioned family pressure. Once women become involved, the reasons cited for remaining in the drug trade were economic rather than social.

**The income earned from the opiate trade provided the interviewed women with a degree of independence as they directly managed the money themselves and used it primarily for family expenses and savings.**

- › All the women interviewed declared that they directly managed their own earnings from the opiate trade, except one who managed the money together with her husband. For all of them, it was their main source of income, or a significant part of their overall income. All the women used the money for family expenses and savings. The women interviewed were able to save a share of their income. Some also invested the money in property, gold or jewellery. Two women funded the drug use of their family members.

**Family-based Drug Trafficking Organizations (DTOs) are an important aspect of Afghan women's involvement in the opiate trade. Women rely on male relatives or a trusted male trafficker to gain access to opiates and DTOs.**

- › As contacts with men outside of their families were limited, the women interviewed often worked with one trusted male trafficker. The person, referred to as a 'good man', could be a family friend, a neighbour and in one case a married couple, with whom over time the women had built relationships of trust. This also corroborates previous UNODC research findings on the importance of family based DTOs in Afghanistan. Some of the women saw themselves as working with a network rather than within one.

**The interviewed women generally remain on the periphery of the DTO and reported that they were unable to rise in the hierarchy due to their gender.**

- › The barriers women face within Afghan society appear to be reflected in the opiate trade. Within DTOs, women's contacts with men other than family members or the trusted male focal point are restricted or non-existent, and the women interviewed remained confined to the lower levels of DTO hierarchies, with the notable exception of two small retail networks led by women identified during interviews. Unlike in other parts of the world, the interviewed women did not think Afghan women could rise to the top levels of drug trafficking networks within Afghanistan.

**The interviewed women took advantage of opportunities linked to social and cultural perceptions but also to their skills and strengths.**

- › Six of the women interviewed said that it was easier for them as women to transport, traffic and distribute opiates. Three women indicated that the police or border guards do not search women. Women cannot be checked by men in the Afghan context, while men are often solely responsible for operating checkpoints. Although confined hierarchically, women's roles and related income can evolve to some extent over time as they gain expertise and experience.

### Lack of drug use by the women interviewed.

- › As the interviewed women did not report starting to use any type of drugs after entering the drug trade. Most respondents, however, reported drug use within their families, referring only to male relatives.

### Gender-based violence is perpetrated by drug users in the family.

- › The prevalence of gender-based violence (GBV) is difficult to estimate, as it may be underreported particularly in the context of Afghanistan. According to the Demographic Health Surveys latest research, 50.8 per cent of women experienced physical and/or sexual violence by an inmate partner in their lifetime.<sup>7</sup> Three respondents indicated having experienced GBV. All the three victims also reported drug use within their families and in all the cases, the perpetrator of the violence was a drug user. In addition, six women indicated that the drug trade has an impact on women's experience of GBV.

### The impact of the Taliban takeover on the drug trade and women's involvement remains uncertain.

- › The respondents' assessment of the impact of the Taliban on women in the drug trade was mixed: some respondents left the drug trade due to the new restrictions - particularly those related to the free movement of women. One woman reported a decrease in her income, while others stated that drug trafficking had actually become easier under the new government. As women lose their right to work and to earn an income in the licit economy and as the economic situation of the country deteriorates, women will be pushed further into poverty and desperation, which may increase their reliance on the illicit economy.

### Further research is required into various aspects of Afghan women's involvement in the opiate trade.

- › The objective of this study was to provide an insight into the experiences of a neglected and under-researched population, and it highlighted knowledge gaps related to the scale of women's involvement in the opiate trade, as well as the impact of the opiate trade on women's lives and livelihoods. The scale of women's involvement remains an open question. Further research would also be required to fully understand the impact of the drug trade on women's lives, especially in light of the Taliban's take-over of the country. In addition, Afghan women's experience of the criminal justice system was not part of this research and should be explored further in the context of the Afghan opiate trade.

### Sample size and study plan

The study was designed in early 2021 and the initial plan involved interviewing up to 20 Afghan women, including active traffickers and detainees charged with drug trafficking related offenses. These interviews would have covered several Afghan provinces including Nimruz, Kandahar, Zaranj, Nangarhar, Kabul and Badakhshan.

The former Afghan government granted permission to carry out the study at the end of April 2021. Female Afghan experts were hired to conduct the interviews, however, the worsening security situation from May onwards and the change of government in Afghanistan in August 2021 made this impossible due to safety concerns, but also because the new Taliban regime released all prisoners, including women charged with drug trafficking offenses. The data collection plan therefore had to be revised and the data collection had to be delayed until a time where the safety of interviewers and interviewees could be guaranteed. In June 2022, 9 women currently or previously active in the drug trade were interviewed and their responses provide the backbone of the study.

7 UNFPA, retrieved from <https://asiapacific.unfpa.org/knownvaw-data> and the Demographic Health Surveys Programme (DHS) retrieved from [https://dhsprogram.com/Countries/Country-Main.cfm?ctry\\_id=0&ctry\\_c=AF#](https://dhsprogram.com/Countries/Country-Main.cfm?ctry_id=0&ctry_c=AF#) accessed on 13 August 2022





## Methodology

This study investigates Afghan women's role and involvement in the drug trade. The study is predominately qualitative, and a semi-structured interview questionnaire was utilized to interview nine Afghan women in Afghanistan and outside, through a snowballing method. The initial female respondents were introduced by one of the male traffickers interviewed in previous AOTP work. Of the interviews, including one in-depth follow-up interview, six were conducted face to face and four online. The interview questionnaire is available upon request from AOTP from the contact details at the front of this report.

Before developing the semi-structured questionnaire, a comprehensive literature review was conducted to understand the nature and extent of the role of Afghan women in opiate trafficking. The literature review findings indicated a lack of empirical research of a similar nature in the last few decades in the context of Afghanistan. The major research limitations relate to the small number of women interviewed that prevent generalization in the national context. But the findings of these interviews provide a unique fresh and recent understanding of Afghan women's role in opiate trafficking and highlight areas that would benefit from further analysis.

The face-to-face interviews were conducted in two major cities in Afghanistan, while the remote interviews were conducted using a secure online application. Both the face-to-face and remote interviews were conducted by a female interviewer and men were not present during the interviews. The women outside Afghanistan and interviewed online, were located in European and North American cities at the time of interviews. As with the interviews in Afghanistan, the interviewer was female and no males were present during the interviews.

The data collection instrument included sets of open-ended and closed-ended questions regarding the socio-demographic characteristics of the women, their involvement and role in the drug trade, their motivations for entering and remaining in the drug trade, the business model and drug trafficking networks. Specific questions were also asked, to understand their experience about gender-based violence and drug use. Local, cultural, and subject-sensitive concerns were considered when questions were designed, while also ensuring confidentiality and anonymity and giving the respondents the freedom to respond/not respond to each question.

Participation in the research was entirely voluntary. The respondents were informed about their right to withdraw from the research at any stage without any explanation. They were also informed that they were not obligated to answer any or all the questions. The respondents were further briefed on the research objectives, and upon their verbal consent, the interview was started. The interviews lasted around half an hour each. The respondents were not remunerated for participating in the interviews.

### Limitations

This qualitative study is not meant to be representative of the overall Afghan female population engaged in the drug trade and is not intended to provide a comprehensive overview of their experiences. Given the lack of existing research and previous engagement with Afghan women involved in opiate trafficking, this study provides valuable insights into the experiences and challenges faced by a vulnerable, hard to reach and understudied population, albeit on a small scale. No prior reference studies were available on Afghan women and opiate trafficking and the challenges involved in engaging with female traffickers were further complicated by the Taliban takeover.

Given the sensitivity of the topic and the fact that the women were discussing personal experiences in the context of illicit activities, the themes and questions had to be approached with great care. The research did not focus primarily on gender-based violence and it did not include standard survey modules to assess physical and sexual violence. As a result, findings on gender-based violence should be used with caution and as a general point of departure for understanding the possible links between gender-based violence and drugs.

## Global overview: women in the illicit drug trade

Globally the illegal drug trade is a largely male-run domain. Based on the latest available data, of the 88 countries and territories that provided data to UNODC, disaggregated by sex in 2020 the share of women brought into contact with the criminal justice system for drug trafficking offences globally was 10 per cent. However, this varied widely, from less than 1 per cent to 40 per cent depending on the countries, with several countries reporting a proportion of between 7 and 16 per cent.<sup>8</sup>

Much of the research conducted on the illegal drug trade focusses on the ways in which men engage in the many dimensions of drug-related activities worldwide or omits consideration of gender perspectives. Women are mostly believed to play a minor role in illegal drug operations, mostly involved at lower levels, and are usually portrayed as victims in this male-dominated arena.<sup>9</sup>

This section of the report presents an overview of the information available on women at various levels of the drug trade at a global level based on existing literature: from crop cultivation and drug production to the trafficking of drugs to intermediary positions and finally, positions of leadership. This is followed by a discussion on the factors that drive and/or motivate women to engage in the illegal drug trade. The conclusion summarises the key findings and presents the many questions that remain unaddressed in the literature.

8 UNODC, Member State responses to the ARQ 2020

9 Adler, Patricia. 1993. *Wheeling and Dealing: An Ethnography of an Upper-Level Drug Dealing and Smuggling Community*. New York: Columbia University Press; Bourgois, Philippe. 1995. *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio*. New York: Cambridge University Press; Council on Hemispheric Affairs. "The rise of femicide and women in drug trafficking." 28 October 2011; Maher, Lisa and Kathleen Daly. 1996. "Women in the Street-Level Drug Economy: Continuity or Change?" *Criminology* 34: 465-491; Maher, Lisa. 1997. *Sexed Work: Gender, Race, and Resistance in a Brooklyn Drug Market*. Oxford, UK: Clarendon; Siebert, Renate. 1996. *Secrets of Life and Death: Women and the Mafia*. Translated by Liz Heron. New York: Verso; B. Stevenson (2011) Policy, criminal justice and mass imprisonment. Working paper prepared for the first meeting of the commission Geneva. Global Commission on Drug Policies; Camille Stengel and Jennifer Fleetwood. August 2014. "Developing drug policy: gender matters." GDPO Situation Analysis. Swansea, United Kingdom, Global Drug Policy Observatory.

## Women in illicit crop cultivation and drug production

Research shows that women can play an important role in illicit crop cultivation and drug production in different regions. In the cultivation of opium poppy in Afghanistan, women and children provide unpaid labour in a large variety of labour-intensive activities which include weeding and clearing fields, lancing and breaking opium poppy capsules to remove and clean seeds, and preparing opium gum.<sup>10</sup> Similarly in South America, women engage in the cultivation and harvesting of coca leaf.<sup>11</sup> For the cultivation of cannabis in Southern Africa, older women and housewives are reported to have both supportive and managerial positions.<sup>12</sup>

In synthetic drug manufacture, a study has shown that women can also be involved in synthesizing methamphetamine. Methamphetamine "cooks" are highly valued and are commonly believed to be male. However, in the United States, women have been found to perform the role of both "cooks" and "shoppers"<sup>13</sup>, with the latter purchasing or obtaining supplies for manufacture.<sup>14</sup> A survey conducted in the United States of America showed that in 40 per cent of the dismantled methamphetamine laboratory cases, the arrested women had been directly involved in the manufacture, sale or use of methamphetamine.<sup>15</sup>

## Women in drug trafficking

When it comes to drug trafficking compared to drug production or manufacture, much of the literature on women relates to their role as "drug mules". Indeed, women seem greatly present in this form of drug trafficking. Even so, women also occupy various intermediary positions of drug trafficking and more rarely positions of leadership.

10 Women also produce the by-products of opium, such as oil and soap. For more information see: UNODC. *World Drug Report 2018*. "Booklet 5", June 2018, p. 24; UNODC. *World Drug Report 2016*, p. 24; United Nations system task force on transnational organized crime and drug trafficking as threats to security and stability. 2014. "A gender perspective on the impact of drug use, the drug trade, and drug control regimes." Policy Brief.

11 Washington Office on Latin America and others. 2016. "Women, Drug Policies, and Incarceration: A Guide for Policy Reform in Latin America and the Caribbean", p. 29; UNODC. *World Drug Report 2016*, p. 24-25.

12 Annette Hübschle. 2014. "Of bogus hunters, queenpins and mules: the varied roles of women in transnational organized crime in Southern Africa." *Trends in Organized Crime* 17: 31-51.

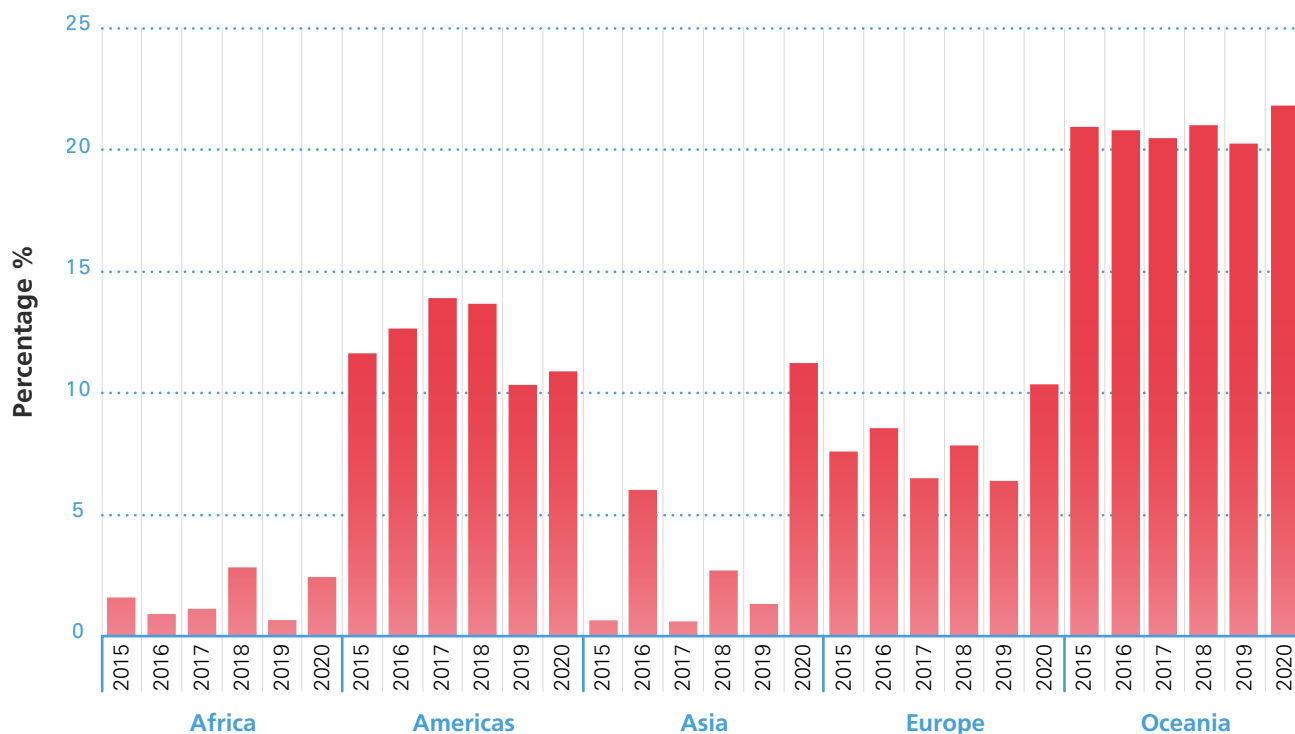
13 "Shoppers" purchase or obtain supplies for synthetic drug manufacture.

14 Robert Jenkot (2008) "'Cooks are like gods': hierarchies in methamphetamine-producing groups." *Deviant Behavior* 29(8): 667-689.

15 UNODC. *World Drug Report 2018*. "Booklet 5", June 2018, p. 25.



**FIG. 1** Proportion of women among those brought in contact with the criminal justice system who are suspected of drug trafficking offences (2015-2020), by region, for any illicit drug.



Source: UNODC responses to the annual report questionnaire (2015-2020).

### Drug “mules”

Particularly in Latin America, a large numbers of studies have been conducted analysing female drug “mules”<sup>16</sup> and courier.<sup>17</sup> This position tends to represent the lowest level in the drug supply chain, and women and girls doing these low-paid jobs can easily be replaced should they be arrested.<sup>18</sup> In Latin America and South-

ern Africa, female drug “mules” can also act as decoys to detract attention from larger drug smuggling activities carried out by traffickers at international borders.<sup>19</sup> In the context of cocaine trafficking, women reportedly smuggle drugs at the national and international levels together with men, but smuggling drugs to prisons is undertaken almost solely by women.<sup>20</sup>

In other parts of the world, women are also frequently employed to transport drugs. For instance, there have been reports in Western Africa of women living with HIV or other diseases recruited as drug “mules”, as authorities may prefer to deport them rather bring them into the criminal justice system and provide them with health care; officials may also be afraid of becoming infected.<sup>21</sup> Some drug trafficking networks in Africa reportedly targeted female students and workers from Vietnam and

16 Most of the “mules” arrested have quantities of one to two kilos, hidden in their luggage or often carried in their own bodies, after ingesting capsules full of the drug or inserting “eggs” filled with the drug inside their vagina: WOLA, Washington Office on Latin America and others. 2016. “Women, Drug Policies, and Incarceration: A Guide for Policy Reform in Latin America and the Caribbean,” p. 21.

17 Inter-American Commission of Women and Organization of American States. 2014. “Women and drugs in the Americas: a policy working paper.” Washington, D.C.; Washington Office on Latin America and others. 2016. “Women, Drug Policies, and Incarceration: A Guide for Policy Reform in Latin America and the Caribbean,” p. 10; UNODC. 2017. “Personas privadas de libertad por Delitos de Drogas en Panamá: Enfoque socio-jurídico del diferencial por género en la Administración de la Justicia Penal”; Corina Giacomello. 2018. “Women, drug offenses and penitentiary systems in Latin America.” Briefing Paper. London: International Drug Policy Consortium. Fleetwood, J. (2014). Drug mules: Women in the international cocaine trade. Springer.

18 “Mujeres en prisión: los alcances del castigo.” 2011. Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales, Ministry of Defense. Office of the Federal Prison Ombudsperson; Lisa Maher and Susan L. Hudson. 2007. “Women in the drug economy: a metasynthesis of the qualitative literature.” *Journal of Drug Issues* 37(4): 805–826.

19 Annette Hübschle. 2014. “Of bogus hunters, queenpins and mules: the varied roles of women in transnational organized crime in Southern Africa.” *Trends in Organized Crime* 17: 31–51; UNODC. 2017. “Personas privadas de libertad por Delitos de Drogas en Panamá: Enfoque socio-jurídico del diferencial por género en la Administración de la Justicia Penal.”

20 UNODC, *Women in the cocaine supply chain*, Cocaine Insights 3, UNODC, Vienna, March 2022

21 Hai Thanh Luong (2015) “Transnational drugs trafficking from West Africa to Southeast Asia: a case study of Vietnam.” *Journal of Law and Criminal Justice* 3(2).

the Philippines to serve as drug couriers.<sup>22</sup> In Bangladesh, other trafficking networks have hired women and children to carry heroin and bottles of phensedyl, a codeine based cough syrup, from India.<sup>23</sup> Also, in China, women have been involved in cross-border heroin trafficking activities and heroin sales as couriers or mules.<sup>24</sup> In Europe, Albanian criminal networks employed “madams” at brothels in Belgium, usually women with EU passports, to act as drug couriers to transport cocaine from Belgium and the Netherlands to Italy.<sup>25</sup>

### Intermediary and leading roles

Studies from across the world, demonstrate that women can also play a role in intermediary positions. In Norway, “successful” women drug dealers have been found to establish themselves in an area dominated by men by desexualizing themselves and maintaining a violent posture whilst remaining emotionally detached and professional.<sup>26</sup> In analysing the traits of “successful” female drug dealers selling amphetamines, heroin or cannabis in Australia, another study has shown that women can adopt kin or kin-like relations in order to be successful, as well as ensuring a good reputation, trust and reliability.<sup>27</sup>

Overall, the intermediary drug trafficking responsibilities of women can be highly diverse. In Southern Africa, male and female “agents” both ensure the transportation of cannabis to strategic locations or to final consumer markets in urban centres.<sup>28</sup> Whereas in Mexico, women in the Tijuana cartel were found to have been operating and managing key functions related to drug related money-laundering.<sup>29</sup> Also in Mexico, there have

been reports in the media of women taking an operational or tactical role within drug organizations by leading and participating in kidnappings, torture and assassinations.<sup>30</sup> In Trinidad and Tobago, women reportedly assisted drug leaders by acting as financial controllers, supervising drug selling or being personally involved in small-scale drug dealing and selling.<sup>31</sup> Additionally, women in leading positions have recruited other female couriers through coercion, intimidation or financial compensation.<sup>32</sup> In the United States, female “crack” cocaine dealers reportedly ran “house connections” in New York in the 1990s, selling among the non-stereotypical, “hidden” population of employed users; with one dealer offering her apartment to her clients to help them manage the effects of the drug and helping them oversee their finances.<sup>33</sup>

Women have sometimes been arrested when drug trafficking operations have been dismantled by the authorities. For instance, in 1992, 15 Ghanaian men and women residents in the Netherlands were arrested when a Ghanaian ring was uncovered in Amsterdam. The traffickers had transported 50 kilograms of cocaine and heroin from Ghana and Thailand to Europe, the United States, and Canada, with Amsterdam as their base.<sup>34</sup> In China, women have also appeared in the press on stories relating to official drug seizures and arrests.<sup>35</sup>

Although some women have attained positions of leadership in drug trafficking organisations, the numbers tend to be few and have been uncovered in few geographical locations, mainly in Latin America, Africa, and the United States. In Latin America, powerful

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22 Hai Thanh Luong (2015) “Transnational drugs trafficking from West Africa to Southeast Asia: a case study of Vietnam.” *Journal of Law and Criminal Justice* 3(2), p. 40.

23 Pushpita Das (May 2012) “Drug trafficking in India: a case for border security.” Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses. IDSA Occasional Paper No. 24; “Children used for smuggling across India-Bangladesh border.” *Deccan Chronicle*. Murshidabad. April 22, 2011. At <https://www.deccanherald.com/content/155700/children-used-smuggling-across-india.html>.

24 Ko-Lin Chin and Sheldon X. Zhang (2015). *The Chinese Heroin Trade: Cross Border Drug Trafficking and Beyond*. New York and London: New York University Press, p. 182-185.

25 Arsovska, J., and Janssens, S. (2009) “Policing and Human Trafficking: Good and Bad Practices.” In C. Friesendorf (Ed.) *Strategies Against Human Trafficking: The Role of the Security Sector*. Vienna: National Defence Academy and Austrian Ministry of Defence and Sport: 169–211.

26 Heidi Grundetjern and Sveinung Sandberg (2012) “Dealing with a gendered economy: female drug dealers and street capital.” *European Journal of Criminology* 9(6): 621–635.

27 Barbara Denton and Pat O’Malley (Autumn 1999) “Gender, trust and business. women drug dealers in the illicit economy.” *British Journal of Criminology* 39(4): 513–530.

28 Annette Hübschle (2014) “Of bogus hunters, queenpins and mules: the varied roles of women in transnational organized crime in Southern Africa.” *Trends in Organized Crime* 17: 31–51.

29 Louise Shelley (September 2012) “The relationship of drug and human trafficking: a global perspective.” *European Journal on*

*Criminal Policy and Research* 18(3), p. 244; UNODC. *World Drug Report 2018*. “Booklet 5”, June 2018, p. 25-28.

30 Elena Azaola and others. “What roles are women playing in Mexico’s drug war?”, Inter-American Dialogue. 25 August 2011; Amanda Woods. “Cartel assassin ‘La Catrina’ shot dead by cops in Mexico.” *New York Post*. January 14, 2020.

31 Inter-American Commission of Women and Organization of American States. 2014. “Women and drugs in the Americas: a policy working paper.” Washington, D.C.

32 Inter-American Commission of Women and Organization of American States. 2014. “Women and drugs in the Americas: a policy working paper.” Washington, D.C.

33 Bruce D. Johnson, Eloise Dunlap and Sylvie C. Tourigny (2000) “Crack distribution and abuse in New York.” *Crime Prevention Studies* 11, p.36; Eloise Dunlap, Bruce D. Johnson and Lisa Maher (1997) “Female crack sellers in New York City: who they are and what they do.” *Women and Criminal Justice* 8(4): 25–55; Lisa Maher and Kathleen Daly (November 1996) “Women in the street-level drug economy: continuity or change?” *Criminology* 34(4): 465–491; Furst, R. Terry, Richard S. Curtis, Bruce D. Johnson and Douglas S. Goldsmith (2001) “The Rise of the Middleman/Woman in a Declining Drug Market.” *Addiction Research* 7(2): 103–28.

34 Emmanuel Akyeampong (July 2005) “Diaspora and drug trafficking in West Africa: a case study of Ghana.” *African Affairs* 104 (416): 429–447.

35 Ko-Lin Chin and Sheldon X. Zhang (2015). *The Chinese Heroin Trade: Cross Border Drug Trafficking and Beyond*. New York and London: New York University Press, p. 173.

female leaders of drug trafficking organisations have recently become known as “*drug queens*”. For example, a reading of court cases and relevant literature shows that some women have held high-ranking positions, including cartel leader, in drug trafficking groups in Mexico.<sup>36,37,38,39,40,41,42</sup>

### How and why do women become involved in the drug trade?

The reasons for which women get involved in the drug trade are highly diverse and mostly converge and overlap with one another. There tends to be a multiplicity of factors acting together, in which gender, socioeconomic vulnerability, violence, intimate relations and economic factors shape the complex relationship between women and the drug economy.<sup>43</sup> Thus, none of the factors discussed in this section are mutually exclusive but should rather be considered as an overview of the many possible determinants that can result in women’s involvement in the drug trade. Women’s motivation may also depend on the roles they perform within the drug trade, with research tending to focus on women in particular circumstances, such as drug mules.

The following section only refers to literature that relates to women. However, it is important to note that the reasons women become involved in the drug trade are not exclusive to women but can also be among the many reasons for men or children to engage in illicit-drug related activities. Moreover, this section only

covers the main factors that have been discussed in the literature. It is possible that there are number of other aspects which would help to explain the presence of women in the drug trade that have so far been neglected.

### Poverty and financial necessity

Various forms of poverty and financial necessity are among the drivers for women to become involved in illicit drug cultivation and production. For instance, in Southern Africa, some women are very active in cannabis cultivation largely because their partners and other male members of their families are absent and in search of work in urban areas or because they have died.<sup>44</sup> In Afghanistan, opium poppy cultivation is found to predominantly take place in areas where women and girls have lower access to education and health services than at the national level.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, income generated from opium poppy cultivation can be an essential source of income for women and their families which enables them to pay for household necessities such as food, furniture and clothes.<sup>46</sup> A women’s survey conducted by the Ministry of Counter Narcotics of Afghanistan in collaboration with UNODC in 2016 showed that a quarter of the 167 women interviewed in 46 villages identify poverty as key motivation for opium production, followed by earning higher income (20 per cent of respondents).<sup>47</sup> Almost 20 per cent of women found that opium poppy allowed households to accumulate capital (purchasing a car, house, or other physical assets) or to cover large basic and non-basic expenses such as education, health fees, and weddings. Another 20 per cent of women indicated that constraints in finding a daily job or the lack of profitable, alternative crops also played a role in opium poppy cultivation decisions.<sup>48</sup>

Available literature indicates that poverty and other related economic hardships are also among the predominant reasons for women to engage in drug trafficking. UNODC research on women and cocaine trafficking in Latin America shows that women often join the drug trade voluntarily but that decision is shaped by limited choices and socio-economic conditions.<sup>49</sup> In South America, some of the women incarcer-

36 The United States Department of Justice. “Leader of Drug Trafficking Organization Convicted of International Drug Trafficking Conspiracy.” December 19, 2019.

37 United States Attorney’s Office, Southern District of Florida. “Alleged international narcotics trafficker extradited from Mexico on cocaine conspiracy charges.” 10 August 2012.

38 Elaine Carey (2014) *Women Drug Traffickers: Mules, Bosses, and Organized Crime*. Albuquerque, United States: University of New Mexico Press, p. 194-195.

39 Elaine Carey (2014) *Women Drug Traffickers: Mules, Bosses, and Organized Crime*. Albuquerque, United States: University of New Mexico Press, p. 1-2.

40 Judgment of the Supreme Court of Appeal of South Africa. Sheryl Cwele and Frank Nabolisa v. The State, case No. 671/11 (1 October 2012); Annette Hübschle (2014) “Of bogus hunters, queenpins and mules: the varied roles of women in transnational organized crime in Southern Africa.” *Trends in Organized Crime* 17: 31–51.

41 Emmanuel Akyeampong (July 2005) “Diaspora and drug trafficking in West Africa: a case study of Ghana.” *African Affairs* 104(416): 429–447.

42 United States District Court Middle District of Florida Ocala Division. Jemel Lajuan Hamilton. Petitioner, v. Case No. 5:16-cv-259-Oc-02PRL. April 2019. Jennifer Fleetwood (November 2010) “Drug mules in the international cocaine trade: diversity and relative deprivation.” *Prison Services Journal* 192.

43 Jennifer Fleetwood (November 2010) “Drug mules in the international cocaine trade: diversity and relative deprivation.” *Prison Services Journal* 192.

44 Annette Hübschle. 2014. “Of bogus hunters, queenpins and mules: the varied roles of women in transnational organized crime in Southern Africa.” *Trends in Organized Crime* 17: 31–51

45 UNODC. “Sustainable Development in an Opium Production Environment”. May 2017. See p. 8.

46 World Drug Report 2016, p. 24.

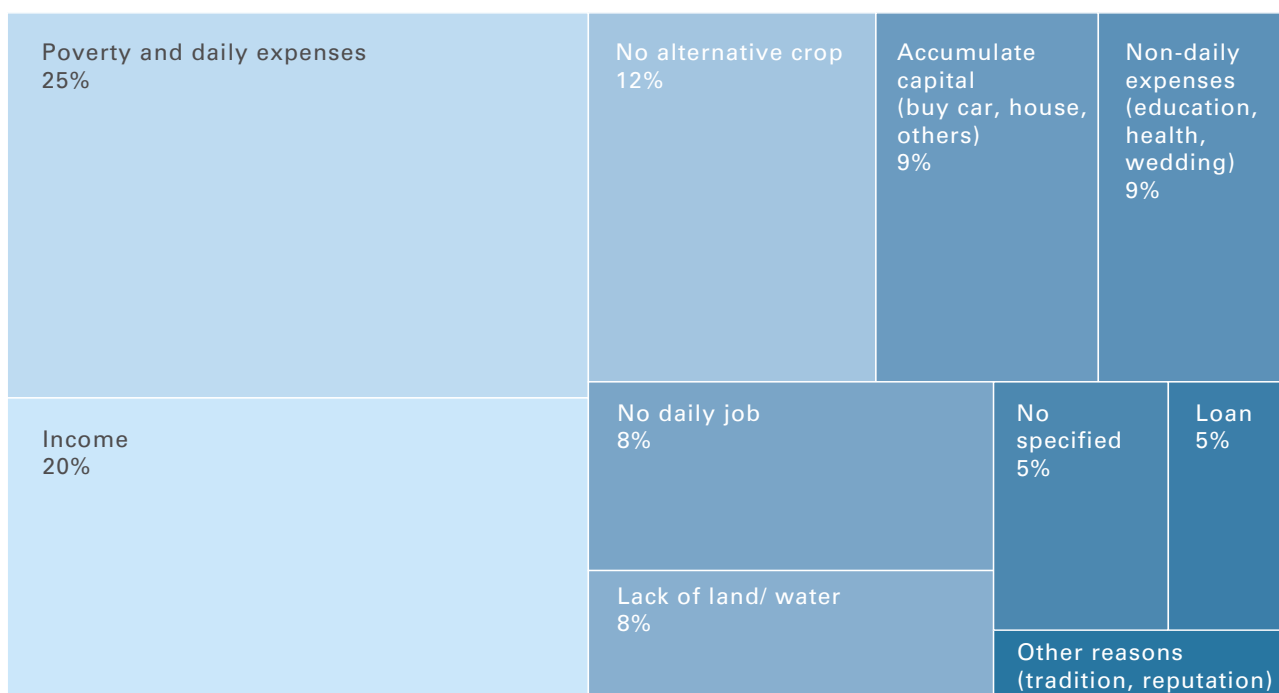
47 UNODC. May 2017. “Sustainable Development in an Opium Production Environment”. See p. 67.

48 UNODC. May 2017. “Sustainable Development in an Opium Production Environment”. See p.67-68.

49 UNODC, *Women in the cocaine supply chain*, Cocaine Insights 3, UNODC, Vienna, March 2022



**FIG. 2** Reasons stated by Afghan women for opium poppy cultivated by members inside the household



Source: UNODC Sustainable development in an opium production environment, *Afghanistan Opium Survey Report 2016*

ated for drug related offenses are single mothers who have little or no schooling, live in poverty, and are responsible for providing care for dependents, whether children, young people, elderly, or persons with disabilities.<sup>50</sup> For these women, the income they generate from drug trafficking enables them to support their families. Anecdotal examples from Latin America indicate that at the top end of the drug trafficking hierarchy, female drug trafficking leaders may have carved out their prominent position as a means to survive and raise themselves and their children out of poverty.<sup>51</sup> In China, a study in Yunnan based on 578 surveyed con-

victed drug traffickers, representing 10 per cent of the total prison population at the time, found that out of 136 female respondents 36 per cent of women incarcerated for heroin trafficking identified themselves as peasants. 76 women prisoners out 292 respondents had no formal education and prior to arrest 54 women among 139 respondents were self-employed.<sup>52</sup>

One study on women and organised crime in Africa, identified poverty, unemployment and the lack of support from the family or community as the main reasons women become criminal actors. In addition, the study mentioned gender-based responsibilities, whereby African women are the providers for their family, as one of the main reasons for their participation in criminal activities.<sup>53</sup>

50 Washington Office on Latin America and others. 2016. "Women, Drug Policies, and Incarceration: A Guide for Policy Reform in Latin America and the Caribbean", p. 8; Inter-American Commission of Women and Organization of American States. 2014. "Women and drugs in the Americas: a policy working paper." Washington, D.C.; Corina Giacomello. 2018. "Women, drug offenses and penitentiary systems in Latin America." Briefing Paper. London, International Drug Policy Consortium; Carmen Antony (2005) "Mujeres invisibles: las cárceles femeninas en América Latina." *Revista Nueva Sociedad*, No. 208, March-April 2007; Rebecca Schleifer and Luciana Pol (June 2017) "International guidelines on human rights and drug control: a tool for securing women's rights in drug control policy." *Health and Human Rights Journal* 19(1): 253–261.

51 Elaine Carey (2014) *Women Drug Traffickers: Mules, Bosses, and Organized Crime*. Albuquerque, United States: University of New Mexico Press, p. 2.

52 Ko-Lin Chin and Sheldon X. Zhang (2015). *The Chinese Heroin Trade: Cross Border Drug Trafficking and Beyond*. New York and London: New York University Press, p. 178-180.

53 ENACT, 2021. *Women as actors of transnational organized crime in Africa*.

## Family associations and romantic affiliations

Although family associations may help explain the involvement of women in the drug trade in various parts of the world, this aspect has been particularly documented in South American countries, where several studies have shown that women often commit crimes in association with their male partner or might be imprisoned because they have taken responsibility for a crime that he had committed.<sup>54</sup> Family associations or the death, incarceration or incapacitation of an intimate partner or male family member were also among the main reasons women obtained positions of leadership in South American drug cartels.<sup>55</sup>

Family ties and romantic affiliations have also played a role in drawing women into the drug trade in other parts of the world. In China women incarcerated for heroin, and to a smaller extent opium and methamphetamine, trafficking in Yunnan primarily entered the drug trade due to their ties with family members, friends and romantic affiliations involved in the drug trade.<sup>56</sup> In Southern Africa, young women have also been drawn to transporting drugs as “mules” because of their own drug addictions or romantic associations with drug dealers.<sup>57</sup> In the African context, a more recent study indicated that family or romantic relationships may facilitate women’s involvement in transnational organised crime but should not be considered the main reason.<sup>58</sup>

## Drug addiction

Several studies have shown that many women employed in the drug trade are regular drug users who have often become involved in drug trafficking to sus-

tain their own drug consumption. For instance, in the United States, high levels of illegal substance use have been reported among female drug traffickers and several studies have shown a crossover between drug use and drug trafficking.<sup>59</sup>

## Coercion and deception

Women can be coerced or threatened by lovers, spouses and relatives into collaborating in the business as mules, drivers, and keepers of drug stashes,<sup>60</sup> and studies have documented this pattern particularly in South American countries.<sup>61</sup> Recent UNODC research on cocaine trafficking points to the fact that although only a minority of women are coerced or deceived while entering the drug trade, their involvement becomes irreversible as they are not allowed to leave the trade.<sup>62</sup>

In some cases, women have engaged in drug trafficking without their knowledge and/or without knowing the risks they were taking.<sup>63</sup> For instance, in Japan, the

- 54 Marcela Lagarde. 2003. “Los cautiverios de las Mujeres: Madres, Esposas, Monjas, Putas, Presas y Locas.” Mexico City. Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, p. 654; Inter-American Commission of Women and Organization of American States. 2014. “Women and drugs in the Americas: a policy working paper” Washington, D.C., p. 34; Corina Giacomello. 2018. “Women, drug offenses and penitentiary systems in Latin America.” Briefing Paper. London, International Drug Policy Consortium.
- 55 Inter-American Commission of Women and Organization of American States. 2014. “Women and drugs in the Americas: a policy working paper.” Washington, D.C.; Elaine Carey (2014) *Women Drug Traffickers: Mules, Bosses, and Organized Crime*. Albuquerque, United States: University of New Mexico Press; Corina Giacomello. 2018. “Women, drug offenses and penitentiary systems in Latin America.” Briefing Paper. London, International Drug Policy Consortium.
- 56 Ko-Lin Chin and Sheldon X. Zhang (2015). *The Chinese Heroin Trade: Cross Border Drug Trafficking and Beyond*. New York University Press: New York and London, p. 183.
- 57 Annette Hübschle (2014) “Of bogus hunters, queenpins and mules: the varied roles of women in transnational organized crime in Southern Africa.” *Trends in Organized Crime* 17: 31–51. ENACT, 2021. *Women as actors of transnational organized crime in Africa*.
- 58 ENACT, 2021. *Women as actors of transnational organized crime in Africa*.

- 59 Bruce D. Johnson, Eloise Dunlap and Sylvie C. Tourigny (2000) “Crack distribution and abuse in New York.” *Crime Prevention Studies* 11, p. 37; Eloise Dunlap, Bruce D. Johnson and Lisa Maher (1997) “Female crack sellers in New York City: who they are and what they do.” *Women and Criminal Justice* 8(4): 25–55; Greenfeld, L., and Snell, T.L. (1999) “Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report: Women offenders (175688).” Washington DC: US Department of Justice Office of Justice Programs; Loper, Ann Booker (2002). “Adjustment to prison of women convicted of possession, trafficking and nondrug offenses.” *The Journal of Drug Issues*: 1033-1050; Annette Hübschle (2014) “Of bogus hunters, queenpins and mules: the varied roles of women in transnational organized crime in Southern Africa.” *Trends in Organized Crime* 17: 31–51.
- 60 Sudbury, J. (2004) “A World without Prisons: Resisting Militarism, Globalized Punishment and Empire.” *Social Justice* 31: 9–30; Caulkins, J. P., Burnett, H. and Leslie, E. (2009) “How Illegal Drugs Enter an Island Country: Insights from Interviews with Interviews with Incarcerated Traffickers.” *Global Crime* 10: 66–96; Camille Stengel and Jennifer Fleetwood. August 2014. “Developing drug policy: gender matters.” GDPO Situation Analysis. Swansea, United Kingdom, Global Drug Policy Observatory.
- 61 Washington Office on Latin America and others (2016) “Women, Drug Policies, and Incarceration: A Guide for Policy Reform in Latin America and the Caribbean”, p. 8; Inter-American Commission of Women and Organization of American States (2014) “Women and drugs in the Americas: a policy working paper.” Washington, D.C., p.39; Carmen Antony (2005) “Mujeres invisibles: las cárceles femeninas en América Latina.” *Revista Nueva Sociedad*. No. 208. March-April 2007.
- 62 UNODC, *Women in the cocaine supply chain*, Cocaine Insights 3, UNODC, Vienna, March 2022
- 63 Jennifer Fleetwood, J. (March 2011) “Five kilos: penalties and practice in the international cocaine trade.” *British Journal of Criminology* 51(2): 375–393; Gabriel I. Anitua and Valeria A. Picco (2012) “Género, drogas y sistema penal. Estrategias de defensa en casos de mujeres ‘mulas’.” in *Violencia de Género. Estrategias de Litigio para la Defensa de los Derechos de las Mujeres*. Buenos Aires: Defensoría General de la Nación, p. 220; Washington Office on Latin America and others (2016) “Women, Drug Policies, and Incarceration: A Guide for Policy Reform in Latin America and the Caribbean.” p. 8; Carmen Antony (2005) “Mujeres invisibles: las cárceles femeninas en América Latina.” *Revista Nueva Sociedad*, No. 208. March-April 2007, p. 7.

Yakuza major crime organisation, has been known to place online advertisements for international couriers to bring drugs into Japan, which has resulted in cases such as one where a 71 year-old Japanese woman unwittingly carried amphetamine from Egypt to Japan.<sup>64</sup> In Mexico, the expression, “blind mule” refers to a style of drug trafficking in the El Paso/Juárez area in which women have been tricked by men into driving cars loaded with drugs across bridges from Mexico to the United States.<sup>65</sup>

### Exploitation of femininity and vulnerability

In some circumstances, drug organisations prefer to recruit women for certain operations because women can be more effective at evading law enforcement than men as they may be less likely to be suspected of drug trafficking. For instance, in South America, some women tried to avoid being suspected of drug trafficking by playing on traditional images of femininity.<sup>66</sup> In Colombia, women have been known to traffic drugs by using their appearance to bypass security officers. In a particular case reported by the media, a beauty queen and lingerie model, was suspected of using other young, beautiful models to transport cocaine internationally.<sup>67</sup> In Africa, women have been found to be less likely to be targeted or investigated by law enforcement due to societal gender expectations and the perception that criminal activities belong in the masculine domain.<sup>68</sup>

In Western Africa, an example has been reported of women living with HIV or other diseases been employed as drug “mules” because law enforcement authorities were reluctant to bring them into the criminal justice system preferring to deport them rather than provide them with health care.<sup>69</sup> Across Africa, women in vulnerable situations, including Caucasian women with children, older people and the disabled, also have acted as low-profile couriers, as they might face a lower risk of being caught by the authorities.<sup>70</sup>

64 Andrew Rankin (2012) “21st-century Yakuza: recent trends in organized crime in Japan.” *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 10(7)(2).

65 Howard Campbell (2008) “Female Drug Smugglers on the U.S.-Mexico Border: Gender, Crime, and Empowerment.” *Anthropological Quarterly* 81(1), p. 262.

66 Denton B and O’Malley P (1999) “Gender, trust and business – Women drug dealers in the illicit economy.” *British Journal of Criminology* 39(4): 513–530; Elaine Carey (2014) *Women Drug Traffickers: Mules, Bosses, and Organized Crime*. Albuquerque, United States: University of New Mexico Press.

67 The Telegraph. “Lingerie model runs one of world’s largest drug gangs, according to police.” 24 February 2010.

68 ENACT, 2021. *Women as actors of transnational organized crime*.

69 Hai Thanh Luong (December 2015) “Transnational drugs trafficking from West Africa to Southeast Asia: a case study of Vietnam.” *Journal of Law and Criminal Justice* 3(2): 37–54.

70 Liana Sun Wyler and Nicolas Cook. 2009. “Illegal Drug Trade in Africa: Trends and U.S. Policy.” Washington, D.C., Congressional Research Service.

Women are also found to request or accept lower pay for drug trafficking than men. For instance, in Kyrgyzstan there have been reports of an increase of women involved in drug trafficking which might partly be explained by women accepting lower rates of payment than men.<sup>71</sup> In a study in China, female drug traffickers were found to traffic smaller consignments than men, limiting their earning potential in the drug trade. The study reported that on average male heroin traffickers trafficked 3,149 grams of heroin, while women trafficked 1,351 grams, and on average earned \$85 per month compared to \$115 for men.<sup>72</sup>

### Connection between drug trafficking and trafficking in women

Evidence shows a connection between women in drug trafficking and the trafficking in women for sexual exploitation. Over the years, there have been cases of women victims of trafficking in persons for the purpose of sexual exploitation being forced to smuggle drugs.<sup>73</sup> Criminal organisations often engage in multiple streams of illegal activities which can lead to trafficked women being further exploited for drug trafficking purposes.

For instance, in Belgium, Albanian criminal networks have been found to employ trafficked women as drug couriers to transport cocaine from Belgium and the Netherlands to Italy.<sup>74</sup> In the Russian Federation, drugs and trafficked victims are trafficked from the former States of the Soviet Union into Eastern Europe, along the same channels.<sup>75</sup> The Yakuza and the Triads, from

71 Julia Kensy and others. 2012. “Drug policy and women: addressing the negative consequences of harmful drug control.” Briefing Paper. London, International Drug Policy Consortium, p. 3; UNODC. *World Drug Report 2016*, p. 35.

72 Ko-Lin Chin and Sheldon X. Zhang (2015). *The Chinese Heroin Trade: Cross Border Drug Trafficking and Beyond*. New York University Press: New York and London, p. 182.

73 UNODC. *World Drug Report 2018*. “Booklet 5”, June 2018; Maher L and Daly K (1996) “Women in the street-level drug economy: Continuity or change?” *Criminology* 34(4): 465–491; Corina Giacomello. 2018. “Women, drug offenses and penitentiary systems in Latin America.” Briefing Paper. London, International Drug Policy Consortium, p. 41; Liz Hales and Loraine Gelsthorpe. 2012. *The Criminalisation of Migrant Women*. Cambridge, United Kingdom, Institute of Criminology, University of Cambridge; Louise Shelley (September 2012) “The relationship of drug and human trafficking: a global perspective.” *European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research* 18(3): 241–253; Arsovska, J., and Janssens, S. (2009). “Policing and Human Trafficking: Good and Bad Practices.” In C. Friesendorf (Ed.) *Strategies Against Human Trafficking: The Role of the Security Sector*. Vienna: National Defence Academy and Austrian Ministry of Defence and Sport, p. 169–211.

74 Arsovska, J., and Janssens, S. (2009). “Policing and Human Trafficking: Good and Bad Practices.” In C. Friesendorf (Ed.) *Strategies Against Human Trafficking: The Role of the Security Sector*. Vienna: National Defence Academy and Austrian Ministry of Defence and Sport, p. 169–211.

75 Louise Shelley (September 2012) “The relationship of drug and human trafficking: a global perspective.” *European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research* 18(3): 241–253.



Japan and China, have also been linked to trafficking in both persons and drugs for decades. The internationalization of the Yakuza has enabled them to exploit their drug trafficking links to traffic women from other regions, in particular South America and Eastern Europe.<sup>76</sup>

### Agency and female empowerment

Most of the literature has largely portrayed the presence of women in the drug trade as being due to necessity or coercion. Although women are likely to suffer disproportionately from the effects of drug trafficking especially at the lowest and middle levels of drug trafficking organizations,<sup>77</sup> some literature has shown female traffickers to have engaged in the drug trade of their own free will.<sup>78</sup> Particularly, the female leaders discussed above have demonstrated high, though varied, forms of agency coupled with a great deal of will and determination. These women have made a conscious decision to build or expand an illicit business as opposed to a legal one.<sup>79</sup>

In Afghanistan, results of a survey conducted in 2016 among opium poppy cultivating households also showed that the majority of interviewed women at least tacitly support opium cultivation: 59 per cent were indifferent or in favour of opium poppy cultivation, whilst only 16 per cent stated an opposition to opium cultivation.<sup>80</sup>

There are other scenarios in which women's involvement in drug trafficking presents a degree of female empowerment and liberation.<sup>81</sup> Research in South

America has shown that some young women freely aspire to becoming drug traffickers and are eager to attain positions of power.<sup>82</sup> In China, women have sometimes been found to enter the drug trade as a means of pursuing an additional entrepreneurial venture alongside their occupation in the licit economy.<sup>83</sup> In addition to supplying their own drug addictions, women engaging in the manufacture of methamphetamine in the United States have also been shown to have valued the privileges and status associated with their illegal profession.<sup>84</sup>

In illicit drug cultivation women's degree of agency is highly varied. For instance, in South America, women play an active decision-making role during the different phases of coca bush cultivation and cocaine production.<sup>85</sup> In contrast, women in Afghanistan play a largely passive role in terms of decision-making in opium cultivation, with only few being able to influence the decision of the man of the household to cultivate opium poppy or not,<sup>86</sup> although education can increase the influence of women on these matters. Around 6 in 10 women with some level of education reported that they were able to directly participate in the final decision on opium poppy cultivation, whereas only 3 in 10 women without education said the same.<sup>87</sup>

76 Louise Shelley (September 2012) "The relationship of drug and human trafficking: a global perspective." *European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research* 18(3): 241–253; Glenn E. Curtis and others (March 2002) "Transnational activities of Chinese crime organizations." *Trends in Organized Crime* 7(3): 19–57.

77 Howard Campbell (Winter 2008) "Female drug smugglers on the U.S.-Mexico border: gender, crime, and empowerment." *Anthropological Quarterly* 81(1), p. 238.

78 Washington Office on Latin America and others (2016) "Women, Drug Policies, and Incarceration: A Guide for Policy Reform in Latin America and the Caribbean." p. 8; Eloise Dunlap, Bruce D. Johnson and Lisa Maher (1997) "Female crack sellers in New York City: who they are and what they do." *Women and Criminal Justice* 8(4): 25–55; Elaine Carey (2014) *Women Drug Traffickers: Mules, Bosses, and Organized Crime*. Albuquerque, United States: University of New Mexico Press, p. 97–203; Elaine Carey and José Carlos Cisneros Guzmán (May–June 2011) "The Daughters of La Nacha: Profiles of Women Traffickers." *NACLA Report on the Americas*: 23–24; Anderson TL (2005) "Dimensions of women's power in the illicit drug economy." *Theoretical Criminology* 9(4): 371–400.

79 Elaine Carey (2014) *Women Drug Traffickers: Mules, Bosses, and Organized Crime*. Albuquerque, United States: University of New Mexico Press, p. 97–203; Netflix Series. 2018. "Drug Lords – Jemeker Thompson: Crack Queen of L.A."

80 UNODC. May 2017. Sustainable Development in an Opium Production Environment, p. 64.

81 Howard Campbell (winter 2008) "Female drug smugglers on

the U.S.-Mexico border: gender, crime, and empowerment." *Anthropological Quarterly* 81(1): 233–267; Netflix Series. 2018. "Drug Lords – Jemeker Thompson: Crack Queen of L.A."

82 Edberg, Mark. 2004. *El Narcotraficante: Narcocorridos and the Construction of a Cultural Persona on the U.S.-Mexico Border*. Austin: University of Texas Press, p. 103.

83 Ko-Lin Chin and Sheldon X. Zhang (2015). *The Chinese Heroin Trade: Cross Border Drug Trafficking and Beyond*. New York University Press: New York and London, p. 173–196.

84 Robert Jenkot (2008) "'Cooks are like gods': hierarchies in methamphetamine-producing groups." *Deviant Behavior* 29(8): 667–689.

85 Washington Office on Latin America and others. 2016. "Women, Drug Policies, and Incarceration: A Guide for Policy Reform in Latin America and the Caribbean," p. 29; UNODC. *World Drug Report 2016*, p. 24–25.

86 UNODC. May 2017. Sustainable Development in an Opium Production Environment. See p. 27–28; UNODC. *World Drug Report 2016*, p. 24.

87 UNODC. May 2017. "Sustainable Development in an Opium Production Environment". See p. 27–29, 65–66.

## Conclusion

Studies have shown that the involvement of women in the drug trade is both diverse and complex. Although women are employed in drug businesses at every level, they are predominantly involved in small-scale drug trafficking. Only on some occasions have women attained high-ranking posts and positions of leadership. Also, there are a large number of connected factors that can drive women into the drug trade. Women can be involved in illegal drug businesses out of necessity, family or romantic relationships, coercion and as a result of their own free will. Thus, it is very difficult to ascertain whether women in the drug trade are largely to be considered as victims of this illegal enterprise or as self-determined agents who are active participants. The answer probably lies somewhere between the two. It should also be noted that the available research is limited due to the historical focus on men with also limitations in terms of geographic coverage.

There continues to be gaps in the literature and a large number of questions remain unanswered. For instance, to what extent do the structural dynamics of the drug trade affect the role of women? The manufacture of synthetic drugs requires an entirely different skill set than the illicit cultivation of opium poppy and coca and their business structures operate very differently. How does this affect the involvement of women and does the synthetic drug, cocaine, opiate, or cannabis trade attract women with different socio-economic backgrounds? There is generally little information available on the involvement of women in synthetic drug trafficking and there appear to be no studies comparing the roles of women operating within different drug business models.

Another category of questions that remain unaddressed relate to the effects of the national cultural context, which certainly affects the degree of entry and involvement of women in licit job markets. However, to what extent do national cultures affect women in illegal drug markets? What is the impact of the cultural context on the motives and working conditions of women within the drugs trade? For example, are women from some cultures more able to reach leadership positions or have greater autonomy in the drug trade than others?

And finally, how do gender stereotypes affect the ability of women to engage in the illegal drug market? How are women treated compared to men within DTOs? Does femininity serve as an asset or as a hindrance to women operating in drug-related activities? Some of the literature addressed in this chapter suggests that femininity can be a double-edged sword in illegal drug professions, but as of yet, there is not enough information available to draw any clear conclusions.

### UNODC research on male Afghan opiate traffickers

UNODC previously conducted research based on interviews with male Afghan traffickers. The qualitative study *“Voices of the Quchaqbar”* provided an important insight into the modus operandi and functioning of DTOs in Afghanistan. Although both studies cannot be compared directly, the previously published report provides context for this study and both reports should be read together. In addition, the questionnaire varied for both studies, with a slightly different focus in terms of topics covered. Despite these differences, some commonalities and divergences were identified during interviews in the involvement and observations of women and men. The main points are reported in this study, without engaging in a full comparison due to the methodological differences.

Source: UNODC, *“Voices of the Quchaqbar”* 2020 [https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/AOTP/AOTP\\_Voices\\_of\\_Quchaqbar\\_2020\\_web.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/AOTP/AOTP_Voices_of_Quchaqbar_2020_web.pdf)



## Afghan women in the illicit opiate trade

This section presents the findings and data analysis based on the interviews conducted with nine Afghan women currently or previously involved in the illicit opiate trade.

### Socio demographic characteristics

All the women interviewed for this study were Afghan, except one non-national who was married to an Afghan citizen and lived in Afghanistan until the Taliban takeover. One woman held dual Afghan and US citizenship. Five respondents were based in Afghanistan at the time of the interview, with the remainder equally split between those outside the country and those describing themselves as living in between Afghanistan and another country. The respondents were between the ages of 26 and 56, with an average age of 43 years. Six women were married, the remainder were widows. They had on average 2.3 children, with two childless respondents.

In terms of education, the women had diverse profiles ranging from one illiterate respondent to a university graduate, with almost half the respondents having completed secondary or high school. This should be viewed in the context of an adult literacy rate (15 years and above) for women in Afghanistan of 30 per cent in 2018 up from 17 per cent in 2011.<sup>88</sup>

Five women declared that they currently work or used to work in the licit economy. In the context of this study, work referred to paid licit work and unpaid domestic work. The women occupied a wide range of legal jobs, mostly working in the private sector and in trade, including one respondent who owned a restaurant outside Afghanistan, and one woman who was the principal of a school. In the broader Afghan context, the labour force participation rate for women aged 15 and above in Afghanistan was 16.5 per cent in 2020, down from 25.8 per cent in 2014.<sup>89</sup>

When asked to describe the financial situation of their families, five women qualified it as medium, with one respondent describing her family as poor. None of the respondents described their families as

very poor or wealthy. In 2020, an estimated 49.4 per cent of the Afghan population lived below the national poverty line.<sup>90</sup>

‘In the early years before my husband started his work [in the illicit drug trade], our economic situation was not good but since he started this business, it is above medium.’ *(Interview 3)*

‘My husband has been an addict for a long time, and he is not working anymore so I am the only one working.’ *(Interview 9)*

The sample interviewed was not representative of the wider Afghan female population, based on the socio-demographic characteristics described in this section. This does not mean that women involved in opiate trafficking are necessarily more educated or more likely to be working in the licit economy, and women in more vulnerable situations are even harder to engage with.

### Involvement in the illicit opiate trade

Women were asked to provide an overview of their current or past involvement in the opiate trade. All the women had substantial experience in the opiate trade, with five of them working for around five to ten years. The respondents with the least experience had been working for four years.

At the time of the interview, six respondents indicated that they were involved in the drug trade, including one who stated that her involvement had lessened compared to the past. Among the three women who were no longer involved in the opiate trade, two indicated that they had stopped because of the Taliban coming to power, as travel and therefore transporting drugs was no longer possible for women. One of the respondents in this study had left the country as a consequence of the takeover.<sup>91</sup> In addition, one woman had stopped her involvement in the drug trade prior to the Taliban takeover, because of the risk of being arrested. She had been trafficking heroin from Afghanistan and Pakistan to North America. Her son was detained while trafficking from Pakistan to Europe, which made her reconsider the risks.<sup>92</sup> All three women who had stopped their involvement indicated they could return to the drug trade, depending on the circumstances.<sup>93</sup>

88 UNESCO, “The right to education: what’s at stake in Afghanistan? A 20-year review”, 2021

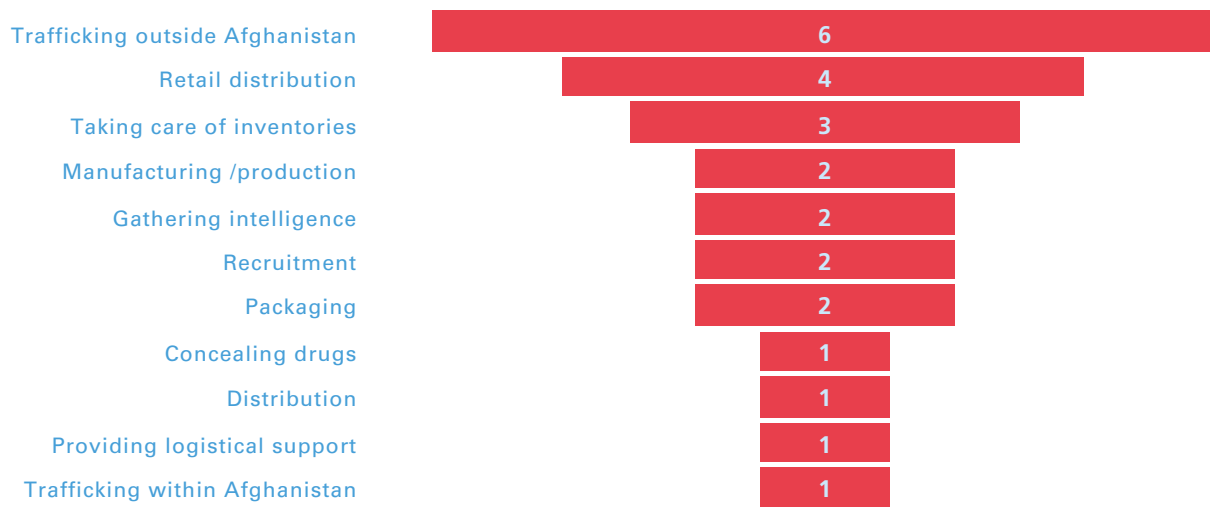
89 World Bank data, accessed on 27 June 2022 <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FE.NE.ZS?end=2020&locations=AF&start=2010>

90 Asian Development Bank, Basis Statistics 2022 <https://www.adb.org/countries/afghanistan/poverty> [accessed on 27 June 2022]

91 Interview 8

92 Interview 1

93 Interviews 1, 7 and 8

**FIG. 3** Roles occupied by the respondents in the illicit opiate trade (25 mentions)<sup>95</sup>

Source: UNODC Sustainable development in an opium production environment, *Afghanistan Opium Survey Report 2016*

The women combine multiple roles in the drug trade, with more than half engaged in two or more different activities. Among the four women who performed only one role, three were trafficking opiates outside Afghanistan and one was selling drugs to users.<sup>94</sup>

Trafficking outside of the country was the most frequently mentioned type of involvement (6 respondents), followed by selling drugs to users (4 respondents), and taking care of inventories (3 respondents). The roles performed by women and the number of respondents who carried out the specific jobs are listed in the chart above. The wide range of roles, including gathering intelligence, manufacturing heroin and recruiting for the network, illustrates the broad scope of women's involvement, their versatility and ability to use their skills in different settings. One of the women involved in recruitment indicated that she was also involved in recruiting other women for the network.

'I was transporting drugs to one of the neighbouring countries of Afghanistan and from there I sent them by post to different addresses in a European country.' (Interview 8)

'I was helping my father and my husband with production at home, and a few times I also trafficked

drugs to Iran.' (Interview 6)

'I work for my father and take care of his inventory and packaging and distribution.' (Interview 5)

'Each time I trafficked 3-5 kg. The network hid drugs inside souvenirs, jewellery, women's clothes. Each year I travelled 3 to 4 times' (Interview 1)

Over time some women were able to broaden the scope of their work and enhance their expertise, even though women faced limitations because of their gender, as will be described in the following sections. Three women indicated that their role changed throughout their years of activity. They had been working for ten, fifteen and twenty, years respectively.

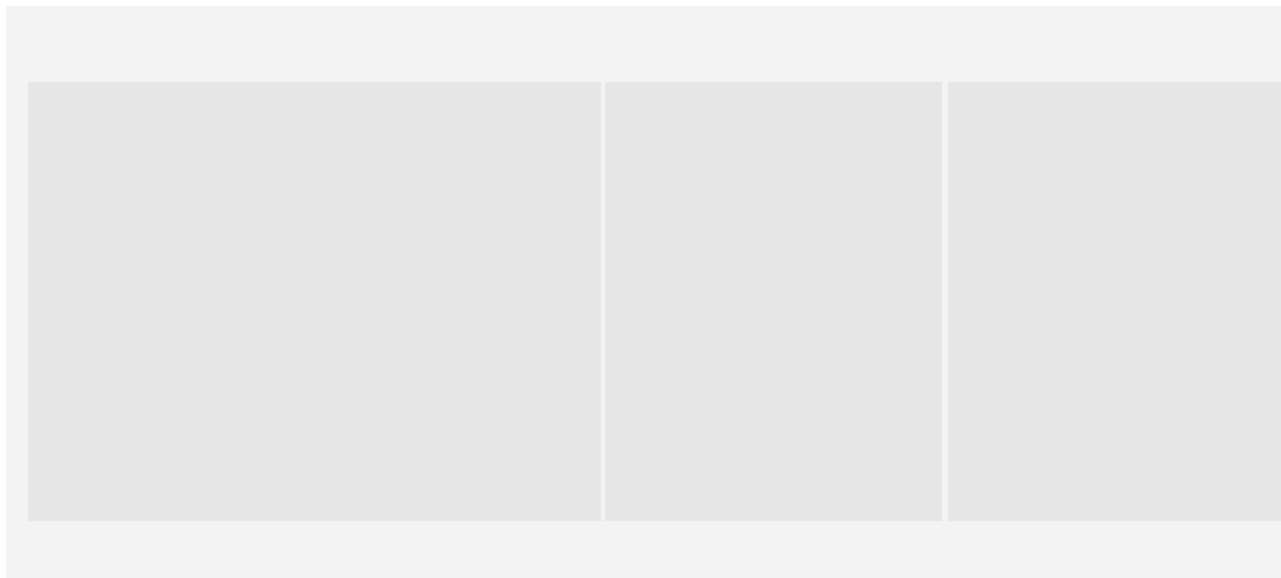
'Initially, I was involved with trafficking and taking care of inventory, then I learned how to do packaging and hiding drugs and then how to produce morphine and heroin.' (Interview 3)

'At the beginning I was involved in the packaging and retail distribution to the addicts and our income was not that good but the drug trafficker, my husband and I were working for, suggested we traffic drugs from Dubai and Pakistan and because the people that worked for the trafficker were very expert in hiding the drugs, we accepted, and we were paid good money.' (Interview 2)

94 Interviews 1, 7, 8 and 9

95 Respondents could provide more than one answer for multiple-choice questions and their answers were grouped and aggregated.



**PIC. 1** Examples of souvenirs used by one respondent to conceal heroin**TABLE 1**

Type of activity	Per day / per amount of heroin	Amount of money
Assisting in morphine/ heroin production	1 kg of heroin	200-300 USD
Morphine/ heroin production	1 kg of heroin	400-700 USD
Morphine/ heroin production at beginner level	1 day of work	100 USD
Morphine/ heroin production at expert level	1 day of work	200 USD
Transporting heroin to North America	1 kg of heroin	3000-4000 USD + travel expenses
Transporting heroin to a neighbouring country	1 kg of heroin	2000 USD
Sending heroin from a neighbouring country by post to Europe	1 kg of heroin	1000 USD
Transporting heroin to IR Iran	1 trip with 3-4 kg of heroin	1000 USD
Transporting heroin to IR Iran	1 kg of heroin	1000-1500 USD
Selling drugs to users	1 day of work	1000-2000 <sup>96</sup> AFN

96 It is challenging to convert this figure into dollars for comparative purposes as we were unable to determine when the work was done and use the relevant exchange rate. Also, as the interview took place after the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan and the subsequent collapse of the Afghan economy, using the exchange rate at the time of the interview would give a significantly lower value than when the work was originally done.

## Involvement in heroin manufacture in a lab

Morphine and heroin manufacture is one area where women reported being able to advance based on their experience and newly gained expertise. Two women stated they worked in a lab, although not regularly. In one case the lab was in the woman's home where she was manufacturing heroin with her husband. Both respondents stated that they progressively learned how to produce the heroin on their own and, subsequently, their income increased accordingly.

'Initially, I was helping the cook but now I am able to cook and from time to time, I cook between 2-5 kg of heroin. When I was helping the cook, I was paid between 200-300 USD for each kilo of heroin. As a cook, I was paid between 400-700 USD for production of one kilo of high-quality heroin.' (Interview 3)

'In the early years, I was paid around 100 USD for one day, later when I became expert, my father paid me 200 USD for every kg of heroin that I helped produce.' (Interview 6)

## Income from the illicit opiate trade

Although not asked directly about their income from the illicit drug trade, six respondents gave indications. The table above provides a summary of the amounts the six interviewed women earned per amount of heroin produced / transported, or per day worked in various roles.

Further research would be required to understand the market dynamics and earnings of women and how they vary based on different factors, including but not limited to geographic location, type of activity, type of DTO; but also, how they compare to the incomes of men performing the same jobs.

Regardless of the type of organisation they worked for and of the roles they performed, all the nine women indicated that they managed their income directly, except one respondent who stated she managed the money together with her husband as they were working in the drug trade together. In the broader Afghan society, based on a study published in 2015, 41 per cent of married women who received cash earnings reported deciding for themselves about the use of their earnings, while 34 per cent reported that they decided jointly with their husbands. A higher cash income may therefore empower women to manage their income directly.<sup>97</sup>

The money earned from the opiate trade was important for all the women. For six respondents, it was their

main source of income and for the remaining three participants, it was a significant part of a wider income.

'I had other sources of income as well which were legal. However, income from drug trafficking was so good. Each time, I trafficked drugs, I was paid between 3000-4000 USD for each kg and my travel expenses.' (Interview 1)

'My main work is my restaurant and beside that I also do this business.' (Interview 4)

The income earned from the illicit drug trade was used by all nine women for family expenses and savings. All the respondents, even those in a more precarious financial situation, were able to save some of the money, meaning that the income earned from opiate trafficking provided women with a degree of economic security and independence.<sup>98</sup> To a lesser extent, respondents also used the income for buying jewellery, gold and property. In two cases, the women bought drugs and covered the expenses of drug users within their families and in one case the money was invested in the illicit drug trade.

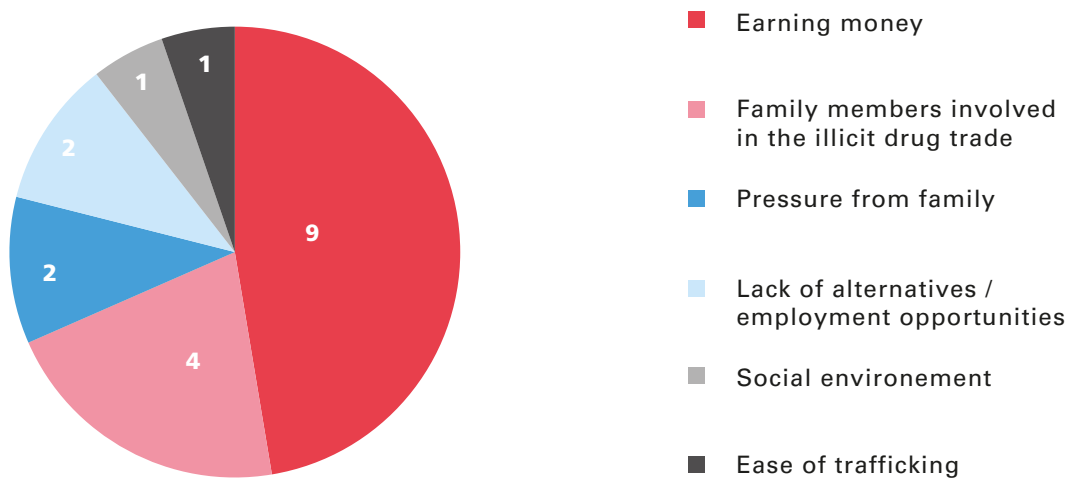
'Two of my children were addicted to drugs and I was paying for their expenses. My eldest son was injecting, and he overdosed and passed away around 8 years ago.' (Interview 6)



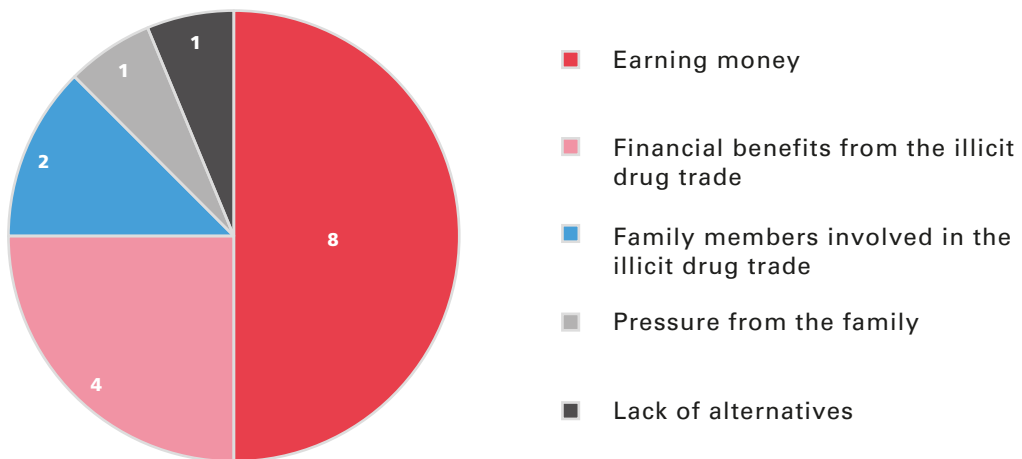
97 Afghanistan demographic and health survey 2015

98 Interview 1

**FIG. 4** Stated motivation for entering the drug trade<sup>99</sup>



**FIG. 5** Stated motivation for remaining in the illicit drug trade



<sup>99</sup> Respondents could provide more than one answer for multiple-choice questions and their answers were grouped and aggregated.

## Motivation

### Motivation for entering the illicit drug trade

The women interviewed entered the illicit drug trade for financial and social reasons, with most of them providing multiple reasons for joining. The main motive mentioned by all the women was earning money. For two women, it was the only reason. The need to earn money covers a wide range of situations, from relatively well-off women who used the proceeds from trafficking to increase their income, to women, including widows, who had to provide for their children and families at times in difficult circumstances. Two women indicated the lack of alternatives and other employment opportunities to explain why they entered the illicit opiate trade.

‘When my husband was alive, he was covering the family expenses and I was saving my income but when my husband passed away, I was responsible for expenses and to pay for my children who don't work.’

*(Interview 6)*

‘My husband and son are not working, and we need money. It is not about motivation; it is about the need and being desperate. The educated people can't find jobs and I don't even know how to read and write.’

*(Interview 9)*

‘[I entered the illicit drug trade] only for increasing my income. With most of the money from drug trafficking I bought gold. And drug trafficking is simple.’

*(Interview 1)*

In addition to financial reasons, women also joined the drug trade for social and family reasons. Four of the respondents indicated that the involvement of family members in drug trafficking led to their own involvement. In all the cases, they referred to male family members.

‘My father, who passed away, and currently my older brother have been doing this business for a long time and this is how I got involved.’

*(Interview 4)*

Two women indicated that they faced pressure from their families to be involved in the drug trade and another woman mentioned the social environment. None of the women mentioned coercion, deception or exploitation as reasons for entering the drug trade.

‘At the beginning I was not interested in the business, and I was afraid, but my father said I should do this business and now it is easy for me.’

*(Interview 5)*

### Motivation for remaining in the illicit drug trade

Once the women became involved in the opiate trade, the financial motivation is critical. The eight women who explained their motivation for staying in the drug trade stated that one of their reasons was earning money. For three women, it was the only reason. In addition, four women indicated that the financial benefits – the relatively high-income level - from the illicit drug trade motivated them to remain. One woman cited the lack of alternatives. On the other hand, the importance of social and family motives decreased. The involvement of family members was mentioned only by two women, while one mentioned pressure from the family and in all three cases economic reasons also played a role.

‘My husband has been working in this business and it was not possible for me to quit, so this made me remain and it is my only source of income.’

*(Interview 3)*

The financial motivation combined with the significance of the opiate trade as a source of income, all point to the importance of understanding the economic impact of the drug trade on women. This will help designing interventions to prevent them from joining or incentivise them to leave.

### Drug Trafficking Organisations

The women reported that they operated in business that were either small (six respondents) or medium sized (three respondents).<sup>100</sup> None of the women worked in large organisations or were handling large amounts of heroin. It should be noted that the women largely referred to the activities they were directly familiar with.

‘The trafficker I worked for was wholesaler, but I was trafficking 3-5 kg. Except one time when I trafficked 12 kg. But I don't want to talk about that here.’

*(Interview 1)*

‘I sell drugs to addicts and it is less than 1 kg [...] I work for a trafficker and sell drugs to the drug addicts in the city. The drugs are not mine, but I am paid by the trafficker to sell his drugs. Every day that I work for him, he pays me between 1000 and 2000 Afghani.’

*(Interview 9)*

100 In the context of the study, the threshold volume of drug trafficking activities was defined as the following amounts of opiates trafficked per month: small scale 1-10 kg; medium scale 11-40 kg; and large-scale  $\geq$  41 kg. This is to keep it in line with the volume of drug trafficking activities listed in the 2020 UNODC “Voices of the Quchaqbar” report.



‘When I was trafficking to Iran, very time I was paid between 1000 to 1500 USD for every kg. Every time I transported 4-5 kg.’ (Interview 6)

‘I was taking drugs from Nimroz to Iran and gave them to an Iranian woman. Every time I took 3-4 kg with me, and I was paid 1,000 USD.’ (Interview 7)

The women seemed to have a limited knowledge of the wider networks which they were linked to. Only one respondent was able to provide the number of people working in the same organisation, five respondents indicated that they didn’t know, and the remainder did not answer the question. One respondent clarified that it was safer for the different people involved not to know each other, with at least some DTOs operating based on a horizontal model with parallel branches responsible for retail distribution.

‘The trafficker I work with has many other people working for him. Everyone is responsible for one side of the city or a specific area in the city.’ (Interview 9)

‘I don’t know all the people that work for the organisation that I usually get supply but in my own business, I work with two other people.’ (Interview 4)

Previous UNODC research<sup>101</sup> on forty-one male traffickers, showed that men had a better understanding of the trafficking organisations they were operating in and the wider networks they associated with, with more than 40 per cent working for networks of around six to twenty people. Even most of the male traffickers who indicated working alone hired other people on an ad hoc basis to fill a particular need.

Family based DTOs played an important role for the women’s involvement, confirming a finding from previous AOTP research on male traffickers,<sup>102</sup> about the importance of small family-based structures in the opiate trade in Afghanistan. Seven out of nine respondents indicated that members of their family were involved in the illicit drug trade and in most cases, they were working together with the women. In all the cases, the women referred only to male relatives: husbands, sons, brothers, fathers and a grandson. The involvement of female family members could have been omitted by respondents for social reasons and would require further research.

‘When I trafficked to Canada, my son was with me who has Canadian citizenship. But I trafficked alone to the USA.’ (Interview 1)

Only two women indicated having business partners outside of their families. In one case the business partners were also partners in a legitimate business.

‘We have worked in the restaurant for a long time. We know each other for a long time and share profit from the business.’ (Interview 4)

Outside of the family, women had limited interactions with male members of the organisation. The only respondent, who had a good understanding of the number of people in the organisation, was working in a family based DTO. But even in family structures, women seem to remain apart from the broader network.

‘My husband is having his own organization and there are around 15 people that work for him, but they are all relatives and family members.’ (Interview 3)

‘I only work with men that I know, and they are family.’ (Interview 4)

‘My father has many people working for him, but I don’t know how many.’ (Interview 5)

‘I have had limited contact with men in my business, but generally speaking, it is not easy being a woman in this country.’ (Interview 8)

The social and cultural barriers imposed on women and their interactions with men outside of their families are key to understanding the peripheral role they occupy within the Afghan context.

‘I was not a member of an organization; I was working independently with an organization, and I don’t know how many members they had.’ (Interview 8)

‘I work for this trafficker and know some of his other people doing the same job as mine. They are both men and women [...] I don’t work with men directly I only get drugs from the male trafficker and sell. He has been our neighbour for a long time, and he is a good man.’ (Interview 9)

‘I didn’t work with a lot of men and the main male trafficker I worked for was a good man.’ (Interview 1)

‘I have not worked with a man I was only in contact with the trafficker and his wife.’ (Interview 7)

‘There is a woman who usually traffics drugs to Iran, she has been working with my father for a long time.’ (Interview 5)

101 UNODC, “Voices of the Quchaqbar” 2020

102 Ibid

Six of the respondents indicated having limited contacts with men, including four respondents who only worked with male family members. For comparison, among male traffickers, only one person out of 41 respondents stated working exclusively with family members.<sup>103</sup> When not dealing with male family members, the women generally had a focal point in the organisation, a man or in one case a married couple, who provided access to the wider network and to the drugs. Three women reported working with male family members and one male trafficker in the DTO, while two women stated they worked only with one male trafficker. The women had built a relationship of trust with the male contact point, who could be a neighbour, a family friend or was simply described by the women as a 'good man'. Some of the women also confirmed that their male family members had a similar working relationship with women outside of their families. The women therefore didn't necessarily see themselves as being part of a network – only four of them indicated working for a network – but rather as working with their families or with a DTO or trusted male contact.

### Trafficking between provinces and outside Afghanistan

The women had a relatively good understanding of the geographic scope of the operations of the DTOs they worked for. This could be linked to the fact that six of them were themselves responsible for transporting drugs outside Afghanistan or between Afghan provinces. The one respondent who did not know about the geographic reach of the DTO was involved in retail selling heroin to users.

Five women stated that the DTO they worked for trafficked drugs to other provinces within Afghanistan, while two respondents indicated it was a possibility. Three women reported that their organisations trafficked to all the provinces in Afghanistan, while one respondent's organisation trafficked to several provinces in very distinct parts of the country (Helmand, Herat, Kandahar, Nangarhar and Kabul). This confirms findings from previous research conducted among male traffickers<sup>104</sup> on widespread trafficking between provinces in Afghanistan and shows the large geographic reach of DTOs and their ability to transport drugs over long distances within the country.

'I think the trafficker that I worked with was involved in trafficking to other provinces of Afghanistan, but my job was just to traffic from Afghanistan to neighbouring countries and send via post to European country.' (Interview 8)

103 Ibid

104 Ibid

Eight respondents reported that their organisations trafficked opiates to other countries. DTOs trafficked to various locations, with the neighbouring countries of the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan most often named, followed by destination markets in North America and Europe.

'I trafficked drugs to the USA and Canada. I knew a couple of people who worked for my drug trafficker and trafficked to Dubai and other neighbouring countries.' (Interview 1)

'[I trafficked to] one of the neighbouring countries of Afghanistan but I prefer not to say the name of the country.' (Interview 8)

### Women and the illicit opiate trade

The respondents were also asked about their understanding of other women's involvement in the opiate trade, as well as the opportunities, challenges and perceptions related to gender. All the respondents, except one, indicated knowing other women working for the same drug trafficking organisation, including other women working in a lab. The one who did not know any women, stated that there are most likely women working in the same network, but she did not know them personally. In addition, one respondent knew women working for other networks. One of the respondents involved in recruitment stated having recruited around twenty women from one province within a year.

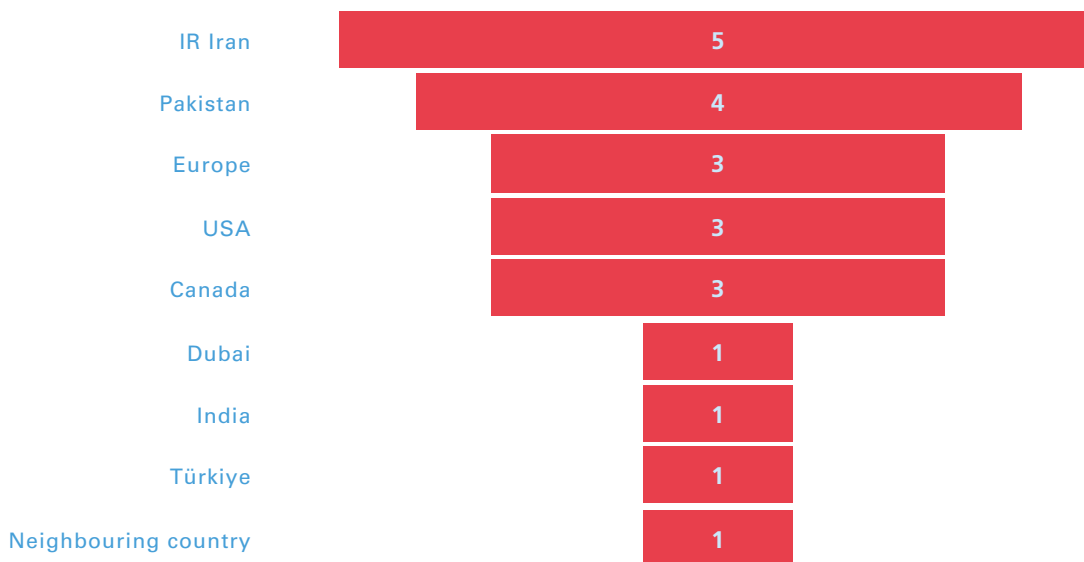
'Women work in different roles, but mostly in trafficking and selling drugs to addicts.' (Interview 4)

'I know some women who work for this drug trafficker in production and packaging.' (Interview 1)

In terms of the roles occupied by other women, most were involved in retail distribution and trafficking drugs, followed by heroin production. Those were also the roles identified as frequently performed by the respondents themselves. One respondent reported recruiting women to gather intelligence on police check points (referring to city district police commandments which had checkpoints in the city under the previous regime) and on corrupt officers who were co-opted by DTOs.

When asked about the challenges and opportunities for women in the illicit opiate trade, the respondents mentioned the overall difficulties faced by women in Afghanistan, where the options and opportunities are limited, be it in the licit or illicit economy. The main limitation reported within the opiate trade was the inability to undertake roles higher up in the hierarchy

**FIG. 6** Trafficking destinations outside Afghanistan (22 mentions)



and in bigger DTOs. Although women’s roles could expand over time, the wider social restrictions limited their opportunities for growth.

‘It is difficult being a woman in Afghanistan.’ (*Interview 5*)

‘There aren’t many opportunities for women to go higher in the chain, such as becoming the head of a network or becoming a major drug trafficker, due to cultural issues.’ (*Interview 10*)

‘In Afghanistan a woman cannot lead the network or cannot be the major trafficker but in production and distribution [women] are much better than men.’ (*Interview 1*)

‘In general, it is easier for a woman to transport drugs and sell to addicts but running a drug business is challenging for a woman because of the culture and tradition.’ (*Interview 8*)

‘This work always involves risks, and it also depends on the role of the women. For example, trafficking has its own different risks compared to production and distribution.’ (*Interview 2*)

Despite the limitations imposed on women, six of the respondents stated that it is easier for women to undertake certain roles, namely transporting drugs (five respondents), retail selling to users (five respondents), producing heroin in a lab (four respondents), gathering intelligence (one respondent) and hiring transporters (one respondent). The fact that Afghan women are less likely to be searched was a key advantage identified by respondents, especially in relation to transporting and selling opiates. As Afghan women cannot be searched by men in the country, it means that unless there is a female officer working at the checkpoint, they are unlikely to be checked.<sup>105</sup> In addition, women identified their other strengths, such as manufacturing morphine and heroin, which are not linked to social circumstances but rather skills.

‘Women are hired because they are good for certain jobs such as helping in the kitchen labs, helping conceal drugs, retail selling, and collecting information about where retail drug traffickers are operating, which police officers were corrupt. The higher jobs are normally for men in Afghanistan.’ (*Interview 10*)

<sup>105</sup> It is unclear to what extent the Taliban have maintained female police and border officials following their return to power, but any significant reduction in female security officials will have a corresponding impact on border security. One of the respondents indicated that she was not searched at a checkpoint operated by the Taliban.

‘[Women work] in different parts [of the business], but most of them in production, trafficking and distribution.’ (Interview 1)

Although some of the women thought women managing a major trafficking network was almost impossible in the Afghan context, two of the respondents were aware of two small retail networks, one led by a woman and the other one managed by two women. In the latter case, the women were buying drugs from the husband of the respondent and were operating independently. They were also involved in other crime types, with high-level connections in Kabul. They were involved in retail distribution and supplied drugs to high-level customers.

‘In Afghanistan, women are being less suspected and searched compared to men [...] I was only involved in trafficking. Since I am a woman, it was simple for me, and I had a good income as well.’ (Interview 1)

‘For women it is easier to traffic drugs, sell to addicts and also hire drug transporters. Women can be very helpful in the drug trade because the police normally do not search women a lot [...] I don’t know much about it, but I know a woman who has people working for her and distributing drugs to addicts.’ (Interview 4)

‘As a woman, trafficking drugs to Iran and to Kabul was easier for me. Women are good for trafficking and also work at home with production [manufacture].’ (Interview 6)

‘When I was transporting drugs from Nimroz to Iran, it was easier for me to hide the drugs as a woman and because we were travelling illegally, when the Taliban stopped our car, they did not search me because I was a woman.’ (Interview 7)

‘I think because I am a woman it is much easier for me to sell drugs to addicts.’ (Interview 9)

‘I know two women that have a working relation with my husband, and they are managing their own business and my husband supplies to them. They sell drugs to users inside Afghanistan.’ (Interview 3)

The women’s families mostly knew about their illicit work and didn’t perceive it in a negative way. When family members were also involved, the women were seen as working in the family business. In other cases, they were seen as providers for their families with no other option. When family members were not engaged in the opiate trade, they may not see women’s involvement in a good light (two respondents), or they may not all be aware of it. In one case a women stated that

her family was not involved and only her husband knew about her illicit work.

‘My family knows that I have no other option, I need money to support my family.’ (Interview 7)

‘Many people in my family were doing this business for a long time.’ (Interview 6)

‘My mother and brother know but don’t say anything. My husband also works for my father.’ (Interview 5)

‘One of my sons and one of my daughters were not happy with my work, but my eldest son introduced me with the drug traffickers!’ (Interview 1)

‘My siblings did not see it well, but my husband’s family are mostly doing this business.’ (Interview 3)

Within communities, the involvement in the illicit trade is kept hidden. All the women stated that their community is not aware of their work or that they do not discuss it with people. This was mostly associated with the perceived risk of discussing the drug trafficking business, while none of the women explicitly mentioned negative moral attitudes. Only one respondent mentioned the moral judgement of women engaged in the opiate trade by men.

‘No one knows about it. This is not something we want to talk about it in the community, it is very risky.’ (Interview 8)

‘We don’t talk to people that we do this business; it is very risky.’ (Interview 4)

‘We don’t tell people and neighbours what we do. My father and brothers are involved in real estate business.’ (Interview 6)

‘My experience [with men in the illicit drug trade] was not bad, but men do not look good at women who traffic drugs because men think that women who work in the drug business are not morally good, which is not true.’ (Interview 2)



## Women and gender-based violence in Afghanistan

Gender-based violence is a pervasive problem in Afghanistan, which originates from and is reinforced by cultural practices, social and economic conditions and inequality. The Taliban takeover has been a major setback for women's rights in Afghanistan, which is further illustrated in the context of this study by the number of women who did not want to discuss the Taliban during their interviews and those who indicated that the takeover has had a negative impact on the already difficult lives of Afghan women (see section below on impact of the Taliban takeover).

Based on a study conducted in Afghanistan in 2010-2011, 92 per cent of all women (aged 15-49 years) believed a husband is justified in beating his wife. Almost 90 per cent of women experienced at least one form of domestic violence, 17 per cent experienced sexual violence and 52 per cent experienced physical violence. It should be noted that women's tolerance for wife beating decreased with education.<sup>1</sup>

According to another survey from 2015-2016, more than half of ever-married women aged 15-49 experienced emotional, physical, or sexual violence from their spouse and 61 per cent of ever-married women who experienced violence never

sought help or never told anyone about the violence. Only 20 per cent of ever-married women who have ever experienced any form of physical or sexual violence sought help from any source. Education had no impact on help-seeking behaviour. Eight women in ten who sought help turned to their families, while 34 per cent asked their husband's family. Women in Afghanistan were unlikely to seek help from doctors, police or any civil or social organisation.<sup>2</sup>

Based on the survey's findings, women's experience of violence greatly varies by province and is more prevalent in rural areas. Women in rural areas are however slightly more likely to seek help than women in urban areas. Women who are employed and paid in cash are less likely to experience controlling behaviours by their husbands than those that do not earn an income in cash. Women's experience of spousal violence (physical, sexual, or emotional) increases with age and the number of children, while it decreases with education.<sup>2</sup>

### References:

1. World Health Organization, 2015, *Addressing violence against women in Afghanistan: the health system response*
2. Central Statistics Organization (CSO), Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) and ICF. 2017. *Afghanistan Demographic and Health Survey, 2015*

## Drug use

Involvement in the illicit opiate trade did not lead to drug use among the respondents. Only one woman used drugs – namely hashish – and she had started before entering the drug trade.

However, six of the respondents stated that at least one family member used drugs. All the drug users in the family were male relatives, including husbands, sons and fathers. All the women who entered the illicit drug trade because of the involvement of family members also reported drug use in their families (four respondents). Among the women who indicated drug use within their families, two out of six did not cite the involvement of family members as their motivation for joining the drug trade.

In half the cases where a relative was using drugs, the person was also the one identified as having brought the women into the drug trade (three respondents). The drug use of a family member forced one woman to finance the drug use of her husband and provide for her family. Opium was the most widely used drug within families, followed by heroin, hashish and methamphetamine, with some of the users engaging in poly-drug use and others changing substances over time.

## Gender-based violence

Only three women indicated having experienced gender-based violence. The identified perpetrators of the violence were husbands and sons in one case. Two out of three women who reported experiencing gender-based violence, indicated that the situation changed since they entered the illicit drug trade.

'In the early years when we started this business with my husband, he is nice, but after a few years he started using shisha and he became moody and started beating me regularly. Few years ago, he married another woman.' (Interview 3)

It should be noted that a detailed discussion on what gender-based violence meant to the respondents was not possible within the scope of this research as the main topic itself was already highly sensitive. It is therefore possible that the nine interviewed women faced situations of emotional, sexual or physical violence, in particular from their husbands, but did not report them as gender-based violence. As Afghan women typically do not seek help from civil society organizations and do not share their stories outside of the family circle, they may also be less likely to talk about gender-based violence in the context of an interview. The woman who participated in a follow-up interview specifically stated



that she did not want to discuss gender-based violence, before agreeing to the second interview.

It is worth noting that more than six of the respondents indicated that the illicit opiate trade has an impact on women's experience of gender-based violence with the remaining three women stating it may have an impact. Further research is therefore required to better understand that impact of the opiate trade and women's experience of gender-based violence.

'I think those who are doing this business will finally have a family member become addict and in our case my husband started.' (Interview 3)

All the victims of gender-based violence also reported drug use within their families and in all the cases the

perpetrator of the violence was the drug user (three respondents). Half the women identifying drug use within their families, also reported being victims of gender-based violence (three respondents). The women who indicated having experienced gender-based violence were possibly experiencing more extreme forms of violence, fuelled by drug use.

'When my husband passed away and my children became addicted, it was difficult to live with them.'

(Interview 6)

'My husband has been beating me since he has started using drugs. When my husband doesn't have drugs, he starts beating me and asks me to go and buy drugs for him.' (Interview 9)

## The Taliban drug ban

In April 2022 Taliban supreme leader Haibatullah Akhundzade issued a decree banning the cultivation and trading of opium and the trafficking of a number of drug types. The decree read as follows: *“As per the decree of the supreme leader of Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA), all Afghans are informed that from now on, cultivation of poppy has been strictly prohibited across the country. In addition, use, transport, trade, export and import of all types of narcotics such as alcohol, heroin, K tablet (a drug with stimulant effects often sold in Afghanistan), hashish and etc., including drug manufacturing factories in Afghanistan are strictly banned. Enforcement of this decree is mandatory. The violator will be prosecuted and punished by the judiciary.”*



## Impact of the Taliban coming to power as reported by the interviewed women

‘The Taliban suppress women.’ (Interview 2)

In August 2021, the Taliban came to power in Afghanistan following a prolonged conflict, the withdrawal of international forces and the collapse of the Afghan government<sup>106</sup>. Since then, women and girls have witnessed the erosion of their rights, including their ability to work and earn an income, to receive an education and study, to access health services, to safely and freely leave their homes, travel within the country and abroad<sup>107</sup>. While Afghanistan is facing an economic and financial crisis, that has wiped out economic gains since 2007, and is pushing its population further into desperation<sup>108</sup>, women face additional burdens and barriers due to current policies and the dismantlement of the already limited support networks and structures addressing their needs<sup>109</sup>. Many women and girls have been forced into displacement within Afghanistan or fled the country.<sup>110</sup>

106 International Institute of Strategic Studies “Understanding the Taliban’s Military victory” August 2021 <https://www.iiss.org/blogs/analysis/2021/08/taliban-military-victory>

107 UN Women Gender Alert 1: “Women’s rights in Afghanistan. Where are we now?” December 2021. <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2021-12/Gender-alert-Womens-rights-in-Afghanistan-en.pdf>

108 World Bank “Towards Economic Stabilization and recovery” April 2022. <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/5f01165822f3639224e0d483ba1861fc-0310062022/original/ADU-2022-FINAL-CLEARED.pdf>

109 UN Women Gender Alert 1: “Women’s rights in Afghanistan. Where are we now?” December 2021. <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2021-12/Gender-alert-Womens-rights-in-Afghanistan-en.pdf>

110 UN Women and UNHCR “Afghanistan Crisis Update: Women and Girls in Displacement” March 2022 [https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-03/af-Afghanistan\\_factsheet-s2.pdf](https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-03/af-Afghanistan_factsheet-s2.pdf)

In April 2022, the Taliban supreme leader Haibutullah Akhundzade issued a decree relating to the drug trade in the country. The interviews were conducted ten months after the Taliban returned to power and the women were asked a range of question about the impact on their involvement in the illicit drug trade, their income and drug trafficking businesses.

Three of the respondents did not feel comfortable discussing the Taliban. Five women stated that the Taliban had a negative impact on the lives of Afghan women in general. While assessing the impact of the Taliban on women’ situation within the illicit drug trade, respondents pointed to the additional restrictions faced by women and in particular restrictions on women’s movement.

‘Women’s movement has become more difficult but for the women inside homes, there is no difference for them.’ (Interview 3)

Despite the Taliban’s April 2022 decree banning the production, manufacture and trafficking of drugs in Afghanistan (see text box above), the interviewed women had mixed views on the drug trade going forward. When asked about the impact on their own involvement, the respondents had very different experiences. Two women indicated that the arrival of the Taliban had made trafficking easier because of their belief that the Taliban lacked the ability to control the drug trade. Conversely, two women stopped their involvement in the illicit drug trade because of the arrival of the Taliban and the restrictions imposed on the movement of women, including one woman who had fled the country. One woman indicated there was no impact on her work but that the restrictions imposed on women more generally made life more difficult, and



there was a lack of trust which forced her to act with more caution. The differences are likely to reflect the different roles undertaken by women as well as their location and personal circumstances. Women involved in transporting drugs were more directly impacted while those overseeing inventories or manufacturing heroin could continue their work from home.

‘I stopped this business since the Taliban came. When the Taliban came, I stopped because I was going to Iran from Nimroz. Since the Taliban came, it has become difficult to travel alone as a woman to Iran.’

*(Interview 7)*

‘I stopped the business since the Taliban took over and since then I am living in one of the neighbouring countries of Afghanistan with my family.’ *(Interview 8)*

‘We feel more free to do business since the Taliban came.’ *(Interview 5)*

‘Since the Taliban took over the power, drug trafficking has become much easier because they don’t have a lot of control on drug trafficking’ *(Interview 3)*

‘There is no difference in my work, but it is difficult to be a woman under the Taliban as there are restrictions on women. I have to be more careful now and now I cannot trust anyone. The Taliban have collected a lot of drug addicts from the city, the demand has decreased.’ *(Interview 9)*

While evaluating the impact of the Taliban takeover on their income, opinions were also split, possibly reflecting the different roles women played within the drug trade, as well as the different locations they were in, and the policies of the local Taliban authorities. Two women no longer had an income as they had to stop their involvement in drug trafficking. One woman’s income was reduced due to a decrease in demand because of Taliban policies against drug users. Another woman’s income had remained the same, although she indicated having more freedom to conduct her business. Finally, one woman’s income had increased due to the ease of conducting business under the Taliban and increased demand.

‘Since the Taliban took over, business has been easier, and we have more requests from our regular customers.’ *(Interview 3)*

‘Before the Taliban took over, I was travelling regularly between Afghanistan and a neighbouring country where I have citizenship but since the Taliban took over, I have not travelled to Afghanistan.’ *(Interview 8)*

## Conclusion

The range of experiences captured by this sample provides important and novel insight into the experiences of Afghan women in the illicit opiate trade, and more research is needed to further comprehend the involvement and situation of Afghan women in the drug trade, and beyond Afghanistan in countries impacted by opiate and drug trafficking, as well as the conditions and dynamics behind their participation.

A comprehensive strategy to address drug supply and drug trafficking from and within Afghanistan must consider the presence of women and the various roles they engage in. Effective gender-sensitive supply reduction policies for the prevention, interdiction and prosecution of drug trafficking will not be possible without data on the involvement, motivation and modus operandi of women.

The economic benefits derived from the drug trade are key to understanding women’s motivation. The research highlights the importance of viable economic alternatives for women to prevent or end their involvement in illicit activities, something that was a challenge prior to the Taliban’s return to power, and which will be more so in the future.

The national and cultural context imposes a number of constraints on Afghan women and must be taken into account while designing policies and projects targeting Afghan women involved in the opiate trade. Although the impact of recent developments in Afghanistan is uncertain at this stage, the deteriorating economic situation and further restrictions may lead more women to rely on the illicit economy, with the opiate trade seen as a viable source of income. At the same time, the restrictions may push some women out of the opiate trade, making it impossible for them to perform certain roles, especially those that involve travel within and outside Afghanistan. The impact is therefore likely to be multifaceted and will require continued and ongoing study.



