



Partners in Crime: The Rise of Women in Mexico's Illegal Groups

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Principal Findings

What's new? The number of women active in Mexico's criminal organisations has risen steadily in recent years. Women often view joining criminal groups as a way of protecting themselves from gender-based violence and acquiring the power and respect they lack in law-abiding society.

Why does it matter? Criminal outfits are fuelling Mexico's wave of violence. That women are joining their ranks in greater numbers bolsters these groups' hold on communities and increases their ability to do harm. Women's participation in gangs exposes children to new threats of violence and recruitment, potentially prolonging the country's security crisis.

What should be done? Mexico's state institutions and civil society should work jointly to promote alternatives to organised crime for young women. Ideally, initiatives would provide opportunities for women to extricate themselves from these groups. Job training programs for women in jail and drug rehabilitation centres are also essential.

Executive Summary

Searing personal accounts, media reports and data analysis of the prison census all point to the conclusion that Mexican women are joining criminal outfits in greater numbers. Frequently from poor backgrounds and broken families, young women offenders report that they drifted into criminality through their partners or connections they forged at drug use hotspots. Male crime bosses tend to value women for their perceived competence, respect for hierarchy and ability to evade police attention. Women's presence in illegal groups has strengthened these organisations. It has also more deeply embedded crime in the fabric of Mexican society and within families. Deterring women and children from lives of crime will require the state and non-governmental organisations to provide alternative pathways to earning a living through initiatives in, for example, jails, drug rehabilitation centres and schools.

The ascent of women in Mexican crime groups represents a striking departure from how they have traditionally intersected with these organisations. Women and their bodies have long been targets of Mexican criminal outfits. When these organisations battle for turf, they often commit femicides and “disappearances” of women – namely, killing them and disposing of the remains – in part to demonstrate dominance in a geographical region. Witness how crimes against women have increased in areas where illegal organisations jockey for control: killing sprees erupted in the border city of Ciudad Juárez in the 1990s and more recently in Zacatecas, Puebla, Veracruz, the State of Mexico and other places where criminal groups are vying for power.

But increasing numbers of women are attracted to the benefits they can reap from joining a criminal organisation. Gender-based violence is rife in Mexico, and judicial redress is virtually non-existent. Young women interviewed for this report almost uniformly experienced abuse in their homes and communities. Most noted that the support of criminal groups and the status they acquire within them can offer protection, recognition and even dignity – in addition, of course, to income.

Women tend to fall into lives of crime through personal connections. Romantic liaisons with young men enmeshed in criminal organisations, particularly as drug dealers, lieutenants and hitmen, expose women to meetings with senior figures in illegal outfits who may come to value their social and financial skills. Alternatively, casual encounters while using drugs can lead to invitations to carry out specific menial tasks. These can include transporting drugs, serving as lookouts or collecting extortion payments.

There can also be opportunities to ascend to more senior positions in organisational hierarchies. Women may become car thieves: interviewees said auto theft is a well-paid and flexible job that can be combined with child care duties. Others have ended up as drug retailers, supervisors of local drug distribution networks or assassins. Like men, the higher a woman rises in the ranks, the more she must be prepared to kill, torture and mete out other forms of violence.

The growing incorporation of women into Mexican criminal groups has far-reaching consequences. Systematic recruitment of women has resulted in stronger criminal organisations that are more entrenched in the communities where they operate. Many

struggle to disentangle themselves from these groups without provoking violent retaliation. As Mexican women often fill traditional roles as primary caregivers, there is a multi-generational impact to their participation as well. More women are being incarcerated because of their criminal affiliations; when mothers end up behind bars, their children are more likely to adopt lives of crime themselves, particularly when they lack alternative caregivers. In other cases, children see the status and salaries their mothers derive from working within criminal organisations and emulate their choices.

Staving off women's enlistment in criminal groups – and encouraging those belonging to them to leave – will require understanding how women are recruited and the challenges they encounter when seeking to establish a life outside crime. Boosting schemes to demobilise individuals from criminal groups should be a priority. To succeed, projects need to be attuned to labour market conditions and offer comprehensive support.

More job training, educational options and psycho-social care are also essential for jailed offenders and drug users, as well as reintegration support for those who have been recently released from prison. Ensuring that programs exist in violence-affected communities for women to learn employment skills and pursue leisure activities – which can help them gain a sense of worth and belonging – could also help prevent criminal recruitment. These initiatives could draw inspiration from similar ones that have enjoyed some success in Latin America, such as Colombia's program for reintegrating demobilised combatants of guerrilla groups.

Mexico's federal state has already created an impressive body of institutions, programs and policies in support of women's rights, including a National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security. Still, these need to be expanded and tailored to community needs in order to address the drivers that send women into criminal organisations and offer a viable exit for those who wish to leave. Women may not yet have broken the hold of men at the heights of criminal power. But their rapid incorporation into the ranks is a deeply alarming sign of how crime has become interwoven into communities throughout Mexico. Addressing the causes and effects of the recruitment of women and their children should be part of efforts to help the country curb the relentless violence of recent decades.

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Partners in Crime: The Rise of Women in Mexico's Illegal Groups

I. Introduction

While Mexico's criminal organisations are frequently portrayed as groups of men at constant battle with one another, women are increasingly implicated in the violence.¹ Often, it is as targets. Murder rates have ticked downward in the country over the past four years, but femicides and other attacks on women continue to climb and are rarely prosecuted.² Moreover, members of the Mexican military and police forces often subject women to sexual violence.³ Not surprisingly, there is a correlation between the intensity of conflict in a given area and the level of gender-based violence. Rates of femicide and disappearances of women are higher in places where criminal groups are fighting for territorial control or clashing with state forces.⁴ To make matters worse, the justice system tends to be harsh when women harm men in acts of self-defence.⁵

¹ "Defunciones por homicidio de enero a junio de 2022 (Preliminar). Num, 27/23", National Institute of Geography and Statistics (INEGI), 23 January 2023. For recent overviews of Mexico's conflicts, see Crisis Group Latin America Report N°99, *Mexico's Forgotten Mayors: The Role of Local Government in Fighting Crime*, 23 June 2023; and Falko Ernst, "On the Front Lines of the Hot Land: Mexico's Incessant Conflict", Crisis Group Commentary, 26 April 2022.

² By focusing on women's experiences and comparing them to men's, this report does not aim to ascribe to the gender binary or ignore the experiences of people of other genders. Other Crisis Group publications will explore this topic, which falls outside the scope of this one. Crisis Group calculations based on data published by the Registro Nacional de Personas Desaparecidas y No Localizadas and INEGI show that murders of men decreased by 7 per cent over the last four years, while the number of femicides has remained almost constant at around 3,900 per year between 2019 and 2022. "Defunciones por homicidios", INEGI, 2023. Disappearances of women increased by an alarming 49 per cent between 2019 and 2022. Impunity is overwhelming: in 2022, only seven of every 100 femicide cases were solved, and fewer than half the trials resulted in a conviction. Shelma Navarrete, "Solo 7 de cada 100 homicidios y la mitad de feminicidios se esclarecen en México", *Expansión Política*, 1 December 2022. It is estimated that over 94 per cent of the sexual and/or physical crimes against women in 2021 were not reported. "Encuesta Nacional sobre la Dinámica de las Relaciones en los Hogares 2021", INEGI, 2021.

³ 15.5 per cent of women detained by the military at their last arrest reported sexual harassment, forced nudity, fondling, touching, attempted rape or threat of rape, while 4.8 per cent reported being raped. "Encuesta Nacional de Personas Privadas de la Libertad", INEGI, 2021. Women are often killed by criminal groups because of their association with members of rival groups, even if they themselves are not involved in illegal activities. Montserrat Álvarez Jiménez, "Muertes Olvidadas: Un Análisis de las Ejecuciones de Mujeres en la Guerra Contra las Drogas", CIDE, 2020; Ilse Becerril, "Mujeres mexicanas, botín del narco y crimen organizado", *Infobae*, 9 March 2022.

⁴ Lydiette Carrion, *La Fosa de Agua: Desapariciones y Femicidios en el Río de los Remedios* (Mexico City, 2020); and Lidia Arista, "En México, el 60% de los feminicidios son cometidos por el crimen organizado", *Expansión Política*, 29 September 2020.

⁵ "Woman who killed rapist while defending herself gets 6 years in Mexican prison: 'If I hadn't done it, I would be dead today'", CBS News, 17 May 2023; and "En legítima defensa, la historia de Yakiri Rubio y la lucha por su libertad (Capítulo de regalo)", *Animal Político*, 18 June 2017.

That said, women have become more than just targets of violence by criminal groups; increasingly, they are also perpetrators of crime. Crisis Group's interviews with women imprisoned in Mexico, in addition to other work in the country in recent years, suggest that women are joining the country's criminal organisations in growing numbers. The proportion of women charged with an offence related to organised crime increased from 5.4 per cent of the total of both indicted men and women in 2017 to 7.5 per cent in 2021.⁶ While it is possible that many of the women accused of belonging to criminal groups are innocent, ethnographic data collected by Crisis Group for this report and expert analysis buttress the thesis that women are increasingly involved in these groups.⁷

The drivers of this trend vary. Sometimes, criminal groups offer a form of protection that the state and judicial system fail to provide. Joining an armed group can in certain cases be a survival strategy and a means of wielding power in environments where gender-based violence is rife.⁸ Whatever the precise causes of women's drift into crime, the increasing prominence of women in illegal ventures could have enormous repercussions in Mexican society, particularly in light of the *machista* norms that have long shaped the division of labour between men and women in paid employment, family life and child rearing.

This report explores the security, political and cultural dynamics that have led Mexican women to be drawn into criminal organisations; the implications for them and their communities; and ideas about how the apparent trend in women's recruitment might be halted and reversed. The report is based on research conducted in Mexico City, Zacatecas, Morelos, Sonora and Baja California between July 2022 and June 2023. Crisis Group organised nine workshops with 70 women who were incarcerated or in rehabilitation centres for drug abuse, and conducted fourteen interviews with women who were former or active members of criminal groups, as well as 27 interviews with men and women who were civil society organisation figures, women's rights activists, prison staff, public defenders, journalists, experts on criminal violence, and local and federal authorities.

⁶ Crisis Group calculations based on the National Census of Federal Justice Administration, 2017-2022. This percentage was obtained by calculating the total number of men and women charged with organised crime, offences involving weapons, explosives and other destructive materials, illegal carrying and/or possession of weapons, cartridges and magazines, kidnapping, transport and/or trafficking of narcotics, possession of narcotics for sale, and other offences against public security and state security. Of the total number of persons charged with these offences, Crisis Group calculated the proportion of men and women charged with these offences by year.

⁷ Talk by Marcos Alan Ferreira, Nicole Jenne, Ana Beatriz Ramalho and Carolina Sampó, titled "The Role of Women in Criminal Organizations in Latin America: Insights from Brazil and Mexico", delivered as part of the 24-Hour Conference on Global Organized Crime, 18-19 October 2023. Talk by Rafael Prieto Curiel and Eduardo Guerrero titled "Contando criminales en México", delivered as part of the Seminario sobre violencia y paz, Colegio de México, 28 September 2023.

⁸ Arlene Tickner et al., "Women and Organized Crime in Latin America: Beyond Victims and Victimized", Colombian Organized Crime Observatory, Universidad del Rosario, 2021; Elaine Carey, *Women Drug Traffickers: Mules, Bosses and Organized Crime* (Albuquerque, 2014).

II. Who Are the Women in Organised Crime?

There is no official data about women's membership in organised criminal groups, but media reports indicate that they make up between 5 and 8 per cent of these groups' active personnel.⁹ Like men, they occupy a spectrum of positions. Some engage in low-level illegal activities solely as a means of subsistence, while others ascend to more senior positions in criminal hierarchies. They all must comply with specific codes of behaviour and respect chains of command.¹⁰

Mexico's survey of incarcerated people gives some clues as to the background of women who commit criminal acts.¹¹ The majority of women sentenced for offences related to organised crime (66 per cent) have at least one child, and half were earning less than \$275 per month, an amount below the minimum wage, before they went to jail.¹² According to the survey, a reported 13 per cent of these women had been orphaned as children and almost one in five reported having been physically, sexually and/or emotionally abused by a relative during childhood.¹³

Many of the members of crime groups interviewed for this report shared these characteristics. Involvement in organised crime is part of a continuum of violence to which they and their communities have been exposed. Over half of the former and current criminal groups members interviewed for this report had experienced physical violence in their childhood, and seven were survivors of sexual violence. They began their involvement with criminal groups as adolescents, started using illicit substances between the ages of twelve and thirteen, and most of them had given birth to their first child before the age of eighteen.¹⁴

According to one expert, most of the inmates who had been involved in criminal organisations report that they found themselves in a state of extreme loneliness and social exclusion very early in life. They felt that their families had not protected them.¹⁵

⁹ Jesús Lemus, "Un detallado retrato de mujeres que participan en el mundo de la delincuencia en México", *Los Angeles Times*, 2 July 2020.

¹⁰ Tickner, "Women and Organized Crime in Latin America: Beyond Victims and Victimiziers", op. cit.

¹¹ Crisis Group used the National Survey of Incarcerated People of 2021, which polls all women in prison, to identify the common characteristics of women convicted for offences regularly associated with organised crime, such as kidnapping, extortion, and trafficking of weapons and illicit drugs. "Encuesta Nacional de Personas Privadas de la Libertad", op. cit.

¹² The minimum wage in 2021, when the survey was conducted, was \$320 per month. "Incremento al salario mínimo para 2021", Comisión Nacional de los Salarios Mínimos, 21 December 2020.

¹³ The average age of those who participated in the workshops and interviews was 29. Only two women had a college degree, while the majority had reached high school. Only two respondents had never used illicit substances, while eleven had experienced substance abuse. Most participants started using illicit substances between the ages of twelve and thirteen. On average, participants had two children. Crisis Group interviews, former and active members of criminal groups, Sonora, 10-17 August 2022; Morelos, 4-6 October 2022; Zacatecas, 28-30 October 2022; and Baja California, 22-24 November 2022.

¹⁴ The average age at which interview participants had committed their first illegal act for a criminal group was seventeen, with only two of fourteen interviewees having started their criminal careers after their twenties. Ibid.

¹⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Corina Giacomello, professor, Universidad Autónoma de Chiapas; Angela Guerrero, director, CEA Justicia Social; and Andrés Hirsch, ReverdeSer Colectivo, Mexico City, January 2023. All are experts on the Mexican justice system. Crisis Group interview, penitentiary system expert, Sonora, 17 August 2022.

One of the women reflected on her troubled youth in the following terms: “All I remember from my childhood is fear and pain. ... Life has always been hard for me. I was the punching bag for my mother and brothers because I was the youngest and couldn't defend myself. I was always beaten. I was a very shy child, very quiet, so the teachers at school thought I was [developmentally delayed]”.¹⁶

For many of the women who spoke to Crisis Group, criminal life is a means of self-defence and a way to avoid being a target. Some women, especially young women, turn to crime as a route not just to survive in communities plagued by violence and threatening behaviour, but also to acquire a certain degree of autonomy and even perceived dignity. One interviewee said:

From a very young age, I understood that you have two options: either you become a *cabrona* or you get fucked up. ... It's not like you say, 'Oh, I'm going to be a thug', but you realise that you can't go around naively, that if you want to live you have to know how to defend yourself and know who you are with. One thing leads to another, and you end up like this.¹⁷

Women's rising profile in organised crime has in turn proven a boon for illegal groups. With a larger pool of people willing to enlist, it is easier for criminal leaders to replenish their ranks in the face of constant losses through the imprisonment, murder or disappearance of their troops. Women's participation has also helped these organisations weather President Andrés Manuel López Obrador's deepening reliance on the military to fight crime.¹⁸ A recent study estimated that Mexican criminal organisations recruit roughly 7,000 members per year.¹⁹ The diversification of criminal portfolios tends to mean that illegal outfits depend on a broader range of occupational profiles, affording more opportunities to women who have been recruited. Studies have documented the particular importance of women in rackets such as human trafficking and money laundering.²⁰

¹⁶ Crisis Group interview, former member of a criminal group, Morelos, 4 October 2022.

¹⁷ Women in organised crime often call themselves *cabronas*, a moniker that in Spanish suggests strength, rudeness, coldness and willingness to use violence, qualities that are traditionally attributed to men in Mexico's *machista* culture. Crisis Group interview, former member of a criminal group, Tijuana, Baja California, 22 November 2022.

¹⁸ Ramón Centeno, “¿Cómo entender la militarización de México en la presidencia de AMLO?”, LSE Latin America and Caribbean (blog), 17 November 2022; Lisa Sánchez, “Militarización y militarismo en México”, *Análisis Carolina*, no. 22 (2022).

¹⁹ Rafael Prieto-Curiel, Gian Maria Campedelli and Alejandro Hope, “Reducing cartel recruitment is the only way to lower violence in Mexico”, *Science*, 21 September 2023.

²⁰ See Tickner, “Women and Organized Crime in Latin America: Beyond Victims and Victimizers”, op. cit.; Cecilia Farfán Méndez, “Women's Involvement in Organised Crime and Drug Trafficking: A Comparative Analysis of the Sinaloa and Yamaguchigumi Organisations”, in Julia Buxton, Giavana Margo and Lona Burder (eds.), *The Impact of Global Drug Policy on Women: Shifting the Needle* (Bingley, 2020), pp. 159-168; “Avocados and organized crime in Michoacán, Mexico”, Modern Mexico (podcast), 10 April 2023; and Jane Esberg, “More than Cartels: Counting Mexico's Crime Rings”, Crisis Group Commentary, 8 May 2020.

III. Recruitment Pathways

Crisis Group's interviews suggest that women in Mexico are drawn into organised crime via two main routes: romantic partners who are involved in illicit activities or connections they forge in drug dealing and drug use hotspots in impoverished communities. These pathways are not mutually exclusive and often reinforce one another, pushing women and their children into the orbit of criminal groups that hold sway over the neighbourhoods where they live.

A. *The Role of Romantic Partners*

Many women formerly associated with illegal groups said they initiated their criminal careers through romantic partners. In cases where their partners were jailed, the women became more embroiled in criminal networks, largely because they could fill their partners' now vacant positions if they could display the requisite skills.²¹ A number of women said they relished the opportunity for upward mobility in the organisations. Some came to enjoy the feeling that they were good at the tasks assigned. One interviewee told Crisis Group how sympathy for her partner led her into the criminal group:

My partner was a shopkeeper (*tendero*), but because he used crystal meth non-stop, the numbers never added up for him. He was always in debt, so he got walloped with a piece of wood (*tableado*) all the time. I felt very sorry for him because they used to break his skin really bad. I always tried to mend him, and then I started to help him serve the clients. I never had any problems. The accounts were always in order, and I was never in debt. But he started to become lazier and lazier ... maybe because he knew I was in charge. ... Until the boss found out and when [my boyfriend] went to jail he told me, 'Well, if you want to support your partner, keep working for me. After all, you already know how to run the business'. And that's how I started, at first more out of fear, as if I was forced to, but then I liked it.²²

Women often accompany their partners while they engage in activities such as selling and distributing illegal drugs, collecting money from criminal operatives, stealing cars, and patrolling areas under criminal influence. These activities give women access to trusted networks. The women develop specific skills and become comfortable around illegal activity, enabling their eventual incorporation into the criminal group and involvement in its day-to-day operations. Figures of authority in criminal organisations, usually men, assess the potential recruits' character and skill set during casual meetings. Based on these first encounters, women may be asked to per-

²¹ Around half the women interviewed by Crisis Group had joined criminal organisations because of romantic relationships.

²² Drug sellers are known as shopkeepers (*tenderos*) because "little shops" (*tienditas*) are drug retail points. In this case, he was in debt to his suppliers. Mexican criminal organisations have adopted a form of punishment known as *tablazos*, in which a wet wooden plank is used to beat victims. The fact that it is wet makes it more painful and more likely to leave open wounds on the victim's body. Crisis Group interview, active member of a criminal group, Sonora, 17 August 2022.

form tasks that match their perceived abilities, most often when their partners are in prison.²³

Continuous exposure to members of criminal groups affects people's values and predisposes them to regard crime as a legitimate way to make a living.²⁴ Their readiness to break the law may have been kindled in the social environments where they grew up, which were often steeped in brutality and hardship. "We live in a different universe", said a psychologist at a prison in northern Mexico who has run psycho-social programs there for the past fifteen years. "What you or I consider good or bad is different for them, because they have been immersed in different values and have had extreme life experiences, full of violence of all kinds".²⁵

For women, intimate relationships with male members of criminal groups further reinforce their absorption of what scholars have called "criminal entrepreneurial logic", a process that helps prospective recruits rationalise illegal and violent activities as acceptable.²⁶ Romantic partners serve as the women's first coaches for the positions they will later occupy, often by casually sharing details of their responsibilities over time.²⁷ Hence, women's inaugural roles in their criminal careers often match those of their partners. One woman described her initiation into a criminal group as follows:

He [boyfriend] was a hitman and taught me how to shoot. At first, he let me play with his weapon, hold it. It was like a game. He let me take pictures [of myself holding the gun]. Then he asked if I wanted to learn how to shoot and ... he taught me. He gave me a gun and he liked that I always carried it in my purse. And so, I started to enjoy weapons. I learned how to clean and disassemble them. ... One day, he took me to a ranch, supposedly for a barbecue, and I saw how they burned some guys alive. ... I wanted to close my eyes, but he made me watch. ... He told

²³ None of the women interviewed by Crisis Group had expressed interest in joining the criminal groups before those higher up in the organisation asked them to perform a specific task. In some cases, they were reluctant to do so and were warned that support for their partners in prison would be withdrawn, or that they or their children could be targeted if they did not comply. The imprisonment of their partners made these women particularly vulnerable to intimidation and coercion because they were short of income and lacked family support and protection. Crisis Group interviews, former and active members of criminal groups, Sonora, 10-17 August 2022; Morelos, 4-6 October 2022; Zacatecas, 28-30 October 2022; and Baja California, 22-24 November 2022.

²⁴ According to scholar Karina García Reyes, the feeling of abandonment and isolation due to economic constraints, the perception of relative inequality and the feeling of being worthless as a human being are conditions that encourage the idea of joining a criminal group. Membership is perceived as a way of acquiring a sense of self and belonging. Karina García Reyes, *Morir es un Alivio* (Mexico City, 2021).

²⁵ Crisis Group, interview, prison psychologist, Baja California, 24 November 2022.

²⁶ Criminal entrepreneurial logic is understood as the perception that organising an illegal market requires skills like those needed to operate a legitimate business. Seen within the parameters of this logic, violent activities have no ethical, moral or legal connotations and are instead part of normal business activity. Robert Smith, "Understanding Entrepreneurial Behaviour in Organized Criminals", *Journal of Enterprising Communities: People and Places in the Global Economy*, vol. 3, no. 3 (2009); Karina García Reyes, "Violence Within: Understanding the Use of Violent Practices Among Mexican Drug Traffickers", *Justice in Mexico* (working paper series), vol. 16, no. 2 (November 2019).

²⁷ Crisis Group interviews, former and active members of criminal groups, Sonora, 10-17 August 2022; Morelos, 4-6 October 2022; Zacatecas, 28-30 October 2022; and Baja California, 22-24 November 2022.

me I had to become strong if I wanted to be with him. ... When the boss called, it was because he knew I already knew the job and I was good at it.²⁸

In many cases, becoming involved in criminal activity occurs naturally as part of a romantic relationship. Partners' requests to assist with tasks such as transporting illicit substances or weapons, renting a house or collecting money are common. The women agree as they would to other, more mundane requests.²⁹ In other instances, however, women find themselves coerced or tricked into participating in illegal ventures. Those who have difficulty making ends meet can find it particularly challenging to deflect overtures to perform criminal acts. Criminal group members can also adroitly manipulate women into joining their ranks, particularly when they recognise that the woman in question possesses valuable skills. According to an active member of a criminal group,

[The boss] told me that I was a very good worker, that he liked the way I treated my clients and that I always gave him what it was [the correct amount of money], no excuses, that I was someone reliable and that was hard to find among so many drug addicts and *chapulines* [traitors]. He never treated me badly. He was always very respectful, never rude or threatening. He is a gentleman, and that made me feel special. I also needed the money, because I had stopped working. When my husband went to prison, I had to bring him a lot of things and I had nowhere else to get money.³⁰

Crisis Group's interviews with active and former members of criminal groups showed that women's emotional ties to their children and partners can make them particularly susceptible to being recruited into these outfits.³¹ Women's traditional gender roles, especially their responsibilities vis-à-vis their children, can also make it harder for them to step away from criminal outfits. In the case of the women interviewed by Crisis Group, as noted below, leaving children behind in order to flee criminal clutches can only be done if they have a network of support, which is rare. In contrast, men often rely on women to raise their children; as a result, they can run away from criminal groups more easily.³²

B. *Drugs, Sexual Violence and Recruitment*

Many adolescents and young people – both men and women – who are drug users are easy prey for criminal organisations.³³ The risks that come with trying to buy and

²⁸ Crisis Group interview, former member of a criminal group, Morelos, 4 October 2022.

²⁹ Crisis Group interviews, former and active members of criminal groups, Sonora, 10-17 August 2022; Morelos, 4-6 October 2022; Zacatecas, 28-30 October 2022; and Baja California, 22-24 November 2022.

³⁰ Crisis Group interview, active member of a criminal group, Sonora, 16 August 2022.

³¹ Edith Carrillo Hernández, "¿Vinculadas al Narco?, Mujeres Presas por Delitos Contra la Salud", *Desacatos*, no. 38 (2012).

³² Carolina Agoff, Sveinung Sandberg and Gustavo Fondevila, "Women Providing and Men Free Riding: Work, Visits and Gender Roles in Mexican Prisons", *Victims and Offenders*, vol. 15, no. 7-8 (2020).

³³ 74.1 per cent of young offenders reported regular use of an addictive substance. See "Sistema Nacional de Vigilancia Epidemiológica de las Adicciones", Secretaría de Salud, 2021. While older

use illicit drugs are significant, and users find in these criminal networks a degree of protection, including the ability to retaliate physically against those who harass or victimise them.³⁴ These same illegal outfits can become a source of income as well, as users are invited to become lookouts, steal, or start selling or transporting drugs or firearms.³⁵

Criminal groups target locations where illicit drugs are sold, bought and used to recruit new members. Many of the young people – mostly children under the age of fifteen – who frequent these places face not only economic hardship, but also have little recourse to public services or support from communities that have often suffered steep declines in levels of trust and solidarity.³⁶ Under these conditions, armed groups offer not just a stable income, but also status and power.³⁷

Sometimes recruits are survivors of gender-based violence, which increases their vulnerability. One young woman told Crisis Group how she was abandoned by her father, had a distant relationship with her mother and had been sexually abused by an uncle. By the age of eleven, she was spending most of her days on the streets, where she felt more secure than at home. A drug dealer approached her after learning she wanted a mobile phone, asking her to sell several grams of crystal meth in exchange for one.³⁸ She proved to be a good saleswoman and received the promised phone. By the time she was fifteen, she was collecting money from several drug selling spots; by nineteen, she was running five drug retail shops in her neighbourhood.³⁹

women interviewed by Crisis Group did not generally use illicit drugs, younger ones used drugs more frequently. Surveys have likewise shown that the proportion of men in Mexico who use drugs has remained stable in recent years, but the percentage of women who partake has risen. The reason is likely the proliferation of criminal groups, which has exposed younger generations in particular to more addictive substances such as crystal meth. Mauricio López-Méndez et al., “Age-specific Rates of Onset of Cannabis Use in Mexico”, *Addictive Behaviors*, vol. 122 (2021).

³⁴ “Historias de Detención por Posesión Simple. Violaciones a Derechos Humanos Contra Población Usuaria de Drogas en México”, DDHH Elementa, ReverdeSer Colectivo, March 2021; Angélica Ospina-Escobar, “En el Fuego Cruzado: Pistas para Entender los Ataques Criminales a Centros de rehabilitación en México”, *Animal Político*, 10 July 2020.

³⁵ Crisis Group interviews, former and active members of criminal groups, Sonora, 10-17 August 2022; Morelos, 4-6 October 2022; Zacatecas, 28-30 October 2022; and Baja California, 22-24 November 2022.

³⁶ For example, in the 1970s poor neighbourhoods were often self-built, which meant that neighbours not only knew one another but took collective action to occupy land, put up houses and even establish public services. From 2000 onward, with violent crime on the rise, the spirit of solidarity in these communities withered and the space for conflict resolution shrank. See Loic Wacquant, *Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity* (Duke, 2009); Rossana Reguillo, *Necromáquina. Cuando Morir no es Suficiente* (Tlaquepaque, 2021); Angélica Ospina-Escobar, “Changes in the Dynamics of Drug Dealing and Use: A Generational Analysis for Hermosillo, Sonora”, *Frontera Norte*, vol. 31 (2019).

³⁷ Crisis Group interviews, former and active members of criminal groups, Sonora, 10-17 August 2022; Morelos, 4-6 October 2022; Zacatecas, 28-30 October 2022; and Baja California, 22-24 November 2022.

³⁸ Crystal meth is the common name for methamphetamine, a stimulant drug produced by Mexican criminal groups (among others). Its potent effects, along with its cheap price, have made it popular throughout the country.

³⁹ Crisis Group interview, former member of a criminal group, Sonora, 15 August 2023.

The sense of community and belonging that criminal groups provide is highly valued by girls and young women who have limited connections with their families or other social networks.⁴⁰ The physical and emotional abuse that often mars their home life and their experiences on the streets make them feel isolated and powerless, both as girls and later as women. “I was looking to not feel weird or useless, as my mother told me I was”, a young woman told Crisis Group. “That’s what you liked most about being in the cartel, hearing the stories of the others and realising that nobody loved us. ... That’s why these people become your family, because they understand you, they know your dreams and they care about you”.⁴¹

Criminal networks also afford young women the possibility of exacting revenge. Although they experience high levels of sexual violence, young women have scant prospects of getting judicial redress for the crimes against them.⁴² Proximity to criminal groups via drug use, however, gives women a means of settling old scores.⁴³

Two women told Crisis Group that they had been raped by people in their close social circles more than ten years ago, when they were teenagers. These crimes occurred when one was using crystal meth while the other, who was six months pregnant at the time of the rape, had stopped using meth but was still in a relationship with her boyfriend, a drug dealer. Because of their age and the fact that they felt they would be stigmatised by the judicial system, they did not report the rapes to the authorities.⁴⁴ Instead, they decided to ask hitmen to take revenge on their assailants. The girls asked to be present at the moment of the punishment, which included torturing and killing the men and disappearing the bodies. While they had never previously been witnesses to such a violent act, the women said their desire for revenge gave them the “courage” to watch the torture inflicted on their attackers. Shortly afterward, they received offers to join a unit of hired killers working for a local group, and eventually took up positions within the criminal organisation that had exacted vengeance on their behalf.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Jacqueline O’Neill, “Engaging Women in Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration”, *Inclusive Security*, 31 March 2015.

⁴¹ Crisis Group interview, former member of a criminal group, Morelos, 5 October 2022.

⁴² 99.7 per cent of cases of sexual violence experienced by women over eighteen years of age from July to December 2021 went unreported. “Crece la cifra negra de la violencia sexual: en 2021, el 99.7% de los casos no se denunciaron”, *México Evalúa*, 8 March 2022. More conservative estimates suggest that 78 per cent of women who experienced sexual or physical violence in 2021 did not seek help from anyone and did not file a complaint. “Encuesta Nacional sobre la Dinámica de las Relaciones en los Hogares – ENDIREH, 2021. Principales resultados”, INEGI, August 2022.

⁴³ Crisis Group interviews, former and active members of criminal groups, Sonora, 10-17 August 2022; Morelos, 4-6 October 2022; Zacatecas, 28-30 October 2022; and Baja California, 22-24 November 2022.

⁴⁴ The Inter-American Court of Human Rights has pointed out that how Mexican officials stigmatise women often affects investigations of violent crimes. “Violencia Contra las Mujeres e Impunidad. ¿Más allá del Punitivismo?”, *Equis Justicia Para las Mujeres*, December 2019; Angélica Ospina-Escobar, “Violencia Sexual y Reproductiva hacia mujeres que se inyectan drogas en la Frontera Norte de México. ¿La Frontera de los Derechos?”, *Cultura y Droga*, vol. 25, no. 30 (2020).

⁴⁵ Scholars have called this process whereby the exercise of violence transforms vulnerability into agency “necro-empowerment”. For these women, killing and torture became a source of self-affirmation in the face of their alienation and experience of sexual violence at a very young age. Sayak Valencia, *Capitalismo Gore* (Mexico City, 2022).

C. *Family Ties*

Women's deepening involvement in organised crime has resulted in higher rates of recruitment of their children. Surveys show that women overwhelmingly fulfil care duties in Mexican households.⁴⁶ As more women drift into crime, their growing participation in illegal groups can foster an intergenerational cycle of crime and violence.⁴⁷ In some cases, children are recruited as a means of punishing mothers who want to leave the criminal group.⁴⁸ In other instances, particularly when women are incarcerated and there are no adults who can properly care for their children, sons and daughters gravitate toward criminal syndicates for survival.⁴⁹ A woman reflected with pain on how her son had ended up in a criminal group in a misguided effort to help her:

When I went [to prison], my youngest son was ten. ... When he came to visit me, I had nothing to give him. ... We would see the other families eating at the tables next to us and we didn't even have a soda. One day he came to visit me very happy and showed me that he had \$15 to buy me whatever I wanted. I started to cry, and I asked him, 'What have you done, son?' He just hugged me and told me, 'What I had to do to buy you a proper meal in here'. ... That was when I knew he had started working as a hitman. He was fourteen years old.⁵⁰

Children may also perceive that their lawbreaking mother is a powerful force in their network of peers and neighbours, and leaders of these criminal groups can take advantage of these perceptions to recruit them. Women told Crisis Group that criminal bosses would approach their children with stories about their mother's role in the group as a ploy to encourage the kids to get involved in crime.⁵¹

There are other risks as well: kids who are left unprotected after their mothers join criminal groups or go to jail often drift toward criminal groups as a means of self-preservation. They tend to be bullied and ostracised, and often do poorly in school, if they attend at all.⁵² Some children also face stigma and discrimination in their neighbourhoods and schools for having a mother who is a criminal, particularly those who are left without their primary caregiver.⁵³ Many of these children move

⁴⁶ "El 75% de las personas que brindan cuidados del hogar en México son mujeres", *Forbes*, 3 October 2023.

⁴⁷ Eric Olson, "Familia, niños y delincuencia: La violencia como herencia", Inter-American Development Bank, 20 July 2018; and "El impacto social de la prisión femenina: Recomendaciones para una política pública en la materia", Centro de Políticas Públicas, Instituto de Sociología Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, 2012.

⁴⁸ Crisis Group interviews, former and active members of criminal groups, Sonora, 10-17 August 2022; Morelos, 4-6 October 2022; Zacatecas, 28-30 October 2022; and Baja California, 22-24 November 2022.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Crisis Group interview, former member of a criminal group, Baja California, 23 November 2022.

⁵¹ Crisis Group interviews with former and active members of criminal groups, Sonora, 10-17 August 2022; Morelos, 4-6 October 2022; Zacatecas, 28-30 October 2022; and Baja California, 22-24 November 2022.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

from home to home and are exposed to brutality and neglect.⁵⁴ Experts say many children who have been left without someone to care for them because of their involvement in organised crime are traumatised. One told Crisis Group:

In the shelter there was a boy whose mother and father had been killed because they were involved in drug trafficking. He was about ten years old. He had been staying with relatives for a while, but nobody wanted to look after him because he was a difficult child, very aggressive, with problems, so he ended up in there. He used to play pretending to be a killer; his father was a killer. He had a little medal of the Holy Death that belonged to his mother, and one day when he was fighting with another boy, he lost the medal and the boy started to cry like we had never seen before, he was devastated. We understood that this medal was all he had left of his parents who cared for him and loved him. Like him, there are many children here who we see with sadness that they will most likely follow in their parents' footsteps because there is no one to show them another possible path.⁵⁵

In rare cases, when women can seek support from extended family, they may send their kids to another city or even abroad, mainly the U.S., in order to shield the children from recruitment. Women who have more economic resources may decide to start a new life in a place where no one knows them, leaving their families behind. The fear of being found is always present, however, and can prevent them from developing new social networks. Sometimes, loneliness pushes women to return to their homes. When they do, it is only a matter of time before they and their children are sucked back into the criminal group.⁵⁶

The participation of women in organised crime and its impact on child recruitment has frayed the social fabric in many Mexican communities. Overall, the number of children and adolescents in criminal organisations has risen sharply over the last decade. Between 2019 and 2022, arrests of people aged up to eighteen on charges of homicide and causing injuries and crimes against health rose by 16 per cent. Meanwhile, arrests of people aged between nineteen and 25 increased by 65 per cent.⁵⁷ Approximately 250,000 minors concentrated in several Mexican regions were believed to be at risk of recruitment by armed groups in 2022.⁵⁸ Experts have noted that rising intergenerational dependence on crime is contributing to the worsening of armed conflict in parts of Mexico.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ Olson, "Familia, niños y delincuencia: La violencia como herencia", op. cit.; and "El impacto social de la prisión femenina: Recomendaciones para una política pública en la materia", op. cit.

⁵⁵ Crisis Group interview, Lizeth García, director, Provay, Ciudad Obregón, August 2022.

⁵⁶ Crisis Group interviews, former and active members of criminal groups, Sonora, 10-17 August 2022; Morelos, 4-6 October 2022; Zacatecas, 28-30 October 2022; and Baja California, 22-24 November 2022.

⁵⁷ "México Destruyendo el Futuro", *Animal Político* and México Unido Contra la Delincuencia, August 2023.

⁵⁸ Crisis Group interview, former member of a criminal group, Baja California, 23 November 2022. The Mexican states with the largest number of children recruited by criminal groups are Chihuahua, Tamaulipas, Guerrero, the State of Mexico, Michoacán, Zacatecas, Nuevo León, Sonora, Veracruz, Mexico City and Baja California. Yalina Ruiz, "Revelan que desde los 9 años, niños secuestran y matan para crimen organizado", *El Universal*, 5 May 2023.

⁵⁹ "Niñas, Niños y Adolescentes Reclutados por la Delincuencia Organizada", Reinserta, 2022.

IV. Roles and Duties in the Crime World

Women can be found in positions throughout the hierarchy of Mexican criminal groups, except for the top posts. As they gain skills valuable in the crime world, women begin to climb the ranks.⁶⁰ Those with strong administrative and logistical skills may be asked to maintain weapons and drug inventories and coordinate attacks on rival groups. These can include kidnappings and acts of extortion.

Women also have certain perceived operational advantages that can help them advance.⁶¹ Some told Crisis Group that criminal groups regard women as better suited to pass through crowds and operate in other public settings without being noticed, to be more observant and patient, and stay off the radar of the police and military. In essence, the groups are exploiting gender stereotypes that make women less likely to be suspected of wrongdoing than men. Many of the women with whom Crisis Group spoke had been praised by their criminal bosses for their self-discipline and sense of responsibility. Their bosses commended them for fulfilling their assigned tasks and their meticulous handling of money, drugs and weapons. Men in charge also gave them plaudits for not taking cash that did not belong to them.⁶²

Women interviewed by Crisis Group occupied five main positions within organised criminal groups: car thieves, drug-shop managers (*tenderas*), supervisors (*checadoras*), hitwomen (*sicarias*), leaders of criminal cells (*jefas de grupo*) and – on rare occasions – lieutenants directing the logistics of kidnapping, extortion and migrant trafficking.⁶³ While the people interviewed affirmed there are no positions within criminal groups that are reserved exclusively for men, the women all noted they had male supervisors and said they were not aware of any woman at the highest levels of these organisations.⁶⁴

Some women reported that they had worked as drug or weapons couriers before becoming part of the criminal structure itself. Carrying out these tasks can be understood as part of a series of tests that the interviewees had to pass to join the group. The jobs were not seen as formal positions in the organisation.

⁶⁰ Authors such as Corina Giacomello have highlighted the subordinate role of women in criminal structures, mainly as part of the “illicit survival economy”, but Crisis Group fieldwork indicates that a growing number of women are moving into the upper echelons. Corina Giacomello, *Género, Drogas y Prisión: Experiencias de Mujeres Privadas de su Libertad en México* (Mexico City, 2013). The term “illicit survival economy” refers to low-level positions in the chain of criminal activity, including small-scale producers, brokers, transporters and counterfeiters, who are not part of the payroll and can be easily replaced. García Reyes, “Violence Within: Understanding the Use of Violent Practices Among Mexican Drug Traffickers”, op. cit.

⁶¹ Crisis Group interviews, former and active members of criminal groups, Sonora, 10-17 August 2022; Morelos, 4-6 October 2022; Zacatecas, 28-30 October 2022; and Baja California, 22-24 November 2022.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Women interviewed for this report were part of the Sinaloa Cartel, Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generación, Cartel del Sur and Los Zetas. Within each group, there is high degree of specialisation of tasks. Work is carried out in isolated cells, coordinated by the “chief”, often a man, who oversees the criminal activity in question in the whole municipality.

⁶⁴ Crisis Group interviews, former and active members of criminal groups, Sonora, 10-17 August 2022; Morelos, 4-6 October 2022; Zacatecas, 28-30 October 2022; and Baja California, 22-24 November 2022.

A. *Car Thieves*

Women interviewed by Crisis Group emphasised that one of the most attractive aspects of auto theft was that it did not usually involve violence. Bosses send precise specifications as to the car they want, which must be delivered at the time and place requested. The job pays well and has flexible hours, which allows them to do domestic work and care for family members. “I was with my children all day, I was a normal housewife and at night, I put them to bed and then I went to work”, said a car thief. “I was always back before they woke up. That’s why I was very careful, because if I was arrested, my children would be alone and that made me very worried”.⁶⁵ Another said: “At first I was very scared to work for a cartel, but then I saw that I just had to be skilful and smart. Most of the time I didn’t even have to take a car when somebody was inside it, but just take it from the street, so it became easy”.⁶⁶

Car thieves must have the manual dexterity to open the car doors and move the vehicles, as well as the ability to outwit drivers when carjacking occupied vehicles, which is sometimes made easier when people at the wheel are distracted using transport apps. Gender stereotypes enable women car thieves to go unnoticed by the police and even onlookers, minimising the need to use violence to steal the car.⁶⁷ Criminal groups also encourage women to flirt if they are stopped by male police officers or at military checkpoints to distract the security personnel, enabling them to escape.⁶⁸

B. *Shopkeepers*

Tenderas (shopkeepers) are in charge of the retail sale of drugs in a designated area, often working twelve-hour shifts. They receive their stock of illegal substances, sell it to customers and hand over the money to their bosses at the end of the shift. The position does not necessarily entail a permanent post in the criminal group, but it is often a gateway into the organisation for those who demonstrate the right aptitude. Most shopkeepers are paid in proportion to the volume of their sales and are allowed to set their own prices (and thus widen their profit margins), as long as they deliver the exact amount of money expected by the end of their shift.⁶⁹

According to the women Crisis Group spoke to, male supervisors often view women through traditional gender stereotypes and associate women with responsibility and care. For example, interviewees repeatedly said women in charge of the shops use drugs as much as men, but they are in general perceived to be more disciplined in managing resources and accounts and assumed to adhere to a code of conduct with their clients. Moreover, these women said they conformed with some of these expectations: mentioning not selling drugs to children, not cheating customers

⁶⁵ Crisis Group interview, former member of criminal group, Baja California, 23 November 2022.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Crisis Group interviews, former members of criminal groups, Baja California, 22-24 November 2022.

⁶⁸ Crisis Group interviews, former members of criminal group, Baja California, 24 November 2022.

⁶⁹ Crisis Group interviews, former and active members of criminal groups, Sonora, 10-17 August 2022; Morelos, 4-6 October 2022; Zacatecas, 28-30 October 2022; and Baja California, 22-24 November 2022.

about the quantity or quality of the substances sold, and dressing inconspicuously to prevent customers from flirting with them.⁷⁰

Interviewees said they are aware of the expectations that men, both their superiors and their clients, harbour regarding women's behaviour, and try hard not to unsettle these stereotypes. They said *tenderas* must be serious with their customers, but polite and not too forceful. They must be clear and direct in stopping romantic advances from the men they interact with, but not aggressive. They must show respect for their superiors, for example, by always asking permission to start selling new drugs, always introducing them to their romantic partners and asking permission before bringing them to the shop, and never buying illicit drugs from competitors.⁷¹

C. Supervisors

Shopkeepers are supervised by *checadoras*, who distribute drugs to retail points and make sure shops are delivering the correct amount of money. They also check that the shop managers are selling only their criminal group's products, and not undercutting the quantity or quality of the drugs.⁷² Because they distribute large amounts of money and drugs throughout neighbourhoods and beyond – not to mention operate as the bridge between the cell leaders and the shop managers – *checadoras* must be highly trusted by cell leaders.⁷³

There are multiple paths to becoming a *checadora*. Sometimes, cell leaders appoint supervisors they know from outside the criminal world, including childhood friends, partners or relatives. Even with these personal connections, trust between the *checadoras* and the boss needs to be nurtured constantly, mostly through displays of loyalty. Others started as *tenderas* and were promoted because of their allegiance to the cell coordinator or lieutenant (*jefe de plaza*).⁷⁴ Supervisors are expected to report any irregularities observed in the shops, keep a distance from the shop managers, and avoid too much contact with them in the absence of the local cell leader so as not to arouse suspicion.⁷⁵

Checadoras also find that maintaining good communication and trust with their bosses strengthens their hand when dealing with shopkeepers, who are often nonplussed when women occupy positions of power inside the organisation. “We know

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² To increase their profits, dealers often cut illicit drugs with other substances or lighten a bag's weight below what was advertised. *Checadoras* need to be attuned to detail to notice if a bag has been tampered with. One woman mentioned noting how the bags are sealed; if she sees a broken seal, she reports it. Crisis Group interview, former member of a criminal group, Morelos, 5 October 2022.

⁷³ “Niñas, Niños y Adolescentes Reclutados por la Delincuencia Organizada”, op. cit.; Francisco Cuamea, “Droga, Sangre y Dinero. Narcomenudeo. La Evolución de los Carteles”, *Noreste*, 2017; and García Reyes, “Violence Within: Understanding the Use of Violent Practices Among Mexican Drug Traffickers”, op. cit.

⁷⁴ Crisis Group interviews, former and active members of criminal groups, Sonora, 10-17 August 2022; Morelos, 4-6 October 2022; and Baja California, 22-24 November 2022.

⁷⁵ Crisis Group interviews, former and active members of criminal groups, Sonora, 10-17 August 2022; Morelos, 4-6 October 2022; Zacatecas, 28-30 October 2022; and Baja California, 22-24 November 2022.

that men don't like it when a woman arrives [to supervise them]", a *checadora* said. "I came to the shop and asked [the shop manager and his employees] to show me the bags of drugs they were selling. They just laughed at me and slammed the door in my face. ... So, I made a phone call, and instants later, they came out with their tails between their legs. 'No ... oh, excuse me'. And whether you like it or not, that gives you power".⁷⁶

As is the case with car thieves, the supervisory role is not excessively demanding in terms of time, which allows women to devote time to their children or other care-taking duties. Supervisors have responsibilities at the beginning of the day, when they distribute illicit drugs to their various retail points, and at the end of the day, when they collect the money from sales. Occasionally, *checadoras* also transport weapons from one place to another. If the accounts are out of balance, the supervisors must immediately report the anomaly to the cell leader, but they are normally not responsible for imposing or enforcing penalties.⁷⁷

The *checadora's* role attracts women for other reasons, too. Within the realm of organised crime, women often covet a supervisory position because people in these roles are less likely to come to the authorities' attention. They are mobile rather than posted in one place, and therefore can avoid attracting notice. Strikingly, none of the women interviewed by Crisis Group went to jail while fulfilling the role of *checadora*. In encounters with law enforcement or the military, women in this role promptly contacted the boss, who took the steps needed to secure their release, including by coordinating with police officers on the groups' payrolls.⁷⁸ The close relationship *checadoras* maintain with cell leaders, coupled with their possession of valuable information, makes them indispensable to a criminal group. One interviewee, the widow of a former commander of the powerful Los Zetas, worked for the organisation for over ten years in various positions, including as a *checadora*. She explained the benefits of this position as follows:

Of all the jobs I had, the one I liked the most was *checadora*, because I was able to take it easier. It was just handing over and picking up and that was it, you know what I mean? Nobody messed with me because of who my husband was, not even the guys. ... Once we were stopped at a checkpoint [by the military], but it was just a matter of calling and they let us pass, because at that time the plaza [the turf] was ours and everything was settled.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Crisis Group interview, former member of criminal group, Baja California, 24 November 2022.

⁷⁷ Crisis Group interviews, former and active members of criminal groups, Sonora, 10-17 August 2022; Morelos, 4-6 October 2022; Zacatecas, 28-30 October 2022; and Baja California, 22-24 November 2022.

⁷⁸ "Twice I was stopped by the police, but because [the criminal organisation was] always in collusion with the police, it was just a search. They [the police] would take what we were carrying, and we would call [the boss] and that was it. They would let us go, but they would just keep what we were carrying, drugs, money, whatever, but nothing happened to us". Crisis Group interview, former member of criminal group, Zacatecas, 30 October 2022.

⁷⁹ Crisis Group interview, former member of Los Zetas, Zacatecas, 27 October 2022.

D. *Assassins and Logistics Coordinators*

Irrespective of gender, *sicarios* (hired killers) – together with cell leaders and lieutenants – play the most violent roles in criminal groups, including murdering and disposing of bodies to prevent identification. They receive training in weapons handling, body dismemberment and disposal, and escape tactics in the presence of enemy groups or security forces. Sometimes the job entails attending training camps run by criminal groups. In other cases, recruits acquire skills via informal training with their partners or close friends.⁸⁰ Cell leaders or lieutenants directly recruit *sicarios*, assigning them tasks, providing them with weapons and remunerating them for their work. All these responsibilities require high levels of trust and communication; discretion and effective task execution are highly valued qualities.⁸¹

Several women *sicarias* told Crisis Group that retrograde gender stereotypes can both prepare them to be assassins and enable them to escape the attention of state authorities. Patriarchal norms exhorting women to be quiet and submissive are still present in many parts of Mexican society. Because many women in Mexico are raised to go unnoticed, it can be easier for them not to draw attention to themselves.⁸² In addition, their gender can facilitate gaining access to their victims, who are usually men. People may let their guard down around women because they are not expected to be killers. In some cases, exploiting their “femininity” gives them access to victims in a way that may not be available to men.⁸³

Sicarias seemed keen to rationalise their lethal work in interviews. They presented themselves as agents of retribution, portraying their targets as men associated with criminal factions notorious for violence and egregious mistreatment of women.⁸⁴ They uniformly stressed the ways they differed from male killers, underscoring that they did not inflict harm on or kill innocent individuals, including minors. Their prevailing justification for their violent acts was that they were forced to choose between preserving their own life or that of their victim.⁸⁵

Some women also act as the logistical coordinators of kidnapping, extortion and migrant smuggling rackets. These crimes require planning, such as tracking down the person to be kidnapped and deciding when and where the person should be grabbed, renting the house where the hostage will be held, collecting extortion money and transporting migrants from one state to another. Criminal groups like to employ women in these roles because they invite less scrutiny when renting a house or a ranch, and they can act as a guide or escort for groups of migrants without attracting the authorities' attention.⁸⁶

⁸⁰ Crisis Group interview, former member of a criminal group, Morelos, 6 October 2022.

⁸¹ Crisis Group interviews, former and active members of criminal groups, Sonora, 10-17 August 2022; Morelos, 4-6 October 2022; Zacatecas, 28-30 October 2022; and Baja California, 22-24 November 2022.

⁸² Crisis Group interview, former member of Los Zetas, Zacatecas, 27 October 2022.

⁸³ Crisis Group interviews, former members of criminal groups, Morelos, 6 October 2022; Baja California, 22-24 November 2022.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Crisis Group interviews, former and active members of criminal groups, Sonora, 10-17 August 2022; and Zacatecas, 28-30 October 2022.

E. Cell Coordinators

Some women become *jefas de grupo* (cell coordinators). Those interviewed for this report described the post in similar ways. They managed groups of ten to twenty individuals; they were in charge of recruiting new members; they controlled who had weapons; they determined appropriate sanctions for individuals who breached the organisation's internal regulations; and they launched attacks on rival groups within a specific geographic area. *Jefas de grupo* also are often involved in other crimes such as kidnapping, torture and "disappearance". They operate under the orders of the criminal lieutenant or *jefe de plaza*, who are usually men.⁸⁷

The women who spoke with Crisis Group explained *jefa de grupo* was a demanding role, and that they had to be available 24 hours a day and live with other members of the criminal outfit. Together they resided in secure houses where weapons, money and drugs are stashed. They always had to be on guard, which required remaining alert for long periods. As a result, people occupying this role often rely on stimulants and are prone to substance abuse. Leaving the secure house alone or taking days off was no simple matter. "If I wanted to take a day to visit my daughter", a cell coordinator said, "I had to ask the boss for permission two weeks in advance, because someone has to look after the house".⁸⁸

The level of time commitment required from cell coordinators meant relinquishing regular contact with their families. While sacrificing frequent family contact is a requirement of this position regardless of gender, the role of many women caring for children or the elderly meant they had to make alternative arrangements with their extended family. In some cases, cell coordinators entirely lost contact with their children when the relationship with their family was strained.⁸⁹ The women Crisis Group spoke to repeatedly mentioned that forsaking regular contact with their children was one of the most difficult parts of being a cell coordinator. It was justified only by the salary they earned, which allowed them to give whatever the children asked for.⁹⁰

For many cell coordinators, however, the distance from their families was worth it because their power within the criminal group translated into protection for their relatives from general crime.⁹¹ Yet women in these positions of power constantly worry about being betrayed. For good reason: if they should lose the loyalty of their staff and bosses, they could be killed. Some women in high-ranking positions make a point of sympathising with and taking good care of their team, largely in the interest of self-preservation. One former *jefa de grupo* said: "I liked to spoil them, especially after a job where they did really well. I had a pool and I would throw pool parties for them. I would invite some girlfriends and give them each [a gram of cocaine] and lots of

⁸⁷ Crisis Group interviews, former and active members of criminal groups, Sonora, 10-17 August 2022; Morelos, 4-6 October 2022; Zacatecas, 28-30 October 2022; and Baja California, 22-24 November 2022.

⁸⁸ Crisis Group interview, former member of criminal group, Sonora, 10 August 2022.

⁸⁹ Crisis Group interviews, former and active members of criminal groups, Sonora, 10-17 August 2022; Morelos, 4-6 October 2022; and Baja California, 22-24 November 2022.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Crisis Group interviews, former and active members of criminal groups, Sonora, 10-17 August 2022; Morelos, 4-6 October 2022; Zacatecas, 28-30 October 2022; and Baja California, 22-24 November 2022.

drinks and food, so they would be happy. If they were happy, I was protected; if not, I was worthless".⁹²

All cell coordinators interviewed by Crisis Group reported that – compared to men in the same position – they thought of themselves as more attentive and responsive to their staff's family needs. They paid medical bills, lawyers' fees and funeral expenses; lent money for home improvement projects; offered protection and financial support when their employees were robbed or engaged in neighbourhood quarrels; and helped them fight for legal custody of their children. They would also acknowledge the hardships that come with the job, trying to forge strong bonds among the group's members to help them deal with isolation from their family. "We form a kind of family among the thugs. ... Everyone looks after each other", a *jefa* explained.⁹³

The former cell coordinators and heads of hit squads interviewed for this report had weekly meetings with the male lieutenant of the criminal syndicate, where they briefed him on the challenges they faced. These events, where the boss – always a man – presided over the distribution of rewards and punishments, were crucial for gaining status beyond the confines of the cell's territory.

F. *Violence and Status*

Positions with higher status in a criminal organisation demand a readiness to use physical violence, whether against rival groups or as punishment for colleagues who transgress the group's internal rules.⁹⁴ While both men and women must be willing to use violence, it can have particular importance for women's advancement within the group, due to gender stereotypes and the need to disprove them. In essence, women must show that they can be as violent as their male partners. Women at higher levels can feel compelled to make a display of their authority by violating gender norms, including by making threats and using extreme violence.⁹⁵ A *jefa* described to Crisis Group how she used her willingness to use violence to deal with situations where male subordinates challenged her authority:

I was the only woman. And they didn't like that. ... There were times when I would be there and someone would say, 'A woman can't give me orders'. And without a word I'd take out my nine and I'd point it at his head, and I'd say, 'Hey, get off my back. I'm the boss here and if you don't like it, my son, then split'. And if he didn't accept it, I would shoot him right there and the others would take care of the body because the boss didn't like us leaving a mess. So, they knew what I was like.⁹⁶

If they want to ascend the hierarchy in a criminal syndicate, women must demonstrate they can withstand physical abuse as well as any male recruit. Being stoic when subjected to bodily punishment is a way for women to demonstrate they accept the

⁹² Crisis Group interview, former member of a criminal group, Morelos, 4 October 2022.

⁹³ Crisis Group interview, former member of criminal group, Baja California, 24 November 2022.

⁹⁴ Crisis Group interviews, former and active members of criminal groups, Sonora, 10-17 August 2022; Morelos, 4-6 October 2022; Zacatecas, 28-30 October 2022; and Baja California, 22-24 November 2022.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Crisis Group interview, former member of criminal group, Baja California, 23 November 2022.

group's norms and codes of conduct – and show resilience. One of the women reflected on her ability to endure punishments in the following terms:

The head of the hit squad didn't like me. ... He always wanted to get me in trouble with the boss. So he told the boss that I was selling drugs for another cartel. He made them torture me, but I didn't shed a tear. He even kidnapped my child, and another time they beat me so badly that they broke my nose and an arm. ... I never cried or begged. They thought that because I was a woman they would break me quickly, but not me. That's why the boss respected me a lot. Each time I endured such tortures, he gave me more and more responsibility. That's how I became his counsellor and confidant.⁹⁷

Of course, for some women the costs and risks of working for – much less trying to rise in – an organised criminal outfit are simply too much. But finding a way out has its own challenges.

⁹⁷ Crisis Group interview, former member of criminal group, Morelos, 6 October 2022.

V. Exit, Flight and Imprisonment

Leaving a criminal outfit tends to be arduous, and for many women going to jail is the only way out. Some recruits enter the group with the promise of a temporary arrangement, but crime bosses may decide differently, threatening the women or their families if they attempt to leave.⁹⁸ A few women mentioned that the only way to leave the organisation is to flee, changing their place of residence and identity; but if they have children, flight becomes more difficult.⁹⁹ Many of the women Crisis Group spoke to recoiled at the idea of fleeing without their kids. “I live for my children”, said a prisoner. “They are my reason for being. I’m nothing without them”.¹⁰⁰ Fleeing also requires financial and social resources, which most women at lower levels of criminal groups do not have.

In truth, fleeing appears to be more fantasy than reality: none of the women interviewed had attempted to do it themselves, and those they knew who had created a new identity in another city eventually returned home.¹⁰¹ In some cases, criminal leaders kill women attempting to flee the enterprise. In other instances, bosses will in effect trap women into staying by establishing a set amount of money that needs to be repaid before members can leave the organisation. Often, they change the terms of the arrangement unilaterally. “The boss told me that if I didn’t cooperate, I would have to pay, and I got really scared”, one woman, who was the head of a crime cell for more than ten years, said. “He told me that it was only until I paid what I owed, which was \$500, but they never let me go. They always threatened me”.¹⁰²

On the other hand, sometimes groups decide to force out women whom they deem no longer of value. In these cases, members may turn the person in question over to the police or judicial authorities.¹⁰³ Many women interviewed by Crisis Group said once a group decided to oust a member a trap would be set for him or her, often through collusion with the police.¹⁰⁴ This threat weighs heavily on mothers of young

⁹⁸ Crisis Group interviews, former and active members of criminal groups, Sonora, 13 August 2022; Morelos, 4 October 2022; Zacatecas, 28 October 2022; and Baja California, 22-24 November 2022.

⁹⁹ Crisis Group interviews, former and active members of criminal groups, Morelos, 4-6 October 2022; Zacatecas, 28-30 October 2022; and Baja California, 22-24 November 2022.

¹⁰⁰ Crisis Group interviews, former member of criminal group, Baja California, 23 November 2022.

¹⁰¹ One woman who spoke to Crisis Group decided to return because she wanted to be reunited with her children, who were in her parents’ care. Another went back to her native city after her son, who had been arguing with his mother because he missed his friends, ran away from the new home. Crisis Group interviews, former members of criminal groups, Zacatecas, 28 October 2022; and Baja California, 23 November 2022.

¹⁰² Crisis Group interview, former member of a criminal group, Morelos, 5 October 2022.

¹⁰³ Crisis Group interviews, former and active members of criminal groups, Sonora, 10-17 August 2022; Morelos, 4-6 October 2022; Zacatecas, 28-30 October 2022; and Baja California, 22-24 November 2022.

¹⁰⁴ One interviewee said, “They took me to a safe house and said, ‘We’re going to give you these little bags, you’re going to sell them and you’re going to make ten pesos each’. So, I said, ‘No way. You know I don’t work like that. I’m not going to work for ten pesos’. Then they called the boss ... and I heard the boss say ‘Shoot her’. I got on my knees, and all of a sudden the radio rings again and the boss says, ‘You know what? Put the bags in her stuff, buy some witnesses and let her fuck in jail’. ... They took me to the PGR [prosecution service]. They put me in a cell, and they told a federal officer,

children who have no family support.¹⁰⁵ Although men are also subject to patterns of control and intimidation in criminal groups, women's roles as mothers and caregivers make them particularly vulnerable; if they go to jail, there might be no one to take care of their kids.¹⁰⁶

In most cases, criminal groups assume that members in effect leave the ranks as soon as they enter jail, particularly when they played lowlier roles, such as stealing cars. If arrested, women in these positions often find themselves with less bargaining power than their male counterparts. Because of the more limited nature of their relationship with members of the criminal group, they are often unaware of the true identities and whereabouts of their associates. As a result, they have little intelligence to offer the justice system and often get harsher sentences than men. Furthermore, once incarcerated, these members are frequently abandoned by the criminal group.¹⁰⁷ How they fare in the judicial system often depends on having enough money to hire a private lawyer.¹⁰⁸ A number of interviewees felt they had been discarded by their organisations, costing them not only their source of income and their savings, but also the status they once had. They expressed regret for their criminal past and willingness to give reparations to their victims.¹⁰⁹

Crisis Group's research also identified other ways in which imprisonment could shape the relationship between jailed criminal group members and their organisations. Some women maintained their links with criminal groups. If they were considered major assets because of the information they had and the type of activity they carried out, the organisation might continue to pay their salaries and put resources toward enabling their rapid release from prison and attaining better living conditions for them while inside.¹¹⁰ These women had less desire to quit lives of crime, in part because they knew that without the support of the criminal groups they would face harsher conditions and longer sentences. They were also extremely worried about leaving their children without protection and financial support. "It's a dead end because you know they won't do you a favour without asking for your soul in return,

'She's M [informant's name]'. That was it. I spent seven years in prison". Crisis Group interview, Morelos, 5 October 2022.

¹⁰⁵ Crisis Group interview, former member of a criminal group, Baja California, 23 November 2022.

¹⁰⁶ For examples of methods used by criminal groups to control and intimidate male members, see Falko Ernst, "The Life and Death of a Mexican Hitman", Crisis Group Commentary, 17 October 2018. See also García Reyes, *Morir es un Alivio*, op. cit.; Alejandro Santos Gil, "An inside look at Mexico's Sinaloa cartel", *El País*, 16 February 2022; and Edith Carrillo Hernández, "¿Vinculadas al Narco?, Mujeres Presas por Delitos Contra la Salud", *Desacatos*, no. 38 (2012), pp. 61-72. For studies of the differential impact of men's and women's incarceration on children, see Nathalie Alvarado, "¿Cómo lidiar con la desigualdad de género en nuestras cárceles?", Inter-American Development Bank, 12 March 2019; and "Enfoque de género en materia de mujeres privadas de su libertad", Inter-American Court of Human Rights, 2022.

¹⁰⁷ Crisis Group interviews, former and active members of criminal groups, Sonora, 10-17 August 2022; Morelos, 4-6 October 2022; Zacatecas, 28-30 October 2022; and Baja California, 22-24 November 2022.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

but without that favour you rot in prison and, worse, your family suffers”, one inmate explained.¹¹¹

Women's experience of incarceration may also hinge on whether the state actually controls the prison where they are held. That is not a given: one in three prisons in Mexico is run by criminal groups, according to the National Human Rights Commission.¹¹² Experts observe that in these cases it is men, many of them incarcerated, who are in charge of the jail.¹¹³ As the men's and women's wings are often conjoined, women may be brought into the men's section during parties and other social events, where they are forced to perform sexual and other acts as entertainment for the men. Conversely, the Commission reported in 2015 that women who continue to be supported by criminal groups while incarcerated were sometimes able to impose a kind of governance in jails, distributing food, assigning cleaning duties, deciding who could get educational services and/or applying sanctions such as prolonged solitary confinement.¹¹⁴ In these cases, being part of the criminal group provided the women with control of the conditions in which they served out their sentences.

¹¹¹ Crisis Group interview, member of criminal group, Sonora, 12 August 2022.

¹¹² “Pronunciamiento para la adopción de medidas urgentes que garanticen la debida operatividad, seguridad y gobernabilidad en los centros penitenciarios del país a fin de proteger los derechos humanos de las personas privadas de la libertad, sus visitas y del personal que labora en los mismos”, Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos, 2023.

¹¹³ “Informe Especial de la Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos Sobre las Mujeres Internas en los Centros de Reclusión en la República Mexicana”, Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos, 2015; and Crisis Group interview, Ángela Guerrero, director, CEA Justicia Social, Mexico City, August 2022.

¹¹⁴ “Informe Especial de la Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos Sobre las Mujeres Internas en los Centros de Reclusión en la República Mexicana”, op. cit.

VI. Curbing Women's Involvement in Crime

As discussed, women interviewed by Crisis Group did not exclusively point to economic survival as the reason for joining criminal organisations. Rather, some said they participated to gain control of their lives, exact revenge, feel part of a community and strive for personal advancement. Mexican society is characterised by systemic injustice, widespread impunity, deep poverty and pervasive gender-based violence.¹¹⁵ The opportunity to obtain greater autonomy and, in some cases, wield power is alluring.

Efforts to check women's involvement in organised crime must therefore address the conditions that have spurred women to join violent groups. There is some institutional architecture for doing so. Mexico's gender policy is led by the National Institute of Women (Inmujeres), which aims to promote equality by mainstreaming gender in public policies. Mexico also has a National Action Plan for implementing the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security, which outlines objectives and activities in defence of the human rights of women and girls living in conflict settings, and on behalf of women's participation in peace and security.¹¹⁶ The plan was launched ahead of Mexico's term on the UN Security Council in 2020 as a way of demonstrating support for women's empowerment. But despite this framework, critics note, progress toward achieving gender equality and preventing gender-based violence has been slow, due to lack of high-level political will or community engagement.¹¹⁷

Recognising the implications for Mexican women, their families and their communities, the Mexican state should shift course, and treat more seriously and systematically the need to address women's participation in organised crime. The government can do so through more concerted efforts to staunch the drivers that propel women into criminal livelihoods, and to provide off-ramps for women who are part of criminal groups or incarcerated because of their affiliation but who want to leave their criminal past behind.

A. Addressing Drug Abuse as a Gateway into Crime

As discussed, drug use is often women's gateway into criminal groups. Former members of criminal groups interviewed for this report voiced willingness to quit lives of crime, as well as remorse for the harm they have caused to society. They also displayed a desire to repair the damage they did as members of violent criminal groups. There are, however, scant job opportunities or social services for these women once they get out of jail. Nor are there many psychological support programs that would enable women to cope with the violence they have endured during their time in the underworld. To capitalise on their yearning to change, recovering drug users should be offered greater access to such programs.

¹¹⁵ Nubia Zulma Flores Nieto, "Corruption and Impunity in Mexico", *Transcience*, vol. 14, no. 2 (2023).

¹¹⁶ "National Action Plan to Follow Up on Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) on Women, Peace and Security", Secretary of Foreign Affairs, Government of Mexico, 11 January 2021.

¹¹⁷ Crisis Group interview, Carlos De La Rosa, legal researcher, Supreme Court, Mexico City, 10 February 2023.

The range of services available for women who use drugs needs to be expanded, ideally with international donor support. Access to state-sponsored drug addiction treatments is very limited in Mexico. Most of these programs involve compulsory treatment, which requires people to be confined for at least three months. Women find it difficult to meet this requirement due to their responsibilities as caregivers and lack of social support. Moreover, facilities and programs that cater to women's needs, experiences and priorities are scarce.¹¹⁸

State authorities, with donor support, should aim to build community centres or halfway houses where women can receive drug abuse treatment without being hospitalised, and where they can get other social services such as child care, general health care, peer support and job training. The interior ministry's Social Reconstruction Initiative – which seeks to assist communities in high-violence areas by boosting public services and leisure opportunities, as well as creating jobs – could collaborate with the National Commission Against Addictions to set up these facilities in neighbourhoods with high levels of violent crime.

Women who have perpetrated acts of violence should also have a chance to right the wrongs they have done.¹¹⁹ The government could encourage their involvement in local peacebuilding initiatives. An outstanding example of such an initiative is the ES.PE.RE project, which is running in several states in northern Mexico, including Sinaloa and Sonora, as well as in Colombia. This program encourages participants to reflect upon the experiences of armed conflict or lives of crime in group settings over several months. The project has provided tangible benefits for participants, particularly in terms of mental well-being and development of personal goals. It has also promoted the involvement of former inmates in economic activities at the community level.¹²⁰

B. *Women's Participation in Community Programs*

Young women told Crisis Group that they wanted to join criminal groups because, for the first time in their lives, they felt listened to and valued. Local community centres, organisations or clubs where young women can participate in the same way as young men might help deter them from entering a criminal network. Zulu Warriors Nation, a project run by young people in Honduras, offers an example of a successful

¹¹⁸ For example, of the drug abuse treatment centres registered with the National Centre Against Addictions (Conadic), only 10.4 per cent are exclusively for women. Moreover, these programs are not tailored to meet the needs of many of their participants: they do not offer sexual and reproductive health services; pregnant women and those with children are usually not admitted; and their staff are not trained to provide counselling and health care that takes into account the legacy of gender-based violence. In addition, the stay is longer for women than for men (50 per cent of women report staying between three and six months, and 46 per cent longer than six months, while in 65 per cent of men's cases the stay lasts a maximum of three months). In some cases, women are confined longer at their family's request. Angélica Ospina-Escobar, "La oferta de servicios de tratamiento para el uso de sustancias dirigido a mujeres", *Animal Político*, 4 October 2022.

¹¹⁹ Sandra Jovchelovitch, María Cecilia Dedios and Natalia Concha, "Forgiveness as a vehicle to improve wellbeing in post-conflict Colombia", London School of Economics (blog), December 2021.

¹²⁰ Crisis Group interview, Gabriele Pérez, director, ES.PE.RE, Culiacán, August 2023.

peacebuilding approach in an extremely violent setting.¹²¹ This program provides young people with arts and sports groups based on their interests, including the organisation of competitions where members can develop leadership skills and gain recognition from their peers and other community members.¹²² These initiatives should be funded by the state but run by civil society groups, which tend to have more community knowledge and experience working with young people.¹²³ At the heart of these initiatives is the goal of giving young women a greater sense of competence, usefulness, belonging and power.

Part of the challenge will be increasing women's participation in community-based programs that are already available. NGO representatives and local authorities agree that young women participate less than men in these initiatives, in part due to time constraints and family expectations. "Young women are overworked", said a social worker from Ciudad Obregón, Sonora, "because they have to help at home in addition to attending school, and parents do not want their daughters to spend too much time outside the home".¹²⁴ Promoting young women's participation will entail persuading their parents to let them join these groups, which could require financial support from the state. Their participation also hinges on how relevant the project is to young women's lives. Some schemes appear overly shaped by gender stereotypes; for example, the assumption that women want to work as hairstylists or make handicrafts.¹²⁵ Practitioners told Crisis Group that some women wanted financial education or training in entrepreneurship skills, but these were not on offer.¹²⁶

Schools could also play a vital role in helping guide girls away from joining criminal groups and bolstering their community engagement.¹²⁷ Mentoring programs in coordination with local NGOs specialised in crime prevention have worked in some parts of the U.S.¹²⁸ Schools should also aim to coordinate more closely with other public institutions and civil society groups in their localities, making particular use of after-school programs as a means of violence prevention.¹²⁹ The National Institute of Women, in alliance with the interior ministry's recently created Social Reconstruction Initiative, could also work with civil society and community organisations, espe-

¹²¹ "Dilemas del estado de excepción en Honduras", video, Crisis Group, 13 July 2023. See also the work of the Warriors Zulu Nation organisation in Honduras.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Studies have shown that young women's involvement in these projects has promoted sustainable peacebuilding in places like El Salvador and Rwanda. "A Study into the Ways to Better Incorporate Women into Peacebuilding and Conflict Resolution through the Implementation of UNSCR 1325", Democratic Progress Institute, November 2014.

¹²⁴ Crisis Group interview, social worker for state government of Sonora, 25 January 2023.

¹²⁵ Crisis Group interview, Claudia Alarcón, penitentiary specialist, Mexico City, 11 February 2023. See also Michelle Dolinar, "Gender Inclusivity & DDR in Colombia: Recommendations for Achieving Women's Empowerment and Sustainable Peace", *Global Affairs Review*, 25 March 2019.

¹²⁶ Crisis Group interview, Maissa Hubert, director, Equis Justicia Para las Mujeres, Mexico City, 9 February 2023.

¹²⁷ "A Study into the Ways to Better Incorporate Women into Peacebuilding and Conflict Resolution through the Implementation of UNSCR 1325", op. cit.

¹²⁸ Corinne David-Ferdon et al., "Youth Violence Prevention Resource for Action: A Compilation of the Best Available Evidence", National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

cially women-led groups, in formulating school-based crime prevention initiatives.¹³⁰ To support this project, foreign donors could earmark funding for projects targeting adolescent girls.

C. *Reinsertion and Reintegration of Jailed Women*

Even though Mexico's long-term goal should be to dismantle criminal groups, the state should in the near term open pathways to promote the efficient reintegration of women who leave the groups while in prison. A smooth transition from reinsertion programs while women are still in prison to reintegration schemes once they are released would go a long way toward preventing former prisoners from returning to crime.¹³¹

As for what might help persuade girls and women who are in jail to leave criminal groups, there are multiple international processes that can provide useful guidance.¹³² Initiatives in Los Angeles and Vancouver could provide useful models.¹³³ The Vancouver Female Gang Intervention Program, for example, partners each woman with an outreach worker, who accompanies her through the steps needed to quit a life of crime and reintegrate into society.¹³⁴

The most successful individual reintegration programs adopt holistic approaches that combine legal aid, mental and physical health care, psychological support, education and job training, and drug rehabilitation services.¹³⁵ These initiatives also demonstrate the need for long-term development projects in communities where women will reintegrate.¹³⁶

Successful approaches also tend to require tailored strategies that correspond to local patterns of criminal violence. To that end, the Mexican state should work with municipal governments to run pilot reintegration projects that respond to the economic, social and political dynamics of each relevant region. The state should also prepare incarcerated women to make their eventual transition to civilian life and en-

¹³⁰ Crisis Group Report, *Mexico's Forgotten Mayors: The Role of Local Government in Fighting Crime*, op. cit.

¹³¹ According to the UN, reinsertion is the process of providing basic services to facilitate demobilisation. Reintegration is a process aimed at the economic, political and social assimilation of ex-convicts and their families into society. "Introductory Handbook on the Prevention of Recidivism and the Social Reintegration of Offenders", UN Office on Drugs and Crime, 2018.

¹³² Irma Specht and Larry Attree, "The Reintegration of Teenage Girls and Young Women", *Intervention*, vol. 4, no. 3 (2006); and Luisa María Dietrich-Ortega, "Untapped Resources for Peace: A Comparative Study of Women's Organizations of Guerrilla Ex-combatants in Colombia and El Salvador", in Seema Shekhawat (ed.), *Female Combatants in Conflict and Peace: Challenging Gender in Violence and Post-conflict Reintegration* (London, 2015).

¹³³ "These inmates are leaving gangs, stripping tattoos for jobs and better lives", *Los Angeles Times*, 4 March 2022.

¹³⁴ "B.C. 'exiting' program guides gangsters to a better path", *Vancouver Sun*, 15 January 2021.

¹³⁵ Reto Rufer, "Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR): Conceptual Approaches, Specific Settings, Practical Experiences", Geneva Centre for Democratic Control of Armed Forces, 2005.

¹³⁶ Nat Colleta and Robert Muggah, "Context Matters: Interim Stabilisation and Second-Generation Approaches to Security Promotion", *Conflict, Security and Development*, vol. 9 (2009); and Rosemarie Aurore Umurerwa, "The Effectiveness of Reintegration of Female Ex-combatants: Rwanda as a Case Study", University of KwaZulu-Natal, July 2013.

courage their participation in demobilisation and reintegration programs offered in prisons. Ensuring access to basic services in prison, such as health care, nutritious food and drinking water, as well as education and vocational training that match the labour needs of the region, should be essential parts of a reinsertion process that begins before release. This process is key to preventing recidivism.¹³⁷

The Mexican government could increase access to education and employment projects for incarcerated women, including financial literacy for those who need it. Employment in prison should come with guaranteed labour rights, such as fair wages and regular working hours, to prevent exploitation. A good example of this kind of project can be found in Aguascalientes – a state in central Mexico – where the local government established a jobs program for men and women inmates, providing them with training to manufacture baseballs in prison workshops. As an incentive, the local government granted the inmates' children scholarships, while former prisoners were given the opportunity to work in the factory after release as part of their reintegration.¹³⁸

Although Mexico's National Penitentiary Law requires all states to provide post-conviction assistance for inmates, few states make such services available.¹³⁹ For example, only eight states reported having budget allocations for these types of projects, and none of them were tailored to address the specific needs of women outlined in this report.¹⁴⁰ These programs thus require stronger federal regulation of how prison budgets are spent, including gender-disaggregated indicators of expenditures.

In considering models for reintegration programming once women are discharged from prison, Mexico could look to the example of Colombia's reintegration of demobilised combatants, which has enabled over 28,000 former fighters to begin the transition to civilian life.¹⁴¹ Although designed in very different circumstances, Colombia has aimed through these efforts to promote women's empowerment by creating peer support networks, promoting access to sexual and reproductive health services, and organising de-stigmatisation campaigns for women who were involved in armed

¹³⁷ Researchers have pointed out that women in Mexican prisons face harsher conditions than their male counterparts, in part because most women's penitentiaries are located inside men's jails. Carolina Agoff, Sveinung Sandberg and Gustavo Fondevila, "Women Providing and Men Free Riding: Work, Visits and Gender Roles in Mexican Prisons", *op. cit.* During the prison workshops organised by Crisis Group, women commented on the lack of access to medical care, medicine, basic services such as water and sanitation, and access to educational or job training since these services are located in prison wings assigned to men. Taking women to those spaces requires additional security that, given the lack of staff, prisons are often not able to provide. The solution in most prisons is to keep women locked in their cells without access to services.

¹³⁸ Crisis Group interview, penitentiary expert, Aguascalientes, March 2023.

¹³⁹ The type of assistance available varies from state to state, but it generally includes vocational training and job search support, access to micro-credit, support for inmates interested in completing schooling, referrals to shelters and community kitchens, and legal counselling.

¹⁴⁰ Angela Guerrero et al., "La reinserción social comunitaria en México: diagnóstico, recomendaciones y rutas de acción", CEA Justicia Social, 2021.

¹⁴¹ Almost 30,000 ex-combatants have demobilised individually, in addition to those who did so collectively as part of wider peace processes. For a description of the "reintegration routes" in Colombia, see "Territorios de Paz: Ruta de Sometimiento Individual a la Justicia de Integrantes de Gao", Alto Comisionado para la Paz, 2021; and "Reseña histórica institucional", Agencia Colombiana para la Reintegración, October 2016.

groups. These efforts offer a potentially useful precedent for Mexico, and they could become part of the existing Colombia-Mexico program of security cooperation. Colombia could provide technical assistance for the design of demobilisation pilot projects and the successful implementation of these programs.¹⁴²

The National Institute for Women should create a network of institutions, including local NGOs, responsible for the design, coordination and supervision of reinsertion and reintegration programs.¹⁴³ One potential approach has been charted in Canada, where the national Circles of Support and Accountability program helps released offenders reintegrate into their communities through the creation of volunteer “circles”. Each circle supports the offender in managing day-to-day challenges and ensures that they are accountable for their actions. This model has reduced recidivism and helped keep communities safe.¹⁴⁴

Job training and creation programs are an essential part of any demobilisation effort, and they would benefit from robust collaboration between federal and local governments, as well as alliances with the private sector. The Mexican state could partner with civil society organisations and local industries to identify jobs that would enable a transition to a more stable life after they return from prison. These projects could focus on municipalities with a high number of imprisoned women accused of belonging to organised crime, such as Ciudad Obregón in Sonora.

Mexico could also organise programs that make available professionally led support groups to help former criminals with challenges they might face, such as coping with trauma from violence, stigmatisation and discrimination due to their past. These kinds of programs could combat the isolation these women might feel that could tempt them to return to crime.¹⁴⁵ For those accused of non-violent crimes, Mexico may find useful ideas in the Scandinavian restorative justice approach, which places the emphasis on rehabilitating offenders through reconciliation with victims and the community at large, offering family and community mediation, education and skills training, counselling and therapy, and monitored housing and employment opportunities.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴² Dolinar, “Gender Inclusivity & DDR in Colombia: Recommendations for Achieving Women’s Empowerment and Sustainable Peace”, op. cit.

¹⁴³ “DDR and Former Female Combatants”, Democratic Progress Institute, 2016; and Crisis Group interview, Angela Guerrero, director, CEA Justicia Social, Mexico City, August 2022.

¹⁴⁴ Robin J. Wilson et al., “Circles of Support and Accountability: A Canadian National Replication of Outcome Findings”, *Sexual Abuse*, vol. 21, no. 4 (2009).

¹⁴⁵ Specialists have pointed to the importance of incorporating psychological support for trauma from sexual violence, as well as providing education and training opportunities, in post-jail reintegration programs. See O’Neill, “Engaging Women in Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration (DDR): Insights for Colombia”, op. cit.

¹⁴⁶ Kathleen Daly, “Restorative Justice in Diverse and Unequal Societies”, *Law Context: A Socio-Legal Journal*, vol. 167, no. 17 (2000).

VII. Conclusion

Over the past decade, women's involvement in the traditionally male-dominated preserve of Mexican organised crime has grown, reflecting the deepening infiltration of society by these groups. The reasons men and women join criminal groups are not completely distinct. Poverty and inequality are major drivers. The Mexican state's inability to thwart corruption and the webs of collusion between state officials and criminal interests also play important roles: when the judicial system appears to be hopelessly compromised, more people may be drawn to a life of crime. That said, some aspects of Mexican society also make the prospect of joining a criminal group increasingly alluring to women. Patriarchal norms and practices that still guide much of Mexican life have – perhaps ironically – pushed some women to seek autonomy, power and a sense of community in organised crime, even as they also shape women's experiences in these groups.

The growing involvement of women in crime is a problem – and not just for the women themselves. It causes grave damage to their families, particularly their children. Both the normalisation of violence among their offspring, as well as the precariousness of child care when the women are jailed, has contributed to higher rates of criminal recruitment among these children – pushing a new generation into a fresh cycle of violence.¹⁴⁷

Mexico has long made headlines for the ways women are forcibly disappeared and killed. Now it should act decisively to prevent more girls and women from becoming associated with criminal groups and to support them when they move away from lives of violence. Rehabilitating young women offenders in prisons and drug rehabilitation centres, as well as working to prevent their recruitment through initiatives in schools and local communities, will be crucial to curbing their rising participation in Mexican crime. But to achieve these goals, the state, businesses and civil society will need to find ways to offer the economic alternatives, protection and sense of dignity that have so far been absent from many women's lives.

Mexico City/Bogotá/Washington/Brussels, 28 November 2023

¹⁴⁷ Olson, "Familia, niños y delincuencia: La violencia como herencia", op. cit.; "El impacto social de la prisión femenina: Recomendaciones para una política pública en la materia", op. cit.

Appendix A: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is co-chaired by President & CEO of the Fiore Group and Founder of the Radcliffe Foundation, Frank Giustra, as well as by former Foreign Minister of Argentina and Chef de Cabinet to the United Nations Secretary-General, Susana Malcorra.

Comfort Ero was appointed Crisis Group's President & CEO in December 2021. She first joined Crisis Group as West Africa Project Director in 2001 and later rose to become Africa Program Director in 2011 and then Interim Vice President. In between her two tenures at Crisis Group, she worked for the International Centre for Transitional Justice and the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General in Liberia.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Addis Ababa, Bahrain, Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Kabul, Kyiv, Manila, Mexico City, Moscow, Seoul, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

Crisis Group receives financial support from a wide range of governments, foundations, and private sources. The ideas, opinions and comments expressed by Crisis Group are entirely its own and do not represent or reflect the views of any donor. Currently Crisis Group holds relationships with the following governmental departments and agencies: Australia (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade), Austria (Austrian Development Agency), Canada (Global Affairs Canada), Denmark (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), European Union (Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace, Emergency Trust Fund for Africa), Finland (Ministry for Foreign Affairs), France (Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, French Development Agency), Ireland (Department of Foreign Affairs), Japan (Japan International Cooperation Agency and Japan External Trade Organization), Principality of Liechtenstein (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), Luxembourg (Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs), The Netherlands (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), New Zealand (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade), Norway (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), Qatar (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), Slovenia (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), Sweden (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), Switzerland (Federal Department of Foreign Affairs), United Nations World Food Programme (WFP), United Kingdom (Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office), and the World Bank.

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Appendix B: Reports and Briefings on Latin America and the Caribbean since 2020

Special Reports and Briefings

COVID-19 and Conflict: Seven Trends to Watch, Special Briefing N°4, 24 March 2020 (also available in French and Spanish).

A Course Correction for the Women, Peace and Security Agenda, Special Briefing N°5, 9 December 2020.

Ten Challenges for the UN in 2021-2022, Special Briefing N°6, 13 September 2021.

7 Priorities for the G7: Managing the Global Fallout of Russia's War on Ukraine, Special Briefing N°7, 22 June 2022.

Ten Challenges for the UN in 2022-2023, Special Briefing N°8, 14 September 2022.

Seven Priorities for Preserving the OSCE in a Time of War, Special Briefing N°9, 29 November 2022.

Seven Priorities for the G7 in 2023, Special Briefing N°10, 15 May 2023.

Ten Challenges for the UN in 2023-2024, Crisis Group Special Briefing N°11, 14 September 2023.

A Glut of Arms: Curbing the Threat to Venezuela from Violent Groups, Latin America Report N°78, 20 February 2020 (also available in Spanish).

Imagining a Resolution of Venezuela's Crisis, Latin America Report N°79, 11 March 2020 (also available in Spanish)

Broken Ties, Frozen Borders: Colombia and Venezuela Face COVID-19, Latin America Briefing N°42, 16 April 2020 (also available in Spanish).

Mexico's Everyday War: Guerrero and the Trials of Peace, Latin America Report N°80, 4 May 2020 (also available in Spanish).

Miracle or Mirage? Gangs and Plunging Violence in El Salvador, Latin America Report N°81, 8 July 2020 (also available in Spanish).

Bolivia Faces New Polls in Shadow of Fraud Row, Latin America Briefing N°43, 31 July 2020 (also available in Spanish).

Leaders under Fire: Defending Colombia's Front Line of Peace, Latin America Report N°82, 6 October 2020 (also available in Spanish).

Virus-proof Violence: Crime and COVID-19 in Mexico and the Northern Triangle, Latin America Report N°83, 13 November 2020 (also available in Spanish).

Disorder on the Border: Keeping the Peace between Colombia and Venezuela, Latin America Report N°84, 14 December 2020 (also available in Spanish).

Venezuela: What Lies Ahead after Election Clinches Maduro's Clean Sweep, Latin America Report N°85, 21 December 2020 (also available in Spanish).

The Exile Effect: Venezuela's Overseas Opposition and Social Media, Latin America Report N°86, 24 February 2021 (also available in Spanish).

Deeply Rooted: Coca Eradication and Violence in Colombia, Latin America Report N°87, 26 February 2021 (also available in Spanish).

The Risks of a Rigged Election in Nicaragua, Latin America Report N°88, 20 May 2021 (also available in Spanish).

Electoral Violence and Illicit Influence in Mexico's Hot Land, Latin America Report N°89, 2 June 2021 (also available in Spanish).

The Pandemic Strikes: Responding to Colombia's Mass Protests, Latin America Report N°90, 2 July 2021 (also available in Spanish).

Haiti: A Path to Stability for a Nation in Shock, Latin America and Caribbean Briefing N°44, 30 September 2021 (also available in French and Spanish).

A Broken Canopy: Preventing Deforestation and Conflict in Colombia, Latin America Report N°91, 4 November 2021 (also available in Spanish).

Handling the Risks of Honduras' High-stakes Poll, Latin America Briefing N°45, 23 November 2021 (also available in Spanish).

A Fight by Other Means: Keeping the Peace with Colombia's FARC, Latin America Report N°92, 30 November 2021 (also available in Spanish).

Overcoming the Global Rift on Venezuela, Latin America Report N°93, 17 February 2022 (also available in Spanish).

Keeping Oil from the Fire: Tackling Mexico's Fuel Theft Racket, Latin America Briefing N°46, 25 March 2022 (also available in Spanish).

Brazil's True Believers: Bolsonaro and the Risks of an Election Year, Latin America Briefing N°47, 16 June 2022 (also available in Portuguese and Spanish).

Hard Times in a Safe Haven: Protecting Venezuelan Migrants in Colombia, Latin America Report N°94, 9 August 2022 (also available in Spanish).

Trapped in Conflict: Reforming Military Strategy to Save Lives in Colombia, Latin America Report N°95, 27 September 2022 (also available in Spanish).

A Remedy for El Salvador's Prison Fever, Latin America Report N°96, 5 October 2022 (also available in Spanish).

Ties without Strings? Rebuilding Relations between Colombia and Venezuela, Latin America Report N°97, 1 December 2022 (also available in Spanish).

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