

Narco Queens: The Rise of Female Leadership in Mexico's Drug Cartels

Mishti Sinha

MA (International Relations) Amity University Noida

ABSTRACT

The issue of narcotics and drug cartels have been very challenging to Mexican governance over decades. This dissertation focuses on a unique trend in organized crime: the emergence of so-called queenpins women who have risen to leadership positions in the main Mexican drug trafficking cartels after a well-organized campaign against male leaders by the militarized drug war in Mexico. Using three main cases, Enedina Arellano Félix (Tijuana Cartel), Sandra Avila Beltran (Sinaloa Cartel), and Guadalupe Fernandez Valencia (Sinaloa Cartel financial operations), the present study explores the role of female cartel leadership in changing the governance strategies, society and gender norms, and becoming vulnerable to recruitment into criminal gangs.

Although female cartel leadership is evidence of women abilities in high stake governance, the media coverage is always subjected to gender interpretation based on physical appearance and romantic relationships instead of operation prowess, which reinforces instead of eroding patriarchal stereotypes. This alone will not be enough to alter gender norms with no structural changes to provide women with valid avenues of power. On the issue of recruitment, the study confirms that even though queenpin presence in the cartel might be an enabler of women participation in cartels by legitimizing the presence of females and offering them role models, the presence of structural economic factors remains central. Having 25 percent of Mexican women without their own income, 55 percent of them with informal jobs and making 48 percent less than their formal employees, and with an overall income of the female demographics being 35 percent lower than that of males, a systematic marginalization of the economy results in huge masses of desperate women in need of material enhancement no matter who leads the cartel. Queenpins reduce psychological obstacles to recruitment but they do not induce an implicit desperation that causes criminal involvement to be desirable.

The paradigm assumes that gender works in combination as socialization that determines strategic preferences, organizational culture that limits options of good approaches, external perception that influences priorities in law enforcement and structural inequality that opens gendered recruitment channels. The research empirically captures the diversity of queenpin governance, quantifies the difference between governance, traces recruiting patterns, and creates systematic gender bias in law enforcement that, intentionally, benefits female leaders by underestimating and de-prioritizing them.

The implications of the policies include the fact that any effective response strategy needs to focus on criminal organizations and structural factors that allow recruitment. Suggestions can be gender-sensitive law enforcement training by acknowledging female operating importance, economic empowerment which expands legal means of legitimate operations of marginalized women, gender-based violence prevention which seals the lapses of security that motivate women to seek cartel protection and the basic institutional reforms targeting corruption that allows all cartel activities irrespective of gender of leadership. The article

arrives at the conclusion of the paradoxical nature of queenpins who challenge and strengthen gender hierarchies at the same time, proving that women are capable of a lot though acting within and eventually perpetuating structural imbalances. Their creation tells tragic facts: criminal groups provide women with opportunities, protection, and respect which the Mexican society, which is legitimate systematically, deprives them of. The study of queenpins needs to be performed in terms of interrelated systems where gender, governance, violence, and economic inequality feed off each other in the present day cartel networks of Mexico. The emergence of queenpins is no indication of feminist advances but rather a major breakdown of the states that lead to the emergence of situations in which criminal involvement is perceived to be a rational move by desperate women who want to survive, gain security and dignity by any means possible.

Keywords: drug cartels, Mexico, queenpins, female cartel leaders, gendered governance

I. The Queenpins of Illicit Economies and Criminal Governance in Mexico.

The drug trafficking environment of Mexico is an area of study and little known security phenomenon in the twenty-first century. What was initially viewed as a limited law enforcement issue over the last twenty years has become a challenge even to the very nature of state sovereignty - and at the heart of this change, we find the little-noticed story of the rise of women to the very top of criminal regimes. These queens called queenpins are not an exception. They are the symptom of something much deeper - of state failure, gender inequality, structural violence that has long been the life of millions of Mexican women. The illicit economy of Mexico dates back centuries. The colonial period of contraband with its ports in the Caribbean and the Pacific created preliminary networks of extra-legal trade and a cultural permissiveness of doing business out of the establishment. The contemporary drug trade started in good earnest in the early twentieth century and Mexican groups provided U.S. markets with opium and marijuana. In the 1970s, U.S. law enforcement interference with Caribbean cocaine trade caused a shift in leadership to Mexican cartels in transshipment. The cartels of the 1980s and 1990s (Guadalajara, Sinaloa, the Gulf Cartel) developed elaborate smuggling networks and started to impose territorial control over large areas.

It took a turn in December 2006 after President Felipe Calderon deployed more than 50,000 federal forces to the cartel strongholds in Michoacan, Sinaloa and Tamaulipas. This decapitation approach was the basis of this militarised war on drugs: kill the kingpins and the organisations would disintegrate. In reality, the strategy had a reverse effect. Attacking cartel heads led to power gaps that fuelled intra-organisational conflicts and disintegrated large organisations into small and violent groups. Over 400,000 drug related deaths have been reported in Mexico since 2006, and this country is one of the deadliest conflict zones on earth, although there is no official war. Tens of thousands are still missing. What the decapitation strategy also created, completely without purpose, was women space. With systematic waves of male executions, captures, or extraditions, women in cartel families took the place of men. This is where the queenpin phenomenon starts, and without prior knowledge of the governance roles that cartels have come to execute in the lands that they dominate, it will not make sense.

In other states such as Michoacan, Guerrero, Tamaulipas, and some parts of Sinaloa and Jalisco, cartels have now grown way beyond narcotics trafficking to establish what scholars term criminal governance - parallel systems of control which collect taxes in the form of extortion, adjudicate disputes in the form of informal courts, regulate local economies, offer security against other groups and even finance infrastructure. They do the work, in short of a state, in areas where a state in Mexico has not been able to

rule. It is under these parallel institutions that queenpins have become administrators, strategists and at times the most powerful people in a room.

The rise of female cartel leadership is not therefore just a demographic avocation. It is a window into the nexus of state failure, gender inequality, and the rationality of criminal organisations in response to pressure to enforce. To know queenpins is to know not only who these women are, but what structural circumstances created them, how their rule revealed to us the most profound political and social divisions of Mexico.

II. Pathways to Power: Inheriting Criminal Empires by Women.

Women do not normally struggle to rise to the top of a cartel as men do. They are not acquiring land, creating webs of murderous supporters and proving their credentials by years of enforcement practice. Rather, the route to the queenpin leadership is nearly always defined by what Mexican scholar Arturo Santamaría refers to as "mandatory succession" - a crisis-driven process that is orchestrated by the state killing male leaders or by inter-cartel murder. As the men falter, the women come forth.

A key element in this dynamic is the family structure of Mexican drug trafficking organisations. DTOs are intergenerational family business, mothers and fathers bequeath the trade to their children and women in the family work at various departments - logistics, finance, communications, administration. What this implies is that before women can enjoy formal power it is typically the case that they have acquired such in-depth knowledge of operations within the organisation. There is no continuity in their entry into leadership, thus, not as discontinuous as it may seem. It is logically sound organisationally but culturally surprising.

In their 2023 report, the International Crisis Group records two main channels through which women become members of criminal organisations: through relatives or love interests who are already involved in criminal actions, and through relationships established through drug transactions or drug usage. Investigative journalist Deborah Bonello questions the fact that women were involved in these organisations only as a result of the romantic relationship. Men, also, enter by way of family and relationship connections- but where the male influence is supposed to be substantive the female influence is supposed to be incidental. This blind spot of gendering has made the role of women in cartel activities systematically invisible, despite their roles being critical.

In 2006 onwards, Calderon kingpin strategy brought about a dramatic acceleration in mandatory succession. As male traffickers were being slain at rates never experienced before in history, females who had been controlling funds, organizing logistics and communicating were left at the top of organisations with no men left in charge. The dynamic of crisis group research came directly to one woman interviewed: they killed her father and left her brother, who was killed in the final shootout, but at present, she is in control. It is not career development. It is survival.

Queenpin leadership also has a strategic aspect that is not readily perceived. The very patriarchal suppositions that have historically marginalised women within the Mexican society - the supposition that women are not criminal threats, cannot be leaders, not even worthy of investigation - are a sort of operational cover. Strategically, cultural prejudice is an asset. Women power and leadership may grow and stabilise before the state authorities realise she exists, not to mention starting to attack her. This invisibility-by-assumption is considered to be one of the most significant aspects of the phenomenon of the queenpin, and it is why some cartel leaders are women, and why they have had such longevity relative to their male predecessors.

III. Three Women, Three Models: Comparative Portrait of Queenpin Governance.

Enedina Arellano Félix -The Invisible Technocrat.

Enedina Arellano Félix is considered as the first woman to be in charge of a big drug cartel with a strong Mexican background, but she would never want to be called that. Enedina, also referred to as La Jefa, La Madrina, and La Narcomami, has come to rule the Tijuana Cartel by methodically killing all her seven brothers between 2002 and 2014. In February 2002, Ramón was killed in a gunfight with the police. Benjamín was arrested a month later. Francisco Javier was apprehended during a world cup game. Eduardo was taken by the Mexican army in October 2008. In 2013 Francisco Rafael was murdered. One after another, the male chain of command failed, and the sister of the family (Enedina) was left as the senior family member.

The emergence of Enedina is remarkable not just due to the conditions but also due to the leader Enedina became. Her brothers had developed a flashy cartel way of life, with nightclubs, on-the-record executions, showing off their riches and violence; Enedina had instead been learning accountancy and running the cartel financials and money laundering system via pharmacy networks. She was assailed as being called the hand that grinds the cradle - the real leader behind the scenes - long before she was the formal leader at all. Her learning and experience in running the organisation made her the most valuable asset of the organisation even prior to its crisis.

As the leader of the cartel, Enedina held a rather different philosophy of governance, in contrast to her brothers. She placed emphasis on consolidating territories rather than expanding geographically, an emphasis on streamlined operations instead of bloody spectacle, and an emphasis on strategic invisibility instead of visible presence in the world. A study by Alcocer et al. (2025) established that the Enedina leadership yielded more or less different results; the focus of territorial operations was based on concentration, but not expansion, and the nature of violence changed to enforced disappearance. This covert violence accomplishes the same goals as open execution - removing threats, deterring disloyalty - without the media attention and political agitation that such open killings create. It is violence as a method of governance, used with a forensic accuracy, not a performative brutality.

Former DEA Chief of International Operations Mike Vigil characterized Enedina as having never been into the wars of her brothers - she is into making alliances and making money. The assessment is borne out by her extraordinary longevity. As President Peña Nieto administration arrested El Chapo Guzmán and Miguel Treviño, the most notorious kingpins of their time, La Jefa was left. Her survival does not come as an accident. It is the outcome of a governance model, which reduces exposure and maximises operational coherence.

Sandra Avila Beltran -The Glamour Strategist.

When Enedina is invisibility as a strength, Sandra Ávila Beltrana is its antithesis - and she was also invisibly armed with it, with just as much premeditation. The Queen of the Pacific as she is known internationally, Sandra had been guided into the cartel scene by multi-generational criminal roots, tactical romantic relationships and a strategic decision to be seen as an out-in-the-open business type.

Sandra is the niece of Miguel Angel Felix Gallardo - The godfather, leader of the Sinaloa Cartel, who is serving a 40 year sentence. Her parents were also associated with Rafael Caro Quintero who was among the most influential narco bosses in the 80s. Sandra had initially opposed family business, she pursued her studies at the University of Guadalajara, where she studied Communications and wanted to become a journalist. This direction was altered when she was kidnapped by a jealous boyfriend who was connected

to the cartel at the age of 21. The experience showed how strong the criminal world was and made her addicted.

She was married twice; both her husbands were former police chiefs turned drug dealers and were assassinated. Such marriages and most notably her relationship with Juan Diego Espinoza Ramírez (El Tigre) an important member of the Norte del Valle Cartel in Colombia rendered Sandra an invaluable transnational connection between the Mexican cartels and Colombian cartels. She was not just present in meetings, she bargained them. The job demanded professional competency, inter-enterprise trust, and operational intelligence that was not limited to a particular relationship.

Still it was the public face of Sandra that made her unique among other cartel members. She ate at the fine Mexico City restaurants. She lived openly. She became a celebrity when she was arrested in September of 2007- more attention was given to her physical appearance and fashion preferences in the media than the charges against her. She was looked up to by the local fashionistas. The grave criminal action turned to show business. It was not a control loss. Sandra was manipulating the discourse, using cultural beliefs, that beautiful women are not perceived as a real danger, as a cover of operation. Her following career in the social media sector, where she has almost 467,000 TikTok followers and is 62 years old, is a logical extension of the same tactic: Weaponisation of feminine visibility as a barrier against critical examination.

Guadalupe Fernandez Valencia- The Invisible Specialist.

Guadalupe Fernandez Valencia is a third model: complete invisibility by technological specialisation. Being one of the biggest financial brains of the Sinaloa Cartel and a close associate of El Chapo Guzmán, Guadalupe was one of the eight names on the list that was eventually convicted to life imprisonment in the United States. Notwithstanding this remarkable functional significance, there are few news items when her name is searched.

This invisibility in itself is already evidence. Guadalupe was not influential due to charisma or familial success but because of technical indispensability: the management of money laundering systems that the cartel needed to survive. Her case proposes that the most operationally crucial yet least publicly visible queenpins are the strongest, and law enforcement has never been able to count on such a paradox.

IV. Gender, Media, Narco-Feminist Paradox.

The coverage of Mexican media, popular culture, and discourses of queenpins demonstrates a deeper and enduring contradiction: on the one hand, queenpins are hyper-visible spectacles, and on the other, they are invisible actors of serious governance. The reporting of female cartel leaders focuses on glamor, looks, love, and the violation of conventional femininity, as opposed to geographical control techniques, conflict-management systems, and economic structures. Sandra Avila has more column inches dedicated to her fashion than to her accomplishment of connecting two big global trafficking cartels.

This is not an incidental framing. It captures and recreates the gendered presumptions that render queenpins strategically possible in the first place. The existence of female criminal leaders that can be mainly perceived as beautiful women who turned dangerous due to their associations with influential men automatically removes their value as operatives. They are adjuncts to the power of males, instead of possessing their own. The direct implications of this misreading are the resources are directed to male targets, women leaders are de-prioritised, and cartels have a structural benefit by promoting women whose authority will not be valued.

These dynamics are both mirrored and enhanced by popular culture. Netflix series such as *Griselda* and *The Queen of the South* also recognize the strategic abilities of women, yet the characters are portrayed

as leaders who do not want to act as leaders, women who have to commit crimes due to male violence or women who act as protectors of their mothers. Cartel leaders in the male form do not need any such moral justification; they seem to be natural power seekers. The two-sided standard indicates a profound cultural uneasiness about ladies who utilize power due to ambition, money, or supremacy - motives that are deemed ordinary in males.

This has been termed by scholars as the "narco-feminist paradox" - women in control in organisations that are premised on hyper-masculinity violence and overt gender inequality as never before. Queenpins are forced to manoeuvre in cultures in which masculinity, violence, and physical dominance are authorised forms of power. The reply of some of them is to be hyper-aggressive. There are those who use feminine stereotypes to their strategic advantage, assuming they are harmless and thus can work under the radar of enforcement. Both approaches embrace, as opposed to confronting, the gendered logic of the enterprise. The strategy of Enedina is different. She influences by technocratic ability and strategic invisibility - not acting as masculine or weaponising feminine, but bringing merit based legitimacy into an organisation that has traditionally been dominated by violent ability. Her triumph shows that good leadership need not be hyper-masculine or feminine maneuvering, but professional ability, in its mute fashion, pits machismo culture to the wall in a more fundamental way than both the other two.

V. Economic Desperation and the Logic of Recruiting Crime.

To comprehend the reasons why women enter cartels, one needs to know what the legitimate Mexican society has to offer them - and what it does not offer. A legitimate labour market means poverty wages, legal precarity and little progress to women with 55 percent of Mexican women in the informal economy earning 48 percent less than formal workers, 25 percent of them having no independent income and the general income of women being 35 percent below the income of men. Drug trafficking organisations provide an alternative: they promise a lot of money, financial autonomy, respect, and power. Cartel jobs are able to pay thousands of dollars a month as opposed to the formal wages of about 380 USD per month. Outside the sphere of economics, cartels provide security, the security of gender-based violence, of domestic violence, of the exploitation that lies at the heart of informal labour markets. Women, who enter these organisations, often enter not due to any ideological appeal to the narco-culture but due to a simple need to survive in the conditions of the greatest vulnerabilities. The International Crisis Group reports women expressing this clearly: they see enrolling in criminal groups as a way of protecting themselves against gender-based violence and getting power and respect that they cannot get in law-abiding society. It is not false consciousness. It is a logical reaction to structural circumstances where the state has been unable to afford either physical or economic opportunity.

These dynamics relate to queenpin visibility in significant ways. The social media activity of Sandra Avila serves as inescapable aspirational messages to the young women in the marginalised communities: traditional morality and the law will keep you poor, but strategic interest in the narco-economy will purchase your freedom. But the role model story conceals ugly statistical facts. To each Sandra or Enedina that becomes prominent in the long term, thousands of women are killed, imprisoned, traumatised or have their children taken away as an outcome of cartel life. The risk-benefit calculation that potential recruits are making is biased by survivorship bias, which causes us to only notice successful cases and ignore the vast majority of cases.

The evidence on the research has always been consistent that although the visibility of queenpin may lessen the psychological obstacles to recruitment by normalising the participation of women in cartels, the

structural economic factors still dominate. Eliminate queenpins, and there would be little change in the rates of recruitment. Reduce poverty, gender-based violence, and the lack of legitimate economic opportunity, and queenpin prominence would probably fade away not due to enforcement success but because the factors that motivate recruitment had been eliminated.

VI. Institutional Blind Spots and State responses.

The non-engagement of the Mexican state with the queenpin phenomenon has been typified, above all, by a lack of engagement. Successive regimes - militarisation under Calderon, de-escalation under Peña Nieto, AMLO's hugs not bullets, and the intelligence-led approach by president Claudia Sheinbaum - have preserved the structures of enforcement that are based on male leadership models. The kingpin approach that made unintentionally queenpins focuses on men. Leaders that are women act in the ensuing gap.

Gender bias in law enforcement is on various levels. Investigative priorities and resource allocation are culturally influenced by ingrained beliefs that women are not crime threats. The most educative example is Enedina Arellano Félix: during the Peña Nieto government, extraordinary resources were devoted to the capture of El Chapo and Miguel Treviño, but La Jefa was able to lead the trafficking business in Tijuana more than ten years without any serious enforcement interventions. The difference can be attributed to gender-coded ideas of threat, rather than to any strategic calculation of the actual operational significance of her operations. Such underestimation forms a perverse incentive: in case lowering women to the position of cartel leader would lead to less pressure on enforcement, organisations would have all rational incentives to do so not because of some progressive gender ideals but because of rationalised exploitation of institutional blind spots.

There are additional issues when female cartel heads are prosecuted. The courtroom performance of Sandra Avila helps to understand how strategic femininity may serve as a defence strategy that is not available to a male defendant. The cultural beliefs regarding the ability of women to commit violence and act as criminals complicate the prosecution process and make it more difficult to persuade the jury that female defendants are not victims or accomplices but leaders. In 2015, she was freed, having been sentenced to an incredibly short time given the seriousness of the charges against her.

The cartel governance structure cannot be effectively disrupted by focusing on the apparent male leaders and leaving the female operational architects intact. The answer however cannot be merely to apply the kingpin strategy to women - that would merely create the same dynamics of fragmentation that created queenpins in the first place. The less productive route is analytical models of cartel leadership based on operational significance, not gender-coded presumptions on the degree of threat, training that can overcome gender bias in investigative prioritisation, and, most fundamentally, institutional change that can address the corruption and institutional failure upon which all cartel leadership thrives.

VII. Conclusion: What Queenpins Tell us of Mexico.

The story of narco violence is not a footnote to the appearance of queenpins in Mexican drug cartels. It is a prism that can be used to analyze some of the most basic failures of politics and social life in Mexico. Governing with fiscal savvy and invisibility, Sandra Ávila Beltrana with weaponising glamour and transnational relations, Guadalupe Fernández Valencia with structural power and financial indispensability, these women are both a demonstration of the exceptional ability of women, and the structural circumstances that cannot allow them to express that ability.

The most unpleasant fact the queenpin phenomenon brings to light is as follows: women get opportunities,

protection, and respect that is systematically denied by legitimate Mexican society by criminal organisations. As soon as the greatest instances of effective, prosperous women in a society be found in the criminal, as opposed to the legal, business, the message cannot pass unnoticed--not that crime is a rewarding business, though it very frequently is such, but that the legal, the legitimate means of security, dignity, and authority, are blocked to those who most require them.

Queenpins are not feminist victories and mere exceptions to male dominance. They are contradictory personalities: women who have taken power into and through apparatus of patriarchal violence, whose rule challenges and strengthens the gender relations which brought them into existence. They cannot be understood without seeing them as part of a set of systems within which gender, government, violence and economic inequality mutually sustain themselves in modern Mexico.

Their rise does not mean that they are feminists. It is an indicator of state failure - an indicator that puts into place circumstances whereby criminal behavior might seem a rational responding factor among desperate women seeking survival, security and dignity any which way they can get them.

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