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# **The Role of Women in The Drug Trade: A Narrative Analysis on Drug Policy in The Netherlands**

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## **Citation**

Gerritsen, J. (2022). *The Role of Women in The Drug Trade: A Narrative Analysis on Drug Policy in The Netherlands*.

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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# The Role of Women in The Drug Trade

*A Narrative Analysis on Drug Policy in The  
Netherlands*



**Universiteit  
Leiden**  
The Netherlands

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MSc International Relations and Diplomacy

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June 6 2022



## Abstract

The role of gender within the drug trade remains underestimated, under-researched and under-theorized. This research aims to understand Dutch drug policy narratives on women working in the international drug trade. Building on the extensive literature on this topic in Latin America, three narratives emerged. Through an interpretive approach, this research looked for commonalities between the Dutch narratives on women and the drug trade and the narratives that have already been identified in the Latin American context. Based on the interviews that were conducted with drug policymakers and practitioners, it was found that two out of the three narratives are clearly prevalent in the Dutch context. In addition, the study offers some important insights into the necessity to address the factors that trigger women's involvement in drug trade, as well as the role of the media in perpetuating drug trade narratives.

## Acknowledgments

This thesis would not have been possible without the support and guidance of many people.

First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisor Dr. Vanessa Newby, for inspiring me and encouraging me when I needed it most. Thank you for your enthusiasm, support, and constructive feedback. I would also like to thank Dr. Hilde van Meegdenburg as the second reader of this thesis.

I would like to thank all my interviewees for their contribution to my research by sharing their vision and knowledge with me.

I thank my mom, dad, brother and sister for providing unconditional love and support.

To Felix for your patience and for being my constant in the ever-changing terrain of this master.

To my friends, with a special thanks to Arlette, Sophie and Lia.

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## Introduction

On the 25<sup>th</sup> of April 2022, photos of a tortured woman were found on a telephone in the apartment of Ridouan Taghi, a well-known drug lord. Allegedly, these are photos of the Moroccan-Dutch Naima Jillal, who has been missing since 2019. While Taghi had been known as the most wanted drug criminal in the Netherlands years prior to getting caught, little is known about Naima Jillal, including what position she occupied in the Dutch criminal circuit (Vugts 2022). This example is illustrative of the limited information on the role of women in the drug trade.

Globally, the role of gender within the drug trade often remains underestimated, under-researched and under-theorised. What is puzzling is that the extant literature on drugs and gender fails to establish how to theorize the power relations shaping and formed by gender relations. While early research on women in the drug trade mainly focused on women's powerlessness and vulnerability, the 1990s marked a shift towards including emancipation and opportunity in the academic discourse (Bourgois 1989; Fagan 1994; Fleetwood and Leban 2022). However, this notion of emancipation has been criticized as well (Denton 2001; Fleetwood 2014; Maher 1997; Fleetwood and Leban 2022). As stated by Fleetwood and Leban (2022), "Whilst some women may exercise agency and occupy positions of relative power and control, it is not clear how this related to wider social processes of emancipation, at all" (Fleetwood and Leban 2022, 3). Moreover, women's involvement in the drug trade is shaped by drug policy, so it is important to look at the gendered dimensions of drug policy. The gap between government officials and women's experiences could be bridged by incorporating experiences in the design, implementation, and assessment of drug policy (Giacomello 2017). From a policy perspective, this can help shed light on what political measures tend to reduce or increase the challenges women face in the drug trade. Within the dynamic nature of the growing drug market, the gendered impacts of both the drug trade and counter-narcotics policy remain under-researched in the European context, notably in the Netherlands, despite its position as a major hub for drug trafficking. Dutch criminal organizations are key players in the European and global drug markets with an estimated turnover that is similar to the revenue of multinationals such as Albert Heijn and Philips (de Bruijne 2021). This highlights the need to examine the gendered implications on Dutch drug policy initiatives, which culminates in the

following research question: “What are Dutch drug policy narratives on women working in the international drug trade?”

This study fills the knowledge gap on women and the drug trade in the Netherlands by shedding light on drug policy narratives in the Netherlands. In view of the contextual differences between Latin America and the Netherlands, the following sub-questions emerge from the overarching research question:

1. To what extent is the conceptualization of women’s agency in the drug trade in the Netherlands different from the conceptualization in the Latin American context?
2. What is the impact of media narratives in the Netherlands on the perception of women working in the international drug trade?
3. How are Dutch drug policy narratives on women working in the international drug trade reflected in debates in the public sphere on drug policy?

Using an interpretive approach, the goal of this research is to gain an insight into the meaning-making process of drug policymakers and whether they are responding to women’s involvement in it. As institutions and policies shape the structural circumstances in which women live, and, in turn, the meanings attached to being a woman in that context, it is key to take the policymaker’s and policy implementer’s perspective as a starting point and place that at the center of the research. Given the limited literature on this topic, this research is exploratory and theory building. Building on the literature concerning the role of women in the drug trade in Latin America, three narratives emerge, which will be analyzed in the Dutch setting. In the context of these three narratives, I conducted interviews with policymakers, practitioners, and journalists. In addition to the empirical data, various types of documentary sources were analyzed, including journal articles, official documents, and media articles. By following an abductive approach, I went back and forth between the different data sources, which ultimately allowed me to identify two of the narratives in the Dutch case. Besides the prevalence of the narratives, several additional findings emerged, which all indicate that this topic is clearly under-researched gender issues are not addressed in Dutch drug policy. As narratives permeate society as much as policy, this new empirical study is relevant for both society and policymakers.



To answer the research questions as stipulated above, the thesis will be structured as followed: In chapter one, the extensive body of literature on the role of women in the drug trade will be laid out. Focusing on the concepts agency, drug policy, and media, the central debates of the literature on women and the drug trade will be specified to gain a better understanding of the narratives on female involvement in the drug trade. The second chapter will then discuss the methodology and the research design shaping this thesis. The third chapter provides an overview of the global drug trade, shedding light on how this is a growing problem affecting communities worldwide. Chapter four analyses drug policy in the Latin American region and the Netherlands respectively, highlighting the most important instruments, principles, and challenges. Chapter five will present the analysis, identifying the narratives and discussing additional key findings. Finally, the study will conclude in chapter six by addressing the research question, arguing that two out of the three narratives, as identified in the literature on Latin America, are clearly prevalent in the Dutch context. Moreover, the limitations of the study are discussed and possible directions for future research are presented.

# 1. Literature Review

To understand Dutch drug policy narratives on women working in the international drug trade, a general understanding of women and crime, women's agency in drug settings, previously identified drug policy narratives, and the role of media in perpetuating these narratives need to be gained. Consequentially, to fully grasp the role of gender within the drug trade and understand how this shapes women's involvement, the following chapter will begin by discussing the debates on women and crime, the concept of women's agency in relation to drug trafficking and policy, and, in turn, how previous scholarly work can help to explain drug policy narratives in the Netherlands. After the general debate on the matter has been discussed, the narratives as identified in the Latin American context will be applied to Dutch drug policy, to establish if there are commonalities between the Dutch and Latin American narratives on women in the drug trade.

## 1.1 Women and Crime

### *The Gender Gap*

Feminist criminology emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, during the second wave of feminism. It was fueled by feminist scholars opposing the absence of gender from criminological analyses, which seemed particularly remarkable considering the fact that gender appeared to be a strong predicting factor of offending (Steffensmeier and Allan 1996; Blumstein et al. 1986), arrest (Stolzenberg and D'Alessio 2004), and sentencing (Burgess-Proctor 2006; Daly and Tonry 1997; Kathleen Daly 1994). As stated by Burgess Proctor, "Feminist scholars were dissatisfied with the failure of mainstream criminology to recognize issues of gender inequality at all, as well as with the failure of critical and radical criminology to consider the relationship between inequality and crime outside of the narrow context of economic disparities, under which were subsumed issues of race and gender" (Burgess-Proctor 2006). Against this background, the explanation of the gender gap, referring to "[...] the low level of female offending in relation to that of males" gained public attention, which led to a focus on sociological factors for interpretations of crime (Steffensmeier and Allan 1996, 467). Almost five decades after the reduction of the gender gap in crime was first noted, it remains central to research on gender and crime.

### *The Gender Equality Hypothesis*

Until recently, it was argued that gender differences in crime could be accounted for by changes in gender equality over time and in different social contexts (Steffensmeier and Allan 1996). Feminist criminologists developed the idea that the increase in women's offenses could be explained by a rise in gender equality, resulting from the women's movement (F. Adler 1975; Rita James Simon 1975; Steffensmeier and Allan 1996). A "gender equality hypothesis" emerged during the first wave of feminism, arguing that the gender gap in crime is narrowing as male and female roles converge (Steffensmeier and Allan 1996, 467). Even though this explanation has been challenged, it continues to influence notions of gender and crime (Estrada, Bäckman, and Nilsson 2016; Steffensmeier and Allan 1996).

In the debate on the narrowing of the gender gap, two explanations are proposed in the literature: women's liberation and economic marginalization. The liberation thesis emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, when women gained more economic and social independence, which provided them with opportunities to participate in society. Adler's liberation thesis explains one version of this theory, suggesting that convergence in gender roles caused a reduction in the gender gap in all sorts of crime (F. Adler 1975). Another variant of the liberation hypothesis states that the increase in female participation in the labor market created new opportunities for crime in the workplace, emphasizing the impact of women's inclusion in social networks (Rita James Simon 1975). Both variants have received criticism for suggesting that economic participation gives rise to crime amongst women, while it halts crime by men (Chesney-Lind 1997). Furthermore, the reduction of the gender gap is most visible for offences that are compatible with the more traditional roles of women – comprising of theft, fraud and forgery – suggesting that strong empirical evidence for the narrowing of the gender gap is lacking. The shifts in social positions of women, as well as the attitudes towards their changing roles, indicate the difficulties in measurement (Steffensmeier 1993; Steffensmeier and Allan 1996).

Consequently, more recent studies have proposed economic marginalization as an explanation of convergence in the gender gap. According to the economic marginality hypothesis, the rise in female offending rates can be explained by economic hardship of women relative to men (Steffensmeier, Allan, and Streifel 1989; R. J. Simon and Landis 1991; Chu, Heberton, and Toh 2021). As stated by Heimer, "[...] when women become more economically disadvantaged

as compared with men, women's rates of crime compared with men's will increase" (Heimer 2000, 428). However, also this thesis has been empirically challenged. Research has found variation in the extent to which female offences are linked to particular structural factors that marginalize them. For example, while marginalized women in the US seem more prone to engage in low-level economic offenses and drug crimes, the exact effect of marginalization on female offending differs substantially across different sorts of crime (Reckdenwald and Parker 2008; Chesney-Lind and Pasko 2004; Chu, Heberton, and Toh 2021). In light of this, Hunnicutt and Broidy indicated that economic marginality should partly be considered as a result of liberation, showing compatibility instead of conflict between the two theses. According to them, increased female independence does not necessarily correspond to the actual social circumstances of all women. While marginalization of women results in rising levels of female criminal activity, liberation for some women is also linked to economic marginalization for other women and greater female crime when such independence occurs in class and gender-divided societies (Hunnicutt and Broidy 2004).

This shows the significance of analyzing economic marginality within the social context, particularly in regards to the changing social position of women. The focus on multiplicities and intersectionality first appeared during the third wave of feminism in the 1980s and 1990s. It was during this time that feminist of minority-group status started expressing displeasure with the lack of consideration of the intersection of gender with other dimensions of stratification, such as race, sexuality, social class, and geography (Steffensmeier and Allan 1996; Burgess-Proctor 2006). This criticism of feminist scholarship resulted in the recognition of the need for intersectionality in feminist studies of crime. As stated by Burgess-Proctor, "Intersectionality recognizes that systems of power such as race, class, and gender do not act alone to shape our experiences but rather, are multiplicative, inextricably linked, and simultaneously experienced" (Burgess-Proctor 2006). This offers an alternative approach to gender, taking into consideration difference in social context. The gender gap varies significantly across these dimensions. The narrowing gender gap as noted in many Western countries, has supported this development (Estrada, Nilsson, and Pettersson 2019). As stated by Steffensmeier and Allen, "If the gender gap had a biological basis, it would not vary, as it does, across time and space" (Steffensmeier and Allan 1996, 467). In light of this, it is important to not confuse the impact of gender with the influence of other social variables. For instance, for some offences the arrest rates for black women exceeds arrest rates for white men, which is indicative of the effects of race, but not about gender (Sommers and Baskin 1992; Simpson and Elis 1995; Karen 1995; Steffensmeier

and Allan 1996). This indicates the importance of carefully examining the intersections of gender with other aspects of social stratification.

As the research on women and crime underpins the debates on drug policy and gender, it is key to take this as a point of departure for this research. The next sections will show how the debate and explanation regarding the gender gap show similarities to the conceptualization of women and the drug trade.

## 1.2 Women's Agency in Drug Settings

While research on drug-related issues concerning women as users has increased over the past few years, little attention has been given to comprehending the participation of women in the supplying of drugs. Nonetheless, it has been established by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) that women make up one third of global drug users, but the role played by women within the drug supply chain remains unclear (UNODC 2018a). This notion is also reflected in the most recent UNODC report on women and drugs, where both their position as victims and empowered pivotal actors is discussed (UNODC 2018b). As stated in the report, “Neither explanation provides a complete picture of women’s role in the drug supply chain – some are victims, other make their own decisions” (UNODC 2018b). The prevalence of different narratives on the role of women in the drug trade reflect the debate about how to conceptualize women’s agency in relation to drug trafficking.

### *The Agency Debate*

The literature on drugs and gender has been criticized for both exaggerating and understating women’s agency. Of the more than 714,000 women and girls held in penal institutions globally, 35% are in prison for drug-related offenses, while the number for men is 19% (UNODC 2018b). It is remarkable that, despite the high levels of criminalization of women in the international drug trade, there seems to be a lack of international consensus on the role of women in the international drugs trade. It can be said that varying roles and experiences of women within the drug trade reflect diverse gender orders and connotations throughout the world (Connell and Pearse 2015; Fleetwood and Leban 2022).

In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, the “War on Drugs”, in combination with rising heroin and crack cocaine problems, sparked a new wave of US scholarship on women, drugs, and crime (Fleetwood and Leban 2022; Anderson and Kavanaugh 2017). Even though, in the 1980s and 1990s, a growing body started to examine women's roles and experiences within the crack cocaine markets, most of the literature described the drug trade as a patriarchal market, reflecting gender stereotypes (Brownstein et al. 1995; 1994; Dunlap, Johnson, and Maher 1997; Fagan 1994; Inciardi, Lockwood, and Pottieger 1993; Jacobs and Miller 1998; Maher 1997; Miller 1994; Mullins, Wright, and Jacobs 2004; Sommers, Baskin, and Fagan 2000; T. L. Anderson and Kavanaugh 2017; Rosenbaum 1981; Adler 1993; Dunlap and Johnson 1996;

Waldorf, Reinerman, and Murphy, n.d.; P. Bourgois, Prince, and Moss 2004; Fleetwood and Leban 2022). This large body of research has been criticized for perpetuating expressions of hyper-masculinity and dominance in the illicit drug world organization, most notably by Anderson, who referred to it as the leading ‘pathology and powerlessness’ narrative (T. L. Anderson 2005). She goes beyond the reasoning of women as dominant actors in the drug trade and considers them to be indispensable in this field by showing that women's power and contributions to the drug world are articulated through four key actions: buying drugs, offering housing and sustenance needs, supporting male dependency, and partaking in drug sales. Thereby, Anderson sheds light on women's vital supporting role in the drug economy (T. L. Anderson 2005). Stating that “[...] women’s more relational power assists males’ accumulation of structural power and is, therefore, fundamental to ‘successful’ (i.e. stable and lasting) illicit drug world organization” (373), Anderson (2005) argues that men’s and women’s power are interdependent. Building on the ethnographic works of others (Hamid 1990; P. I. Bourgois 2003; Dunlap and Johnson 1996; E. Anderson 1999; Sterk 1999; Dunlap, Tourigny, and Johnson 2000), Anderson asserts the impact of women’s dominance of the household on the drug economy, illustrating both empowerment and agency of women in light of the drug world (T. L. Anderson 2005). Consequently, she seems to unravel the limitations of the structuralist notion of power which is typical for feminist research. The structuralist notion of power reflects binary thinking about gender and traditional gender roles – the male as breadwinner and the female as homemaker. This notion of power has failed to grasp the more differentiated involvement of women in the drug trade because of its notion of power as masculine. For this reason, feminist scholars have sought to appreciate power as a capacity or empowerment instead (Wartenberg 1990; Held 1993).

In turn, these claims about women’s emancipation in the drug trade have been criticized for simplifying relationships of power. According to various authors, instead of notions of emancipation, the unique contextual factors and experiences of gender shape the involvement of women in the drug trade (Maher 1997; Denton 2001; Fleetwood 2014; Fleetwood and Leban 2022). For example, Maher (1997) has argued that a focus on empowerment is disputable because of a tendency to exaggerate women’s agency. Instead, she emphasizes the impact of contextual and cultural factors that shape women’s role in the drug trade. As stated by Maher, “Drug economies take complex and multiple forms, but cultural practices within them remain embedded in broader relations and structures of gender, race and class” (Maher 1997, 193). This sparked further research on gender as volatile action comprised of social constraints, both

in the US and Europe (Measham 2002; Evans, Forsyth, and Gauthier 2002; T. Anderson, Daly, and Rapp 2009; Sanders 2011). Moreover, the focus on contextual embeddedness has fueled concerns over the pitfalls of overlooking the ways in which gender, social class, and race shape the experience, organization, and implications of women in drug markets (T. L. Anderson and Kavanaugh 2017; Fleetwood and Leban 2022). Many studies disregard the social construction of ‘race’ and class in analyses of women in the drug trade (Fleetwood and Leban 2022; Parmar 2017). Authors emphasizing how gender is locally co-constituted therefore emphasize the need to address intersectionality (Fleetwood and Leban 2022; T. L. Anderson and Kavanaugh 2017; Connell and Pearse 2015).

Within this notion of women’s participation in the drug trade as contextually embedded, drug policies are particularly significant because they shape the contextual circumstances in which women are positioned in a particular time and place (Fleetwood and Leban 2022; Anderson and Kavanaugh 2017). While the role of women in the drug trade has been addressed by a significant amount of research in the context of the Americas, echoing the “war on drugs” focus, as specified above (Deitzer et al. 2019), little seems to be known about this topic in the setting of the Netherlands. Based on the principle of gender as a dynamic category, emphasizing that it is both produced and reproduced within its contextual and social characteristics, this thesis will address this gap by focusing on this region.

Given the fact that a great amount of research has been conducted on women’s agency in Latin American countries, which are often considered patriarchal societies, examining this in a Western liberal nation such as the Netherlands might provide novel insights.



### 1.3 Drug Policy Narratives

Commonly shared narratives often become predominant in political debates (Patterson and Monroe 1998), which can also be seen in the field of drug policy. The drug trade, and women's social position within it, are shaped by geographical, historical, and political junctures, including drug policies (Fleetwood and Leban 2022). For example, as recent changes in US drug policy led to a decrease in large scale meth production, this indirectly sparked an increase of 'bake and shake', low-tech production processes that are often female-led (Miller and Carbone-Lopez 2015; Deitzer, Leban, and Copes 2019; Fleetwood and Leban 2022). This shows how certain junctures can create conditions for women to become involved in the drug trade, with the state playing a pivotal role. As stated by Fleetwood and Leban (2022), “The state, institutions and traditions shape both the structural conditions in which women live and the meanings afforded to being a woman in that time and place” (15). This implies that diverse global contexts can result in different outcomes regarding women's participation in the drug trade.

#### *UNGASS Bringing Gender Issues to the Forefront*

The first time that women were mentioned in an official UN document regarding drugs was in 1998 in the Political Declaration<sup>1</sup> that was adopted during the second United Nations General Assembly Special Session (UNGASS) on drugs. More specifically, member states were called on to “[...] undertake to ensure that women and men benefit equally, and without any discrimination, from strategies directed against the world drug problem, through their involvement in all stages of programs and policy-making”<sup>2</sup>. As can be seen from the formulation, this remained rather abstract and ideological. In 2009, the limited attention paid to women regarding drug policy was addressed in the Annual Report Questionnaire (ARQ), which is a mandated data collection instrument to evaluate the major trend in the illegal drug trade and, in turn, used as a starting point for the annual World Drug Report by the UNODC (UNODC 2022a; Nougier 2020). What still seems to be lacking, however, is a collection of adequate data across all UN member states, as well as efforts to gain a better understanding of the women's involvement in the drug trade and the role of underlying factors on their participation, such as ethnicity, age, and socio-economic status (Nougier 2020). During the most recent UNGASS on

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations, General Assembly, *Political Declaration*, A/RES/S-20/2 (10 June 1998).

<sup>2</sup> United Nations, General Assembly, *Political Declaration*, A/RES/S-20/2 (10 June 1998), Paragraph 5.

drugs in 2016, gender issues were raised by various actors, including the consequences of repressive drug policies on women and the high incarceration rate of women in the Americas. As stated by Nougier, “The UNGASS was a catalyst moment for the UN, governments and civil society to highlight the specific vulnerabilities and needs of women engaged in, or affected by, the illicit drug trade and drug policies” (Nougier 2020, 250). Following UN Women raising concerns over the impact of drug policy on women, the international system for drug control established that there was a need for a gender approach to drug policies, which led to the approval of the resolution ‘Mainstreaming a gender perspective in drug-related policies and programs by the United Nations Commission on Narcotics Drugs (CND) in March 2016. More specifically, the resolution:

Encourages Member States to collect and share quantitative and qualitative data, disaggregated by age and sex, related to the world drug problem, including when providing information through the annual report questionnaire as well as when reporting to the Commission on Narcotic Drugs as mandated by the three international drug control conventions, and to mainstream a gender perspective in their research and analysis on the various aspects of the world drug problem, with a view to addressing the knowledge gap on women and drug use<sup>3</sup>

However, this document has been criticized for preserving or even reinforcing gender stereotypes (Giacomello 2017). Giacomello points to the gap between women’s involvement in the drug trade and the policy response, mostly traceable to the predominance of a victimization-driven narrative over agency-driven narratives. Based on five case studies from Latin America, she argues that “[...] women's involvement in drug offences rarely fit the static gender categories present in policy discourse; factors of vulnerability and agency both shape women's involvement in drug offences and drug use and should be taken into account when rethinking current gender-sensitive approaches to drug policies”(Giacomello 2017, 289). Against this background, she stresses the need to include narratives to reconsider the gender categories inherent in policy discourse.

### *Three Drug Policy Narratives*

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<sup>3</sup> Commission on Narcotic Drugs, Mainstreaming a Gender Perspective in Drug-Related Policies and Programmes, Resolution 59/5 (2016), OP 2.

Throughout the literature on women's participation in the drug trade, three main narratives seem to have evolved, often trickling down to policy discourses and, in turn, kept intact through policies. The first concerns the assumption of women as involuntary victims, most predominantly articulated through their role as so-called 'drug mules'. This term can be explained through the following definition: "A drug courier who is paid, coerced or tricked into transporting drugs across an international border but who has no further commercial interest in the drugs" (European Monitoring Centre For Drugs and Drug Addiction 2012). Even though most drug mule research seems to analyze women from the Global South, research tends to represent a Eurocentric perspective. This means that female drug mules, usually from South America, are arrested in the US or EU. As they appear as foreign but end up in Western prisons, they are often portrayed as a burden for Western countries (Cunneen 2011; Fleetwood and Leban 2022). What is remarkable is that while women only make up approximately 20-30% of the arrestees for smuggling drugs across international borders, research on drug mules is predominantly focused on women. These gendered views on men as intentional offenders and women as forced victims create a bias, reflecting gender stereotypes (Fleetwood 2014; Fleetwood and Leban 2022; Fleetwood 2015). Moreover, besides the notion that women are forced to smuggle drugs by men, explanations for women becoming involved in drug trafficking can also derive from family networks (Fleetwood and Leban 2022; T. L. Anderson and Kavanaugh 2017). Several authors have shown how transnational drug smuggling is often anchored in families (Zaitch 2002; P. A. Adler 1993; van San and Sikkens 2017). There is trust due to the family bond, which also means that there is a higher chance of getting involved in drug-related crime when people are born in a family in which brother or parents are already active in crime (van de Rakt, Nieuwbeerta, and de Graaf 2008; Thornberry et al. 2003; Farrington, Barnes, and Lambert 1996; van San and Sikkens 2017). However, it has been demonstrated that women do not only start taking part in drug trafficking through direct family ties. In fact, many women get involved via incidental social relationships, such as friends and boyfriends (Fleetwood 2014; van San and Sikkens 2017).

Despite the differences amongst female drug mules, the dominant interpretation of their role in the drug trade concerns financial need, in combination with uncertainty and the feminization of poverty, as found by research conducted in the USA (Huling 1995), Mexico (Giacomello 2013), the Caribbean (Bailey 2013), Venezuela (Olmo 1968; 1990), the UK (Sudbury 2005; Green 1998; Dorado 2005), Australia (Le and Gilding 2016), Malaysia (Harry 2021), Cambodia (Jeffries and Chuenurah 2019), Thailand (Jeffries and Chuenurah 2016), and South Africa (Mnguni and Thobane 2022; Hubschle 2013) (Fleetwood and Leban 2022).

The second narrative that has emerged in a large body of literature assumes that women are mainly victims in illegal drug markets but additionally emphasizes a sexualized aspect. In drug markets that reflect patriarchal power and dominance, women have often been sexualized and exploited (P. A. Adler 1993; P. Bourgois, Prince, and Moss 2004; Maher 1997; Fleetwood and Leban 2022). As victims in hostile environments, they are often vulnerable to sexual harassment, violence, and exploitation, even if they take up more independent roles (Gómez Fernández 2017; August 2013; Fleetwood and Leban 2022; T. L. Anderson and Kavanaugh 2017). In societies in which the drug trade is associated with a hegemonic masculine world, women's roles have been sexualized in a manner which makes them vulnerable (Muehlmann 2018; Yanes and Sales 2019). This narrative is prevalent in the literature on Latin America because of the strong influence of machismo on society.

The third narrative that has evolved in the literature on women's participation in the drug trade considers women as pivotal actors in the market, emphasizing emancipation (Fagan 1994; P. Bourgois 1989; Fleetwood and Leban 2022). As stated by Bourgois (1989), "greater female involvement in crack reflects in a rather straightforward manner the growing emancipation of women throughout all aspects of inner-city life, culture and economy" (643). Even though the emancipation assumption has received considerable criticism, the fact that some women might have considerable power and agency in drug markets is indisputable. What remains unclear, however, is to what extent this is connected to broader social paths of emancipation, if at all (Maher 1997; Fleetwood and Leban 2022).

As policy narratives are utilized to endorse and consolidate policy decisions on topics dominated by ambiguity and intricacy, they tend to unravel deep power inequalities. According to Roe (1994), policy narratives "[...] often resist change or modification even in the presence of contradicting empirical data, because they continue to underwrite and stabilize the assumptions for decision making in the face of high uncertainty, complexity, and polarization" (2). Therefore, it is key to become aware of how narratives shape the beliefs and practices of policymakers in specific contexts, such as in the Netherlands, where despite the scope of the drug market, there seems to be little research on gender and drug policy.

## 1.4 Media, Drug Policy and Gender

### *Media and Policy*

Drug policy is among the most polarized issues of public debate and the media (Tieberghien 2014). As reflected in both print and online news, television, magazines or radio, illicit drugs are prevalent and regularly appear in the media (Lancaster et al. 2011). An important question arising from this, is what impacts does this have on audiences and drug policy? And more specifically, how does this interact with the narratives about women's roles in the drug trade?

'Evidence-based policy' implies the utilization of scientific knowledge by drug experts in order to formulate policy based on objective knowledge instead of political biases (Ottoson and Hawe 2009; Tieberghien 2014). However, it has been established that, in practice, various other factors are involved in the policymaking process, such as values, interests and ideology (Monaghan 2011; Stevens 2007; Hoppe 2005; Weiss et al. 2008; Tieberghien 2014). Moreover, alongside the science-policy nexus, the media seems to play a key role as well. Firstly, because the media exerts significance influence through its power to frame issues selectively and, in turn, shapes public attitudes (M. E. McCombs and Shaw 1972; Lancaster et al. 2011; Tieberghien 2014). Secondly, as policymakers often rely on the media to understand the public opinion, the media has the power to influence political debates (Scheufele and Tewksbury 2007; M. McCombs and Reynolds 2009; Tieberghien 2014). Even though the role of the media in shaping drug discourse is widely recognized, there seems to be limited research on the nexus between the media and drug policymaking (Goode and Nachman 2009; Tieberghien 2014).

### *Media, Drug Policy and Women*

Some authors have demonstrated how media representations of the drug trade have oversimplified the complexities of the interaction between drug trafficking, women's agency, and drug policies. For example, Muehmann argues that media representations in North America have been gendered, depicting men as the main actors in the drug trade and drug-related violence. In light of this, women's agency has been overshadowed, not only in the media but also in drug policies. However, as drug policies have disproportionately affected women, as can be seen from the rising number of women in prison for drug trafficking offences, women are increasingly taking a more political stance. (Muehlmann 2018). On the other hand, it can

also be argued that the rise in media coverage of women and drug use has contributed to the disproportionate policing of women, which is mainly visible in the high incarceration rate (Campbell 2000; Muehlmann 2018). For instance, the sociocultural meanings attached to motherhood have proposed that drugs have more detrimental effects on women than they have on men. This can be illustrated by how the “decline of maternal instinct” became a governing mentality regulating drug policy in the United States in the 1980s (Campbell 1999). Against this background, it can be said that increased focus on women and drugs in the media has been generative of a public policy discourse that disproportionately affects women.

Within the complex dynamics between drug policy and media, the proliferation of gender identities is heavily dependent on context (Muehlmann 2018). Against this background, the next sections will look at the dynamics between narratives on women in the drug trade and the media in the Latin American context and the Netherlands respectively.

### 1.4.1 Women and Drugs in the Media in the Latin American context

#### *Narco-Culture*

The articulation of gender identities in Latin America is mostly permeated and created by drug traffickers' subculture. This so-called "Narco-culture" is created by drug traffickers to establish their own social order within states (Duarte 2014). This culture consists of a combination of social, political, and economic aspects and the way in which "narcos" have legitimized themselves socially. By doing so, stereotypes of masculinity and femininity are reinforced (Yanes and Sales 2019).

#### *Gender Roles in Narco-Culture*

When a society is heavily exposed to drug trade, violence and conflict between drug cartels, a drug subculture can permeate society. In Latin-America, the impact of narco-culture is characterized by an extreme form of masculinity (Yanes and Sales 2019). This hyper-masculinity is an exaggeration of stereotypical norms of men that results in the devaluation of women (Yanes and Sales 2019). The manifestations of drug culture have become a lifestyle and have disempowered women in society. This is mostly the case in patriarchal cultures, as can be seen in Latin American countries.

#### *Narco-Culture and the Media*

The gender stereotypes as described above have been reinforced by the media. Gender positions as represented by the media often constitute oversimplifications of the complex dynamics between drug trafficking and drug policy, which, in turn, perpetuates governing mentalities (Muehlmann 2018). Besides widespread news coverage on drug trafficking, narco-culture has been represented in popular culture in the 1970s. Ever since the beginning of the "War on Drugs", series, films and movies have spread ideas and attitudes about drug trafficking and crime. Popular culture is recreated by media, as can be seen from narcotelenovelas, in which gender stereotypes, patriarchy and hypermasculinity are reinforced by portraying women as victims that need to be saved by patriarchy (Cabanas 2012). This shows how the media support the narrative of women as sexualized victims in the drug trade. As stated by Cabañas, "This patriarchal gaze is the most important element of fantasy in the telenovelas that distort the

reality of women impacted by the drug trade” (Cabanas 2012, 85-86). Hence, the complex dynamics between popular culture and hegemonic narratives of the drug trade reinforce narratives about women’s roles in the drug trade in Latin America.



## 1.4.2 Women and Drugs in the Media in the Dutch Context

### *“Narco-state”*

In the Dutch media, the term ‘narco-state’ has appeared from time to time as well. For example, one newspaper headline reads as follows: “Hoekstra – at the time party leader of the Dutch political party CDA, currently minister of Foreign Affairs – fears for the Netherlands to become a narcostate: ‘More drugs exported than cheese’” (Tetelepta 2021). In this context, he showed his concerns about the Netherlands becoming similar to countries such as Mexico, especially after learning that Mexican, Colombian and American drug criminals have been reported in drug labs in the Netherlands. According to him, this illustrates how the situation escalates in the Netherlands (Tetelepta 2021). Jan Struijs, chairman of the Dutch police union has a slightly more moderate view, but shares the concerns as expressed by Hoekstra. “Sure we're not Mexico. We don't have 14,400 murders. But if you look at the infrastructure, the big money earned by organised crime, the parallel economy. Yes, we have a narco-state”, Struijs stated (Holligan 2019).

In other countries the Netherlands has been portrayed as a narco-state as well. For instance, in neighboring country Germany in October 2021, a mocked Dutch drug policy. The cover of the renowned German weekly magazine ‘Der Spiegel’ shows the Dutch cheese girl Frau Antje with a Kalashnikov in her hand and a joint between her lips. She carries a cheese in which cocaine is hidden (as shown on the front page of this thesis). De magazine portrays the Netherlands as a cautionary example. “Drug gangs in the Netherlands have long since graduated from hashish to cocaine - and from dealing on the streets to a spree of contract killings. Police, lawyers, journalists: All are at risk of falling victim to the drug violence that has gripped the country”, writes Der Spiegel (Dahlkamp, Diehl, and Lehberger 2021). Nonetheless, despite the label of becoming a narco-state, the stereotypes of masculinity and femininity associated with the narco-culture seem less visible in the Netherlands.

### *Women*

Except from the illustration of the Dutch cheese girl Frau Antje, there is little representation of women participating in drug trade covered in the Dutch news media, which portrays it predominantly as a men’s world. A remarkable figure that appeared in the news recently is

Naima Jillal. The 55-year-old Dutch-Moroccan women who was allegedly doing business with several well-known cocaine smugglers was known as “the Godmother of coke” or “Tante Jillal” (Aunt Jillal) in the criminal underworld. Just when the police started finding out about her prominent position in the drug world, she vanished, which was in October 2019. In April 2022, photos of a tortured women were found on Ridouan Taghi’s phone. They show a naked woman, tied to a chair, with a severed toe and thumb on her stomach. The Judiciary suspects that it is Naima Jillal, but this has not been proven. The photos have been added to the case file of the Marengo-trail (Vugts 2022). The case of Jillal provides an interesting case because, on the one hand, she could be perceived as a victim considering she was tortured, whilst on the other hand, she could be regarded as a pivotal player in the drug trade. Hence, her story as presented in the media could both support the narrative of women as victims of the drug trade, as well as the narrative of women as key actors.

Moreover, what is remarkable regarding the few women appearing in the news with respect to drug trade or crime, is that it often concerns a family member or relative of a male criminal or suspect, which also links up with the narrative of women as involuntary victims. For instance, the judiciary perceives some of Taghi’s brothers and sisters as accomplices. His sister was arrested in December 2019 for her “facilitating role” in the criminal organization. This is noteworthy because in the Moroccan-Dutch criminal environment, deploying sisters is considered to be a faux pas (Vugts 2019b; 2019a). This, again, sheds light on the complex dynamics between the media and narratives about women’s roles in the drug trade.

The debates surrounding the gender gap and the agency debate demonstrate that the literature on drugs and crime has failed to how to theorize the power relations shaping and formed by gender relations. From this literature, three narratives on women’s agency in the drug trade have emerged. Nonetheless, it has been demonstrated that the media representations of the drug trade, as well as drug policies, have the power to reinforce gendered narratives. Moreover, the fact that most of the literature has focused on the Latin American region sheds light on a potential contextual bias.

In light of the societal differences between Latin America and the Netherlands and the gap in knowledge on women in the drug trade in the Dutch context, this research will tackle the void in the literature by addressing the following research question: “What are Dutch drug policy narratives on women working in the international drug trade?”

Based on the three narratives as identified in the literature review above, I will try to identify commonalities between the Dutch and Latin American narratives on women and the drug trade. In the following chapter, I will explain how this will be done by outlining my research design.

## 2. Research Design

The following chapter outlines how the research questions will be addressed by presenting the case selection, unit of analysis, data sources, data collection methods, and data analysis. Moreover, the strategy to work towards trustworthiness will be discussed.

### 2.1 Narratives

*“Ours is a field characterized by extreme diversity and complexity. There is no single way to do narrative research, just as there is no single definition of narrative”* (Riessman 2008, 155).

Narrative is a prevalent concept in the literature on drugs and gender. Therefore, throughout my research, narrative will be given a central place. It is important to note here that narrative will be used both as a concept and a methodology, shedding light on how knowledge is constructed and a methodological tool challenging established modes of theorizing and providing insight into the specifics of lived experience (Patterson and Monroe 1998).

Narratives can be defined as “[...] a form of explanation that works by relating actions to individual beliefs and desires that produce them” (Rhodes 2018). Influenced by the structuralism of anthropologists such as Lévi-Strauss, the French narratologist Barthes (1915-1980) proclaimed the central role of narratives in social sciences during the 1960s (Patterson and Monroe 1998; Czarniawska 2004). This concern for narrative extended to the social sciences and humanities (Czarniawska 2004). By moving beyond reporting, narratives reflect how we make sense of the commonplace, making it a powerful mode of discourse and other forms of organizing experience, as they help us to understand how people organize and experience themselves, both in particular contexts and in relation to others, the narrative is often considered an important tool in political science for analyzing how identity affects behavior (Patterson and Monroe 1998). However, narrative as a research method has been debated by some political scientists because of the intertwinement with the story or fictional element that is inherent to narratives, raising questions regarding the distinction between ‘truth’ and ‘lie’, especially in the political domain (Shenhav 2006; Mandelbaum 1967).

Nevertheless, narrative has established itself as a valuable concept in the social sciences, mainly in the discipline of history, because of its added value in reconstructing events into meaningful

sequences (White 1980; Patterson and Monroe 1998). Moreover, the fact that commonly shared narratives help us understand ourselves and the political debates in which we find ourselves suggests that narratives are as much of political importance (Patterson and Monroe 1998).

## 2.2 Research Question

The design and the methodology of this thesis have been shaped by the following question:

“What are Dutch drug policy narratives on women working in the international drug trade?”

The following sub-questions derive from this research question:

1. To what extent is the conceptualization of women’s agency in the drug trade in the Netherlands different from the conceptualization in the Latin American context?
2. What is the impact of media narratives in the Netherlands on the perception of women working in the international drug trade?
3. How are Dutch drug policy narratives on women working in the international drug trade reflected in debates in the public sphere on drug policy?

## 2.3 Case Selection

The focus of this research is the Dutch case because it is under-researched, which is striking given the fact that it is a hub of drug trade in Europe. The aim behind the research question is to gain insight into the meaning-making process of Dutch drug policymaking on the international drug trade and how this relates to women and girls. Against the background of the extensive body of literature in the setting of the Americas, this research will focus on the case of the Netherlands. Despite being a central drug hub for the global drug market, the gendered dimension of both the drug trade and counter-narcotic policies remains under-analyzed in the Dutch context.

## 2.4 Unit of Analysis

Narratives are the unit of analysis because it uncovers how participants make meaning. These narratives exist in a specific context, but they also have an impact on how the community of

practitioners make decisions about the drug trade and formulate policy. Hence, in identifying these narratives, they show how multiple tides of practitioners are implicated because narratives are created and reinforced through policy or media.

### 2.5 Data Sources

I will make use of both empirical data and documentary sources, between which I will triangulate in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of Dutch drug policy narratives on the role of women in the international drug trade (Patton 1999). The data sources are indicated in the table below:

Type of Source	Data Source
<b>Empirical data</b>	Interviews with policymakers, practitioners and journalists
<b>Primary documentary sources</b>	Government documents UN Resolutions General Assembly debates
<b>Secondary documentary sources</b>	Academic books Academic journal articles Think-thank articles NGO reports

#### *Empirical Data*

Interviews were my main source of data, as I am measuring narratives from an agency perspective and I needed to move beyond reporting (Patterson and Monroe 1998). A diverse group of people that are working on or with drug policy were interviewed. In order to bridge the gap between policy discourse and implementation, interviewees varied between policymakers and practitioners. Amongst the interviewees were policy officers from the Dutch parliament with drug policy in their portfolio, as well as policymakers at the Dutch Ministry of Justice and Security. In addition, the interviewees included people working closer to drug traffickers, varying from people working at penitentiary institutions for women, to a crime reporter for a leading Dutch newspaper, and a police force drug coordinator. Besides that,

moving from the Netherlands to Chile whilst writing this thesis allowed me to talk about the topic in everyday settings, getting a grasp of the perceptions on the drug problem in the two different contextual backgrounds. As this helped me to place my findings in a civil society context, it added a valuable dimension to doing research on this topic.

### *Documentary Sources*

In order to confirm my interpretations, as well as to deepen the analysis, this approach relies on primary documentary sources, such as policy documents and reports, as well as secondary documentary sources, consisting of academic and practitioner literature on counter-narcotic policies related to women and girls were used for analysis. Based on these initial understandings, I did the interviews and compared them by going back and forth, which made this an iterative process of abductive reasoning (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012). Moreover, both primary and secondary documentary sources on the Dutch context have been used to check for respondent validation and for the interpretive claims that are made (Torrance 2012). The main primary documentary sources include Dutch governmental documents on drug policy, supplemented by policy documents on European legislation addressing the illicit drug trade. Secondary documentary sources on the case of the Netherlands mainly concern journal articles, NGO reports and think-tank articles. However, considering the limited amount of work available on this topic in the Dutch context, relative to the extensive amount of research in the Latin American context, I was compelled to take the latter as a starting point for this research.

## 2.6 Data Collection Methods

Two types of data have been collected in order to analyze Dutch drug policy narratives. First of all, documentary sources were collected to gain an understanding of the topic. The primary documentary sources were selected because they were either suggested by the interviewees after asking them about which relevant document should be used for the analysis, or they were selected through independent research. The secondary documentary sources were selected based on an extensive search of the academic literature. Second of all, the first empirical data was collected through purposive sampling (Boeri and Lamonica 2015). This means that initial participants were located through pre-existing connections or by contacting people through social media. From these participants, a technique of snowball sampling was used to find

additional interviewees (Moser and Korstjens 2018). The sample size of 8 interviewees allowed me to conduct an in-depth analysis, whilst also gaining a solid ground to discover linkages and patterns into how participants construct narrative from their own personal experience.

The participants are indicated in the table below:

Name	Job Title
<b>Anonymous</b>	Drug policy maker at the Dutch Ministry of Justice and Security
<b>Raissa Biekman</b>	Policy Offer Dutch Parliament (D66) with the portfolio Drug Policy
<b>Gerald Goossens</b>	Head Detention and Reintegration Penal Institution for women
<b>Rob Hofland</b>	Municipal Councillor in Amsterdam, specialized in Drug Policy
<b>Freek Pecht</b>	Coordinator Synthetic Drugs Police forces Zeeland-West Brabant
<b>Peter Sanders</b>	Head of Security Penal Institution for women
<b>Paul Vugts</b>	Crime Reporter for Dutch newspaper ‘Het Parool’
<b>Jack Wubben</b>	Career of 30 years of working with inmates, Ministry of Justice

It struck me during the empirical data collection that it was more difficult to find women to interview on this topic than men. While I truly tried to gain an equal number of men and women as participants, I ended up with only one interview with a woman. Even though I could not find figures for gender balance among drug policymakers and practitioners, I suspect this to be a male-dominated area.

The participants received 3-5 somewhat overlapping open-ended questions, but with small adaptations to provide as much room as possible to gain their perspectives on the role of women in drug trade. This way of interviewing allowed me to follow up on particularly interesting answers that are relevant to this research, which, in turn, ensured that I gained their narratives in their own words (Dilley 2000).



## 2.7 Data Analysis

As my aim is to attempt to get an insight into the distinctions policymakers working on counter-narcotics policies make, this research is interpretive. Since institutions and policies shape the structural circumstances in which women live, and, in turn, the meanings attached to being a woman in that context, it is key to take the perspectives of the policymaker and policy implementer as a starting point and place at the center of the research. Narrative analysis is best suitable for this because it is an agency perspective and provides a window into the meaning-making process of actors (Bevir and Rhodes 2022; Bevir 2006).

After conducting the interviews, I transcribed the data and translated this into English. I analyzed the transcripts through a technique of close reading in order to gain a deeper understanding of the meaning of what had been said by the participants (Brummett 2018). Whilst doing this, I went back and forth abductively to the extant material on the narratives in the literature on Latin America in order to identify them (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012). As stated by Schwartz-Shea and Yanow (2012), “It is this continuous juxtaposition of conceptual formulations with field realities and the requisite flexibility that accompanies it that comprise the foundational rhythm of interpretive research” (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012, 56). By doing so, I tried to link the knowledge gained from the literature to the experiences and meanings from the participants.

### *Designing for Trustworthiness*

A potential validity issue with narrative analysis can arise from selection biases or the disjunction between the participants' actual experienced meaning and their language perception (Polkinghorne 2007). This is unavoidable given the small number of policymakers and the strategy of interviewee selection. However, the triangulation between different data sources helped me to gain a richer and more balanced view of the phenomenon, minimizing this bias (Elliott and Timulak 2005). Hence, while the interview data increase contextualization and detail, the narrative analysis provides more depth and clarity to confirm the interpretations.

Besides that, in order to establish and maintain credibility, researcher reflection regarding potential biases is paramount. During my research, I became aware that my positionality and the external meta-categories to which I belong (female, Dutch, 'white', graduate student, middle class etc.) meant that I was at times part of a certain power imbalance as well. For example, as a woman, I was part of the group that has been victimized by certain narratives, while at the same time, as a white woman, I was part of the group that may be privileged by race in the context of certain policies. The flexible research design, which allowed me to go back and forth between my initial knowledge and learning from the ongoing experiences in the field, was of great significance to understand the meaning-making process of actors without interfering this with my own lived realities. This process of sense-checking deepened my knowledge, with due regard to how my own identity could affect the process (Pessoa et al. 2019; Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012).

### 3. The Global Drug Trade

This chapter will provide an overview global drug trade. Moreover, the impact of the pandemic on the drug trade will be discussed, showing that this has changed certain trafficking patterns. This chapter will also shed light on what is known about women in the drug trade and how illicit drug trafficking is addressed. The last section will address the drug trade in the Netherlands in particular.

The global illicit drug trade represents one of the most lucrative forms of business for criminals worldwide and is estimated to generate around one-fifth of global crime revenue (EMCDDA and Europol 2022). Drug trafficking flows link countries, regions and continents and are thereby affecting communities globally. In 2021, 275 million people used drugs worldwide, which represents an increase of 22% compared with 2010, in which 226 million people used drugs. The global drug trade has a significant impact on society, undermining socio-economic development and stability and increasing inequality (UNODC 2021).

#### *The impact of COVID-19*

It has been argued that the pandemic has accelerated some of the already existing global drug trade patterns, such as larger shipment sizes, the increased use of maritime and waterway routes and the use of private aircraft, as well as a rise in contactless drug transactions. Drug trafficking over the dark web has increased, as can be derived from the \$315 million dollar this market is worth annually. 57% of the drug transactions made over the dark web mentioned Europe as a region of shipment between 2011 and 2020, with the United Kingdom being the most prevalent, and after that Germany and the Netherlands (UNODC 2021). The adjustment of illicit drug flows to the changing circumstances illustrates the resilience and persistence of these criminal networks.

#### *Europe*

It has been noted that the increasing cocaine flows to Europe are diversifying, which will lead to a further expansion of the cocaine market. Approximately 20 million people were cocaine users in 2019 worldwide, with a particularly high prevalence in Western and Central Europe

and North America, 1.4% and 2.1% of the population aged 15-64, respectively. Europe is an important destination for cocaine, as can also be deduced from the fact that the purity of cocaine in Europe has risen by 40% over the past 10 years, which is indicative of the increased competition and efficiency of the supply chain. Moreover, the amount of cocaine seized in Europe increased by more than 20% in 2019, up to 218 tons, which was a new record, making it the second largest market for cocaine after North America (UNODC 2021). The EMCDDA estimates that total sales of cocaine was worth at least EUR 10.5 billion in 2020 (EMCDDA and Europol 2022).

### *Women and Drugs*

The use of drugs amongst women differs significantly from that of men. This is most apparent in the high prevalence of the non-medical use of opioids and tranquillizers by women, higher usage of drugs to self-medicate amongst women that have experienced childhood adversity, the high rate of gender-based violence amongst female drug users and the increased risk for women for infectious diseases (UNODC 2018b). Nonetheless, the exact dynamics between gender and drug trade remain unclear. As indicated by the UNODC in their most recent report on women and drugs, “[...] the relationship between women and the drug trade is not well understood”, complemented by, “Women may not only be victims, but also active participants in the drug trade” (UNODC 2018b). While it has been established by criminal convictions that women play important roles in the drug trade, official data is lacking. From the data provided by the 98 countries that do collect sex-disaggregated drug-related crime data to UNODC, it has been inferred that 10% of detainees in these countries for the period 2012-2016 were women (UNODC 2018b). However, the exact role of women, and at what component of the supply chain they are mainly active, remains unclear.

### *Approaches to Combating Drug Trafficking*

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) defines drug trafficking as “[...] a global illicit trade involving the cultivation, manufacture, distribution and sale of substances which are subject to drug prohibition laws” (UNDOC 2022a). Based on three major international control treaties, the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs of 1961, the Convention on Psychotropic Substances of 1971, and the United Nations Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances of 1988, UNODC plays a key role in supporting

states in the application and supervision of these international drug control treaties (UNODC 2022c).

The most academic literature is centered around the concept “War on Drugs”, referring to the effort led by the US government to combat illegal drug use and trafficking by dramatically increasing penalties, enforcement, and incarceration for drug offenders, which became a leading doctrine for US domestic and foreign policy (Muehlmann 2013). This started in 1971 when US President Richard Nixon declared the drug war, predominantly shaping US governance systems ever since (J. Simon 2007; Tate 2013).

Nonetheless, while coverage of the drugs trade has primarily focused on the United States, drugs to Europe have significantly increased over the years. McDermott, Bargent, den Held and Ramínez (2021) quoted one of the Senior European police officials and cocaine expert that they interviewed: “For 2019 and the first months of 2020, the thinking was that the flow of drugs entering or passing through Europe was between 500 and 800 tonnes. We base these numbers in part on the notion that we are seizing 10% to 20% of the total” (McDermott et al. 2021, 1). Not only has the cocaine trade exploded in Europe in recent years, it has become more visible and normalized.

### *The Netherlands*

Within Europe, the case of the Netherlands is particularly relevant here due to its location and function as an important transit country for the transnational drug trade, mainly through Schiphol airport and the principal seaport of Rotterdam (Madarie and Kruisbergen 2020; Kleemans 2007). However, routes, modalities, and transit points continue to change in the increasingly interconnected and digitalized market, as can be seen from the shifting points of entry into Europe. As found by UNODC EUROPOL, “The increased use of containerized shipments relying on the high-volume ports of Antwerp, Rotterdam and Hamburg has consolidated the role of the Netherlands as a staging point and led to continental Europe’s North Sea coast overtaking the Iberian peninsula as the primary point of entry for cocaine reaching Europe” (UNODC and EUROPOL 2021). Notwithstanding understanding these global connections and market shifts of global drug trafficking, many aspects remain unclear, including who the main interlocutors for criminal networks that facilitate trafficking from and to Europe are and what role they play (UNODC and EUROPOL 2021). Therefore, this research addresses the gap in knowledge on the drug trade in the European context, specifically in the

Netherlands. With increased demand and availability, the flow of drugs into Europe is expected to increase (UNODC and EUROPOL 2021).

Accurate information on drugs is critical for policymakers to create a clearer picture of the drugs trade and its impacts on society and, in turn, to formulate adequate policy responses. In addition to the negative impact on public health, the drug trade also hampers economic and social development. It has disproportionate consequences for the most marginalized and poses a great threat to international stability and security (UNODC 2021). Understanding the scope and impact of the global drug trade is key in addressing the problem through policies. The next chapter will shed light on drug policy in Latin America and the Netherlands.

## 4. Drug Policy

This chapter will analyze drug policy in the Latin American region and the Netherlands respectively, highlighting the most important instruments, principles, and challenges in this domain. Moreover, it will shed light on the different approaches to drug policies, the origins of these differences, as well as the impacts.

### 4.1 Drug Policy in Latin America

#### *UNGASS 2016*

The declaration of Colombia, Mexico and Guatemala to the United Nations Secretary General in 2012, calling for an urgent review of the approach to drug policies, marked the opening of the drug policy debate. The main concerns were the ineffectiveness of drug policies, high levels of violence and organized crime resulting from the illicit drug market. This call led up to the UN General Assembly Special Session (UNGASS) on drugs in New York in 2016. UNGASS 2016 provided an opportunity for Latin America and the Caribbean to reconsider international drug policy and resulted in an Outcome Document, calling for the inclusion of human rights, development and public health in the approach to drug policies (UNODC 2016b; Garzón and Rueda 2020). This revision provided an opportunity to counterbalance the dominant US “War on Drugs” narrative, which was marked by repressive and punitive policies, and move towards an approach distinguished by a prioritization of public health, human rights and development (Garzón and Rueda 2020; Madrazo Lajous and Pérez Correa 2019).

UNGASS 2016 marked a turning point in the history of drug policies and is by some even considered the end of the “War on Drugs” era (LSE IDEAS 2016). Most countries in Latin America and the Caribbean had followed the US approach to drug policies, but to no avail. In fact, this approach has not only failed to reduce the drug problem, it has also created new issues, exacerbating the violence and security it was supposed to reduce (Garzón 2018; Garzón and Rueda 2020). Growing consensus exists in the literature that the U.S.-led “War on Drugs” has failed (Garzón and Rueda 2020; Garzón 2018; Giacomello and Youngers 2020; Giacomello 2017; Madrazo Lajous and Pérez Correa 2019; Mendiburo-Seguel et al. 2016; Durán-Martínez 2017; Bagley and Rosen 2015; Ponce 2019; LSE IDEAS 2016). For example, in Mexico, after president Felipe Calderon (2006-2012) militarized the drug war with the support from the US

government, this led to extremely high levels of violence and bloodshed in the country. By the end of Calderón's term, Mexico had suffered at least 70.000 deaths and 26.000 disappearances as a result from the repressive regime (Rosen and Zepeda Martínez 2016; Bagley and Rosen 2015). Moreover, the annual economic losses resulting from this agenda have been estimated around 4.3 billion US dollars in Mexico (Viridiana 2008; Ponce 2019). Even though Mexico is only one illustration of the consequences of the "War on Drugs", it sheds light on the impact of this narrative throughout the region.

### *Towards liberalization*

Over the past few years a shift can be seen from the prohibitionist paradigm towards forms of liberalization of drug policies in Latin American countries (Mendiburo-Seguel et al. 2016). Two main arguments that advocate working towards forms of liberalization of drug policies can be identified across Latin American countries.

One argument for reform is that the prohibitionist approach triggers high levels of violence, as can be seen in countries such as Mexico, Bolivia and Colombia (Global Post 2013; Shirk 2011; Bagley and Rosen 2015; Mendiburo-Seguel et al. 2016). This is commonly explained by the empirically supported perverse effect of prohibitionist policy, fueling competition amongst criminal organization and, in turn, provoking violence (Werb et al. 2011; Mendiburo-Seguel et al. 2016).

Another important argument underlying reform of the traditional prohibitionist approach has been the well-documented inadequacy of this approach, in combination with continuing growth of the drug trade, which is a business that only becomes more attractive with repressive measures being implemented (Pardo 2014; Cartay 1994; Mendiburo-Seguel et al. 2016). As lines between consumer, transit and consumer states are increasingly blurred, it is essential to look beyond the notion of Latin America as an area where drugs are produced and transited to other parts of the world. It is key to take into consideration the dynamics within the illicit drug market and how this interacts with policy arena in the region. Drug-related issues are part of a complex system in which various structural factors intersect, with key factors being: corruption, impunity, low regulatory capacity, and inequality. In this context, the drug economy has taken advantage of the structural weaknesses in Latin American countries (Garzón and Rueda 2020; Giacomello and Youngers 2020). Emphasizing that these issues should not be considered



sources of the drug industry, but rather as pivotal forces within the dynamics of the illegal drug market, Garzón and Rueda have shed light on the complexity of drug-related problems and the corresponding policy responses. According to them, “[...] The complex combination of structural factors – such as high levels of corruption, impunity, high inequality, and low regulatory capacity – have favoured the emergence and persistence of an illegal drug industry” (Garzón 2018, 88). The impact of the States’ institutional capacities is key here (Garzón and Rueda 2020; Madrazo Lajous and Pérez Correa 2019). More specifically, it has been claimed that the adverse effect of drug policies is caused by the gap between policy discourse and actual implementation of drug laws, pointing to the importance of institutional capabilities (Madrazo Lajous and Pérez Correa 2019; Garzón and Rueda 2020). As stated by Lajous and Correa (), “[...] Security institutions in the region are often corrupt or inefficient and operate so as to make easy arrests that require less effort” (Madrazo Lajous and Pérez Correa 2019, 454). This results in repression and punishment policies, whilst being aimed at drug trafficking and illicit supply, affect mainly the consumer or vulnerable groups that are deployed by criminal organizations (Madrazo Lajous and Pérez Correa 2019). This disproportionately impacts women as they are more likely than men to face high sentences for minor and nonviolent drug infractions, but which pose a heavy burden on them.

### *Women*

Within the trend of the criminalization of consumers, women have been identified as a vulnerable group, seen as replaceable by both criminal organizations and state authorities. (Madrazo Lajous and Pérez Correa 2019; Giacomello and Youngers 2020). Women’s incarceration has been linked to the “War on Drugs” narrative and the repressive drug policies it has generated. Several authors have demonstrated how repressive drug policies, marked by disproportionate sentencing, excessive use of pretrial detention, and mandatory minimums, disproportionately affect women (Chaparro, Correa, and Youngers 2017; Giacomello and Youngers 2020). Against a background of marginalization and a lack of opportunities, in combination with weak institutions and punitive policies, women are the ones tricked into drug trafficking and, in turn, the first to be incarcerated (Giacomello and Youngers 2020). On a global level, the female prison population is growing more rapidly than the male prison population. Between 2000 and 2017, the global female incarceration rate increased with 53.3%, relative to a 19.6% increase in the male incarceration rate. 31% of the global population that females constituted at that time were located in the Americas. Even when the United States are

excluded from this figure, Latin America is the region with the highest female prison population rate (14.6%) (Walmsley 2017). This is also reflected in the extensive body of literature on women and drug policy in the context of Latin America, versus the limited amount of research on this topic in other regional contexts.

### *Intersectionality*

The disproportionate effects of punitive drug policies on women illuminate the importance of a shift towards a more liberal approach to drug policies in Latin America, with greater attention to human rights and a particular focus on gender. However, besides the gendered dimension of drug policy, it is also key to take into consideration the racialized dimensions. Critical literature on drug policy has focused on racial criminalization and incarceration, showing that for example, in the United States, African Americans and Latinos are affected disproportionately by drug policies (P. I. Bourgois 2003; Waterston 1993; Natapoff 2009; Corva 2008; Alexander 2012; Muehlmann 2018). In light of this, the literature on drug policies has been criticized for ignoring the intersections between gender and race in the implementation of drug-prohibition policies (Hart 2013; Provine 2011; Muehlmann 2018). As stated by Muehlmann, “[...] The skewed effects of punitive drug policies on black women have begged the question of how to understand the racialization of prohibition in tandem with forms of gender subordination” (Muehlmann 2018, 322). Therefore, it is important to draw attention to gender as a complex social structure, subject to individual and contextual features, such as social class, race and sexuality.

Moreover, these complexities show the significance of including women in the process of developing more humane and effective drug policies (Giacomello and Youngers 2020). As stated by Giacomello and Youngers, “For too long, women from affected communities have been excluded from the debate; they not only deserve a seat at the table, but also to take the lead in constructing more humane and effective drug policies in Latin America” (Giacomello and Youngers 2020, 110).

## 4.2 Drug Policy in the Netherlands

The EU has taken a different approach than the US regarding drug policy, both internally and externally. Contrary to the US, which considers drugs in Latin America as a national security threat, the EU has defined it as a societal security threat instead, emphasizing health, crime, and moral values (Strazzari and Russo 2014; Stambøl 2016; Fukumi 2008). As stated by Stambøl (2016), “The EU has a very different view of and approach to coca production in the Andes than the United States. Rather than treating drugs as a national security issue fought through forced crop eradication and militarization, the EU approach has been centered on economic and rural development, data generation, and regional cooperation” (Stambøl 2016, 4). It is, however, essential to note here that the fact that the EU and US are the prominent donors of the UNODC, working alongside each other in implementing both national and international policy initiatives, implies that, despite the differences, there is an inevitable overlap in their policies (UNODC 2018a). Moreover, with a stronger emphasis on policy initiatives focusing on (supra) national security in addressing the drug trade in Latin America, the EU’s approach seems to be substantially shifting from development to security (Stambøl 2016).

Nevertheless, unlike the US model, no evidence has been found of the EU drawing on military force in its enforcement of the policy, which is mainly considered the result of different strategic narratives. Nonetheless, the dynamics of policy convergence and divergence on transnational organized crime reflect EU security policy thinking (Strazzari and Russo 2014). The shift that is taking place from only development policy towards a stronger emphasis on tackling drugs trafficking and organized crime through interventions that fall within the domain of security policy can be referred to as a bifurcation between a ‘soft’ and a ‘hard’ approach to drug control (Stambøl 2016; Cohen 1985).

The debate on a soft versus a hard approach to drug trade fits within the broader policy trilemma in which the difficult tensions and trade-offs concerning the policy fields of drugs, development, and peacebuilding come together and which recently sparked the emergence of a policy consensus concerning the need for essential/fundamental global drug policy reforms (German Agency for International Cooperation 2013; UNODC 2016a; Brombacher and Westerbarkei 2019; Buxton 2015; Goodhand et al. 2021). Against this background, questions have been raised regarding how EU policies on development and security might contradict each

other or what unforeseen effects this might trigger, both domestically and internationally (Stambøl 2016). For instance, it can be argued that various drug policy initiatives aimed at integrating drug policy and development policy, such as the SDGs, the 2016 UNGASS Outcome Document, and the 1998 Action Plan, have failed to effectively engage with the development repercussions of criminalization (Buxton 2020). In a rapidly changing international environment, various authors have expressed skepticism over the compatibility of development and drug policies (Buxton 2020; Stambøl 2016). As stated by Buxton (2020), “Complex development questions cannot be addressed within the institutional and normative framework of criminalisation, with the associated primacy of law- and- order approaches, security actors, and enforcement metrics” (36). In light of this, an approach that focuses on human security instead of transnational security has been advocated. This would allow the EU to maintain its position as a counterweight to the US anti-drug efforts, promoting security through progressive drug policy innovations (Stambøl 2016; Buxton 2020).

Considering the scope of the illegal drugs trade beyond the borders of the Americas, it is remarkable that there seems to be limited research on the concept of the drug trade outside this geographical area. Europe plays a significant role in the international drug trade as a consumer market and production and association with organized crime networks (Stempkowski 2021). Despite the fact that all European member states are signatories to the UN drug conventions, there is no consensus within Europe regarding drug policy (Chatwin 2016; 2017). Due to the subsidiarity principle, the European Union does not play a leading role with regard to the drug trade but can act only if member states insufficiently achieve the objectives of a proposed action.<sup>4</sup> In light of this, the principal European drug policy tools concern Drugs Strategies and Action plans, which do not comprise binding legislation but create an overarching framework for the Member States instead (Stempkowski 2021). Apart from some guiding principles, this has resulted in varying national drug policies among member states, ranging from a more repressive approach in Sweden to relatively liberal drug policies in the Netherlands (Stempkowski 2021; Chatwin 2016; 2017).

In sum, while gender is considered in the application of drug laws in the context in Latin America is prevalent, little seems to be known about the effects of drug policy on women in the

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<sup>4</sup> Consolidated version of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) [2012] OJ C 326/47, Art 5.

Dutch or European context. In the following chapter, the analysis of the prevalence of Dutch drug policy narratives on the role of women in the drug trade will be discussed.

## 5. Analysis

The main objective of this thesis was to understand how those that formulate or implement drug policy bring meaning to women working in the international drug trade. With the narratives identified in the Latin American context as a contextual background, I looked for the narratives of the Dutch participants during the interviews. As the interviewees encompass a broad area of governance, including policymakers, prison officers, police officers, and journalists, the sample size should be considered a community of practitioners. The following chapter discusses the empirical data to find these narratives in the Dutch context. First, I will analyze the narratives I identified during the interviews. I will conclude by stating that Dutch narratives show a high degree of similarity to the narratives prevalent in the Latin American context. Moreover, several additional findings emerged during the interviews, along the axes of self-reflection, intersectionality, and media. These findings suggest that Dutch policy is not addressing gender issues in light of the drug trade.

### 5.1 The Three Narratives

#### *Narrative 1: Victims, Drug Smugglers and Family Ties*

It was evident that the narrative as identified in the literature in the Latin American context corresponding most with the ones I identified in the Netherlands was the narrative of women as involuntary victims, predominantly females working as drug mules. This narrative was prevalent in my interviews with policymakers, practitioners, and journalists. Women's roles in the drug trade were mainly described as facilitating and smuggling, and all interviewees perceived them mainly as victims. As facilitators of the logistics of the drug trade, women were often considered to be assisting leaders: “You often see women closely linked to big players in the drug trade. And regularly also as drug mules”<sup>5</sup>. The participants generally described them as the most vulnerable agents in the criminal networks, which led them to “do the dirty work” and, in turn, become arrested first, as explained by the Head of Detention from a Penal Institution for women. These women usually have been put under pressure to take transportation “for their account”<sup>6</sup>. According to one of the interviewees: “It is made use of

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<sup>5</sup> Vugts, Crime Reporter for Dutch newspaper ‘Het Parool’, Online, 20<sup>th</sup> of May 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Goossens, Head Detention and Reintegration Penal Institution for women, Online, 19<sup>th</sup> of April 2022.

their vulnerabilities and their financial position.”<sup>7</sup> In light of this, most interviewees perceived women as the ones that are taken advantage of and consequently categorized women into a victim role, which explains that the narrative of women as victims of the drug trade is prevalent in the Netherlands as well. As stated by Hofland, “I think women may be considered too often in a victim role. I do think there is a certain bias.”<sup>8</sup> In light of this, he also expected these biases to also permeate drug policy:

Policy is not objective, that's for sure. That simply has to do with the fact that men are overrepresented in decision-making places, and as a man, I simply overlook and feel less of the day-to-day problems that women face. Just as might be the case the other way around as well.<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, in the context of the victimized narrative in which women are considered to be drug mules, the importance of family came up for a significant number of participants, suggesting that female smugglers are often linked to intermediaries via lovers and acquaintances. Crime reporter Paul Vugts provided a great amount of insight information on this phenomenon. According to him, family networks are pivotal in Dutch drug trafficking networks: “It is mostly sisters, wives, or girlfriends of drug criminals that get involved”<sup>10</sup>. This corresponds with the literature that has demonstrated that family ties, as well as love relationships and friendships, can serve to support international criminal organizations (Fleetwood 2014; van San and Sikkens 2017). Several Dutch drug organizations were mentioned in which family plays a central role. Especially the case of alleged Dutch drug kingpin Taghi was referred to as an example of a large drug network in which family structure is notable. It was also emphasized that it was extremely difficult for the authorities to gain insight into these family structures. As noted by Vugts: “Taghi's sisters are suspected of continuing criminal activities, but the Public Prosecution Service cannot prove it.”<sup>11</sup> This was thought to be mainly the case because of limited capacities for these investigations, which might point to the prevalence of bias. More specifically, it gives rise to the question as to what principles these decisions are based on.

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<sup>7</sup> Goossens, Head Detention and Reintegration Penal Institution for women, Online, 19<sup>th</sup> of April 2022.

<sup>8</sup> Hofland, Municipal Councilor in Amsterdam, Amsterdam, 29<sup>th</sup> of April 2022.

<sup>9</sup> Hofland, Municipal Councilor in Amsterdam, Amsterdam, 29<sup>th</sup> of April 2022.

<sup>10</sup> Vugts, Crime Reporter for Dutch newspaper ‘Het Parool’, Online, 20<sup>th</sup> of May 2022.

<sup>11</sup> Vugts, Crime Reporter for Dutch newspaper ‘Het Parool’, Online, 20<sup>th</sup> of May 2022.

Nonetheless, as it proves to be extremely difficult to break the cycles perpetuated by family ties, the prison officers that were interviewed emphasized the importance of uprooting female offenders because of the vulnerabilities they face when they return from detention. It was found that this issue is not addressed by Dutch policy:

To prevent ex-detainees from re-offending, you also need to pay attention to the cause of their crime, especially in the case of women because they have often been put under pressure. This is not addressed to the extent to which it should be addressed.<sup>12</sup>

Especially given the fact that there is evidence of intergenerational transmission of delinquent behavior amongst women (Spapens and Moors 2019), the lack of a structural approach to address this persistent problem is highly problematic. The failure to address the root causes that are embedded in family structures indicates that the narrative in which women are forced into drug trafficking by their relatives can be sustained.

At the same time, the limited consideration of family networks in the drug trade makes women less visible actors in the drug trade, which could also lead them to play a more important facilitating role than they might seem to play, as was also described by some of the participants. The lack of capacity was mentioned several times as an explanation for the limited knowledge of women's roles in the drug trade in the Netherlands: “Investigations usually stop just when it gets interesting for the role of the woman.”<sup>13</sup> The fact that police investigations often come to a halt when they get to the point where women come into view, again sheds light on a potential gendered bias in the implementation of drug policy. Some research has suggested that the role of women in the drug trade in the Netherlands is underestimated and more diverse than is usually thought (van San 2009). It was remarkable that the police officer that was interviewed explained how the police have dealt with several cases in which surveillance tools had proven that the suspect's wife was well informed about the illicit drug businesses their husband was involved in. Pecht mentioned that, while the police lack the capacities to investigate these “passively involved women”<sup>14</sup>, he suspected them of being guilty of punishable acts, including money laundering and facilitating the means of communication. In light of this, he anticipated

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<sup>12</sup> Goossens, Head Detention and Reintegration Penal Institution for women, Online, 19<sup>th</sup> of April 2022.

<sup>13</sup> Vugts, Crime Reporter for Dutch newspaper ‘Het Parool’, Online, 20<sup>th</sup> of May 2022.

<sup>14</sup> Pecht, Coordinator Synthetic Drugs Police forces Zeeland-West Brabant, Online, 16<sup>th</sup> of May 2022.



that when the police would have the capacity to investigate these cases, the role of women in the drug trade would paint a different picture. This clearly shows the prevalence of this narrative keeps women's roles out of view, and gender issues are not addressed.

### *Narrative 2: Women as Sexualized Victims*

The second narrative from the Latin American context, which perceives women as sexualized victims in illegal drug markets, could not be identified in the Dutch context based on my interviews. I attribute this to the persistence of patriarchy and machismo in Latin American societies (Connell and Pearse 2015), which are less dominant in the liberal Netherlands. Nonetheless, in light of the scale of both legal and illegal prostitution in the Netherlands, I find it remarkable that the sexualized narrative did not come forward during the interviews. Despite the fact that the sex trade is legalized in the Netherlands, the trade remains on the periphery of the informal economy, which means that legalization has not driven out organized crime and sexual exploitation (Huisman and Kleemans 2014). Considering this, in combination with the inherently exploitative nature of prostitution, I expect it to be highly unlikely that the sexualized narrative is completely absent in the Netherlands.

### *Narrative 3: The Exceptional Case of Naima Jillal*

The narrative that positions women as pivotal actors within the drug trade was mostly articulated through one example: Naima Jillal. She was brought up by the majority of participants, mostly to indicate that there are exceptions to the role of women as victims or smugglers in the drug trade. She was not mentioned as part of a family network or in relation to male relatives. “Naima Jillal was really a self-made woman”<sup>15</sup>; she was “one of the guys”<sup>16</sup>, as explained by Vugts. This hints at the emancipation assumption, indicating that she successfully developed capacities within the male-dominated environment of the drug trade. Apart from her criminal career, it is remarkable how little is known about this woman. Whilst she was dealing with several drug kingpins that are well-known by both the authorities and the public, Jillal never came forward as a headpiece herself. This points to a bias in drug policy, showing the power of narratives in drug policy, as was also acknowledged by some of the

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<sup>15</sup> Vugts, Crime Reporter for Dutch newspaper ‘Het Parool’, Online, 20<sup>th</sup> of May 2022.

<sup>16</sup> Vugts, Crime Reporter for Dutch newspaper ‘Het Parool’, Online, 20<sup>th</sup> of May 2022.

participants: “Bias is decisive in the approach. Many people will see the men as the problem and not women”<sup>17</sup>. Naima Jillal appeared in the news after photos of her, naked and tortured, were found on a telephone in the apartment of Taghi (Vugts 2022). While it is highly probable that it concerns a gangland-style execution, most interviewees admitted that because it involved a female, they assumed her to be an innocent victim at first, not a drug boss herself:

The first time I saw the headline, I thought, “My goodness, now they're taking somebody's wife”. And I didn't think: “now they're taking a headpiece”. I don't think I'm the only one with that bias. Of course, I did read the articles. But it's about the fact that that's the first thing you think. I think that she might be thought of more often as the wife of, or as a victim, but not as a major player herself.<sup>18</sup>

The fact that the case was considered by the interviewees as exceptional sheds light on the bias in Dutch decision-making and policy implementation because they consider her case to be deviating from the norm. It also suggests that media can play a role in reinforcing narratives. It was remarkable how different narratives were articulated in light of this case. For example, one headline read as follows: “Images show woman who looks like smuggler known as Godmother of the Coke, who disappeared in 2019” (Boffey 2022). This illustrates how media representations of the drug trade can oversimplify the complexities of the linkages between drug trafficking and women's agency, supporting the narratives (Muehlmann 2018). Hence, narratives can permeate society as much as policy, and the case of Naima Jillal shows how the media are a powerful mode of discourse that can reinforce these dynamics.

## 5.2 Additional Findings

In addition to the narratives that I identified above, several additional findings emerged that I did not expect to come across. Given the newness of this research, I believe the following points require discussion as well.

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<sup>17</sup> Vugts, Crime Reporter for Dutch newspaper ‘Het Parool’, Online, 20<sup>th</sup> of May 2022.

<sup>18</sup> Hofland, Municipal Councilor in Amsterdam, Amsterdam, 29<sup>th</sup> of April 2022.

## *Self-Reflection*

One of the most striking findings of the interviews was that the gendered aspect of drug policy had not been considered before, as was clear from the reflexivity of the participants. When I asked them about women in the drug trade, the majority of the interviewees had to stop and self-reflect because they had not really considered the nexus between gender and drug policy before. One interviewee was essentially denying gender issues on this matter by saying that women are not part of the drug trade.

Until you asked about it, I had never really thought about it. That's crazy, actually. That indicates that, in any case, it is not a thing yet. That's not to say it's not a thing anywhere. I would like to know to what extent the people involved in prevention have anything to say about it. But I think crime, especially this kind of crime, is really a men's business<sup>19</sup>.

The fact that this is the response from a policymaker for the Ministry of Justice and Security shows how deeply embedded the gendered narrative of the drug trade is. Based on this answer, I asked another policymaker working on prevention programs targeting youth in Amsterdam. After he explained to me how boys often get involved in drug crime at a fairly young age, I asked him about what is known about young girls in this regard. He did not have the right answer to that question. This had not been considered.

As far as I know, it has always been boys that we've been trying to keep off the streets, and, to be fair, I haven't been able to identify any girls dealing drugs in the city. But it is likely that there are also girls getting involved in these types of crimes. I have just not really thought about that, but I should have<sup>20</sup>.

Given the fact that recently, 82 million euros have been allocated by the Dutch government to youth prevention programs, this gendered bias is problematic. Under the assumption “We must prevent little boys from becoming big criminals”, as stated by the Dutch Minister of Justice and Security Yeşilgöz-Zegerius (Rijksoverheid 2022), the approach supposedly perpetuates the gendered narrative by only focusing on preventing boys from getting involved in drug-related crime.

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<sup>19</sup> Drug policy maker Dutch Ministry of Justice and Security, The Hague, 26<sup>th</sup> of April 2022.

<sup>20</sup> Hofland, Municipal Councilor in Amsterdam, Amsterdam, 29<sup>th</sup> of April 2022.

### *Intersectionality*

A tendency towards the most victimized, passive roles was often linked with more identities than just gender, mainly race and class. In this context, some groups were mentioned several times during the interviews, most notably women from the Dutch Antilles and Surinam. Many females from these areas take part in drug smuggling operations between Central America and Europe because of economic vulnerability. These women are often facing poor economic perspectives and perceive it as an opportunity to make money. Even though this fits with the first narrative, it is remarkable that this group is over-represented in detention, as indicated by both practitioners from the Penal Institutions and policymakers. I asked Raissa Biekman, who is a policy offer for the Dutch parliament and has a Surinamese background herself, about vulnerable groups within the drug supply chain. She explained how many women from the Dutch Antilles or Surinam end up in a negative spiral of vulnerability and how this is not addressed by Dutch policy. They often become involved in drug trafficking out of desperation, which is why they are more inclined to take risks and, in turn, get caught in a vicious cycle that is rooted in the lack of opportunity, economic marginality, and social context. Biekman stated:

If you have nothing to lose and you are heavily in debt, then you take that risk. That is pathetic because then it is always precisely the most vulnerable who are caught, get a prison sentence, and then end up even further in that negative spiral of life. The real kingpins you do not catch with that. They stay off the radar; they stay out of sight. It's very difficult to detain the people that are at the top of the food chain<sup>21</sup>.

Drug trafficking organizations often take advantage of women's socioeconomic position, which is determined by more factors than gender. As demonstrated by the literature as well, “Drug economies take complex and multiple forms, but cultural practices within them remain embedded in broader relations and structures of gender, race, and class” (Maher 1997, 193). Given the magnitude of this issue, it seems problematic that Dutch policy does not take into consideration the intersections between gender, race, and socioeconomic position.

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<sup>21</sup> Biekman, Policy Offer Dutch Parliament (D66) with the portfolio Drug Policy, The Hague, 21<sup>th</sup> April 2022.

## *Media*

Besides the policymakers and practitioners, the media play a key role in perpetuating narratives of the drug trade. Based on the interviews, it is fair to say that the media supports the narratives mentioned above, which leaves women's participation under the radar. This effect seems to be twofold: on the one hand, the media have the power to trigger political debate, whilst on the other hand, it allows criminal networks to show their power and intimidate a national audience. For instance, the murder of Wiersum, the first lawyer of Nabil B., and the assassination of crime reporter de Vries can be considered a demonstration of power, showing who has the power to silence others. These murders have received widespread media coverage, in light of which one might wonder what this means for how the role of women is perceived. A recent article in *The Atlantic* highlights how the media has the power to reinforce narratives and in turn impact society. Elliot Ackerman has discussed how media coverage of mass killings can promote and reinforce extant narratives. By positioning the “bad guy” at the center of the narrative, we can start to find meaning in a story. In turn, this can result in a reinforcement of certain narratives, as has been shown by how media can drive the contagion of mass killings in the US through the glorification of the perpetrators of killings (Ackerman 2022). These interviews and the spree of contract killings by drug gangs over the past few years in the Netherlands, suggest that the media may be a powerful tool impacting society in the Netherlands in relation to the drug trade. Further research could examine how this occurs and more specifically, how the media contributes to the reinforcement of gendered drug narratives.

The journalist that I interviewed seemed to be well aware of his position and influence: “I think that I can exert influence by simply explaining my side of the story of these criminals in the media.”<sup>22</sup> The fact that he often works with a wide array of drug policy practitioners, varying from politicians, Justice, FIOD – the Dutch investigation service of financial and fiscal crime –, as well as lawyers and criminals, illustrates this as well. Vugts explained how he perceives it as important to write about this type of crime for the sake of democracy: “If I were to stop, the others would have won. And this isn't a game. It's about our democracy.”<sup>23</sup>

Nonetheless, there seems to be a fine line between the duties of raising awareness by seeking out the truth in the interests of the public's right to know, and the potential effect of the

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<sup>22</sup> Vugts, Crime Reporter for Dutch newspaper ‘Het Parool’, Online, 20<sup>th</sup> of May 2022.

<sup>23</sup> Vugts, Crime Reporter for Dutch newspaper ‘Het Parool’, Online, 20<sup>th</sup> of May 2022.

glorification of criminal activity by publicizing the wave of murders of lawyers and journalists. Based on the killings or death threats targeting journalists, it seems that another narrative is constructed, telling the story that nobody is safe in the grips of the Dutch mafia.

Vugts acknowledged that, at times, he pays a high price for this power to shape and inform the public. Vugts has written about Taghi and other drug kingpins. In 2017, he appeared on a kill list himself because a drug gang had come to believe that he had information about liquidations that he was going to publish, which led him to live under the highest security for approximately six months. The intimidation of journalists by drug lords sheds light on the construction of the narrative that magnifies crime.

More broadly, this shows how the community of practitioners contributes to these narratives, which, in turn, have a significant societal impact. Moreover, this might explain why there is no discussion (yet) on gender in the drug trade.

## 6. Conclusion

### 6.1 Summary and Answering the Research Question

The goal of this study was to understand Dutch drug policy narratives on women working in the international drug trade. In order to do so, I tried to find commonalities between the Dutch narratives on women and the drug trade and the narratives that have already been identified in the Latin American context. Based on the interviews that I conducted with a variety of drug policy practitioners that encompass a broad area of governance, I found that two out of the three narratives, as identified in the literature on Latin America, are clearly prevalent in the Dutch context. The first narrative, in which the role of women in the drug trade is understood as females being involuntary victims, predominantly working as drug mules, was most visible. The importance of family ties and love relationships predominated in these stories. The other narrative that was identified concerned the perception of women as pivotal actors and was reflected in the case of Naima Jillal. She was considered by the interviewees as an exception, not the norm, which illustrates the bias in Dutch decision-making and policy implementation. The third narrative, which presupposes women as sexualized victims in the illegal drug market, seemed absent throughout the interviews in the Dutch context. However, given the scale of both legal and illegal prostitution in the Netherlands, this seems an unusual absence. In addition to that, based on the fact that women get involved in the drug trade through romantic social ties, I would expect some of these relationships to have a more exploitative character as well. Therefore, I would interpret this as a lack of awareness of this aspect or the lack of concern for gender in the drug trade more broadly. These narratives are perpetuated by people working on the ground like the policymakers, practitioners, and the media and, in turn, permeate society.

In addition to these narratives, several other remarkable findings emerged. Firstly, the lack of reflexivity of the participants was noteworthy, demonstrating that the role of women in the drug trade had not been considered yet by the Dutch policymakers, with some of them even denying the issue. Secondly, the need for consideration of the intersections between gender, race, and socioeconomic factors were highlighted by some respondents in particular the role of race and geographic location as triggers for women's involvement in the drug trade. In view of the magnitude of this issue – as was pointed out a number of practitioners –, the neglect of intersectionality in Dutch drug policy is problematic. Thirdly, the significance of the role played

by the media in perpetuating narratives on the drug trade was striking. The media reinforces narratives about women's roles in the drug trade, as was shown by both the literature and the empirical findings.

From this research, it is evident that there is a lack of knowledge and awareness of women engaged in illicit drug trafficking, as well as of the underlying factors of their engagement. Against the background of the thriving Dutch drugs industry, along with its increasing influence on society, there is a reason for concern. The oversimplification of the complexities of the interaction between the drug trade, women's agency, and drug policy is problematic because it permeates society as much as policy, creating a reinforcing effect.

## *6.2 Limitations and Future Research*

Due to time and access constraints, I was only able to interview eight people. Even though this included individuals working in a broad area of governance, I suggest future research extends the analysis of narratives in drug policy. It is obvious this topic is under-researched, which is problematic given the scope of the drug industry in the Netherlands. Moreover, as can be said from the public and political debates, there is public concern about drug policy in the Netherlands. In addition to that, two policymakers that were interviewed noted how drug policy is biased, and the majority of practitioners agreed that it requires revision. Specifically, the unusual absence of the narrative that perceives women as sexualized victims requires further research.

In general, there is no discussion on gender in the drug trade in the Netherlands, which is problematic given the prevalence of narratives in policymaking and implementation. Thus, future research is needed to address gender issues related to the drug trade.



## 7. References

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