

# A WOMAN FORMED THE FIRST CARTEL? HISTORICAL IMAGINATIONS AND REALITIES OF THE US-MEXICO DRUG WAR

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**Abstract.** Weaving together three historical and contemporary case studies of Mexican female drug traffickers, this article challenges continued scholarly claims that little is known about women's involvement in organized crime prior to 2000s. Women's drug organizations are multi-dimensional affairs, built on familial and social networks that have historically expanded to incorporate police and state agents. This article tracks several such organizations to expand the "new drug history," and demonstrating historical continuities in the women's roles, how policing agents perceived and publicly decried them, and how journalists constructed narratives about them in the media.

"Discoveries" yield exclamations such as recent proclamations by journalists Ioan Grillo and Javier Valdez decrying the emergence of women in the drug trade, a business in which, they claim, men "behave like animals."<sup>1</sup> Such alarm implies that it is only in the twenty-first century that women have toiled in industries where men misbehave. Grillo and Valdez's comments are not unfounded; women in the transnational drug business mostly work at the lowest levels as vendors, and they frequently experience violence. Yet women have also worked at the higher levels. For example, the sensationalist docudrama series *Gangsters* profiled Mery Valencia, the highest-ranking woman in the Cali cartel, who employed a microcomputer and used codes regarding her business transactions and clients.<sup>2</sup> She had sophisticated skills developed over time to run an illegal business, but also a legitimate business that may have served to launder money.

Even though women like Valencia have operated at different levels within it, however, the drug trade is seen and portrayed as a masculine field in which women are victims, bystanders, or accidental participants.<sup>3</sup> While women certainly have played such roles both histori-

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cally and in the present, women, like men, have diverse roles within the drug trade.<sup>4</sup> Men have played significant roles in trafficking, policing, and writing about drugs. Yet distorting the illicit economy into a masculine epic of good versus evil ensures basic misunderstandings about complex commodity chains and illicit economies, and about how women and men work, live, thrive, and die in them.

When embracing intersectionality as a category of analysis, drug scholars address race and class, but frequently gender is absent except when addressing victimization.<sup>5</sup> In many contemporary studies on the drug trade, scholars and journalists embrace stereotypes and use little evidence to justify comments. Their analysis of gender focuses on superficial aspects such as a woman's physical appearance, personal hygiene habits, and her sexual relationships or appetites.<sup>6</sup> Initially, for example, scholars claimed that Ignacia Jasso la viuda de González, aka La Nacha, established the first Mexican "cartel."<sup>7</sup> Their romanticized stories of La Nacha distorted the quotidian realities of those who work in the drug trade, which is far from glamorous for most involved. Jasso's success, along with that of her contemporary Maria Dolores Estéves Zuleta, aka Lola la Chata, demonstrate the complexity of women's roles in the drug trade in the past. The historical continuities and complexities remain relevant today: Delia Patricia Buendía, aka Ma Baker, controlled the local drug trade in Nezahualcóyotl, a neighborhood that borders Mexico City, at the turn of the twenty-first century. The Mexico City press claimed that Buendía, like Jasso before her, led the Neza cartel until her arrest in 2002.<sup>8</sup>

Historical approaches to women and drugs challenge such sensational approaches that categorically limit the roles of women. As the drug war ebbed and flowed at different historical moments, women and their roles evolved and changed, just like men and their roles. Weaving together historical and contemporary case studies of Mexican female drug traffickers, as this article does, challenges the continued historical scholarly argument that little is known about women's involvement in organized crime prior to 2000s.<sup>9</sup> Women's drug organizations are multi-dimensional affairs, built on familial networks that expand to incorporate police and state agents. Tracking such organizations expands the "new drug history" by closely examining how policing agents perceived and publicly decried women, and how journalists constructed media narratives. The attitudes of policing agents, politicians, and journalists were and continue to be influenced by broader concepts of race, class, and gender along the US Mexico border but also more broadly in Mexico.<sup>10</sup>

#### JASSO AND ESTÉVES: COMPLEX COMMODITY CHAINS OF THE PAST

In 2008, Mexican journalist Francisco Cruz published his book *El cártel de Juárez*, in which he argued that Ignacia Jasso la viuda de Gonzalez es-

established the first plaza and built the first cartel. The “plaza” is control of a piece of territory such as a city, part of a city, or a main transportation port of entry such as that between Ciudad Juárez and El Paso.<sup>11</sup> The leader of a drug trafficking organization (DTO) coordinates that control with local policing agents, city officials, and other DTOs. Jasso was a recognized drug trafficker on both sides of the border, but Cruz goes beyond fact to espouse myths that are unproven, such as that she and her husband killed competing Chinese organized crime leaders and that he or she formed the first cartel. These myths situate Pablote González, Jasso’s husband, as a central actor because of the alleged murder of their Chinese competition. Jasso’s history is far more complex than Cruz portrays because her life is a transnational story shaped by an evolving drug war.

Jasso was not from Ciudad Juárez but from the state of Durango. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, poppy was grown in Sinaloa, Chihuahua, and Durango, and it later spread to Tamaulipas and Veracruz.<sup>12</sup> Jasso, like many contemporary women traffickers, had a highly fluid business. She sold both marijuana and heroin, the heroin most likely came from Jalisco, Sinaloa, or Durango and the marijuana from Sinaloa. She processed the heroin in Jalisco, and trafficked it through Ciudad Juárez. For the commodity chain to be successful, she relied on social networks but also she sought powerful allies.<sup>13</sup>

A contemporary of Jasso, María Dolores Estévez Zuleta, aka Lola la Chata, led a DTO based in Mexico City from the 1930s until her death in 1959. She had storage sites in Pachuca, Hidalgo and processing labs in Mexico City and the northern city in Monterrey. La Chata was from the city, and entered the trade with her mother who shifted from selling coffee and *chicharron* (pork rinds) to more lucrative products: morphine and marijuana. As a child, she worked as her mother’s burro. Young Lola and her mother were not unique in buying and selling of marijuana. Women and men sold these illegal commodities in the streets of Mexico City for local consumption.<sup>14</sup> Street vending children, like Estévez, moved through the city with this contraband in open or covered baskets to hide their wares.<sup>15</sup>

La Chata had spent time on the US-Mexico border and allegedly in Ciudad Juárez during the Mexican Revolution (1910-1917), but she returned to Mexico City after the revolution.<sup>16</sup> Because of her location in the center of the country, her opium most likely came from the states of Tamaulipas and Veracruz, and it was then processed in Mexico City or Monterrey.<sup>17</sup> Because of a lab in that northern city, she most likely trafficked the heroin through Nuevo Laredo-Laredo or Reynosa-McAllen, which connected to the eastern network of roads that eventually became the Pan-American highway.

Jasso and Estévez demonstrate the overlapping connections of the drug trade. All producing states are tied to border contraband due to the so-

phistication of drug and organized crime networks, and drugs have been moved through the border by land, by sea, and by air since the 1920s. Thus, women have long been part of drug commodity chains though frequently ignored by scholars, journalists, and writers.<sup>18</sup>

In their lifetimes, however, Jasso and Estévez, were far from ignored. They appeared in US and Mexican documents and media starting in the 1930s. In 1942, the US Bureau of Narcotics, US Customs, and Mexican authorities worked out a sting operation to arrest La Nacha. Two “Ace” US narcotics agents, H. B. Westover and W. H. Crook, posed as “traffickers” selling to Oklahoman Indians who wanted to buy large quantities of opium and morphine. Westover initially arranged a meeting with Jasso, and she demanded that they purchase 450 cans of smoking opium and a kilo of gummed opium. A highly skilled trafficker on the border, she either offered them the use of her chemist to test the purity, or proposed delivery across the border so that their chemist could test it.<sup>19</sup> Her delivery offer was a long-standing business practice of drug traffickers across the border.

As the agents gained Jasso’s trust, she provided insight into her operations. She took them to her fields and labs in Jalisco. She told them that she had a group of smugglers who trafficked her opium into the US, and that she had customers in places as far away as New York and San Francisco.<sup>20</sup> Her assertion may have been true. In 1947, the United Nations Commission on Narcotic Drugs reported:

The Mexican government in its intensified drive to stop the traffic ordered an aerial survey to be made in the spring of 1947 of the poppy cultivation which although prohibited by Mexican law, were increasing year after year. Some 4,500 fields were observed and of them 200 destroyed. Between twenty and thirty clandestine landing strips for aeroplanes had been constructed in Mexico to handle the illicit transportation of narcotics from Mexico to the US. The traffic now appeared to be organized by underworld groups in the US. They have representatives in Mexico engaged in promoting the cultivation of opium poppy, purchasing the crop and arranging its transformation into more valuable and less bulky derivatives. It was estimated that at least one half of the raw opium produced in Mexico and processed into morphine and heroin, most of which found its way into the United States... The so-called “brown” heroin found in Canada originated in Mexico. It was found in various parts of the country in adulterated form. The traffic in this drug was directed by a syndicate with headquarters in Toronto...<sup>21</sup>

The success of women like Jasso and Estévez relied on their ability to create important connections to move drugs from various sites in Mexico to distributors in US border towns and to sellers in distant cities. Both women gained the favor of the police and policing agents. In 1933, Daniel Minjares Perea and Daniel Rodriguez, leaders of the Confederation of Parents and Teachers in Ciudad Juárez complained about her to the governor of Chihuahua Rodrigo Quevedo. They wrote:

The sale of narcotics is being done shamelessly and with impunity in the house of a woman dubbed La Nacha with the knowledge of the Police chief, a man called Moriel, and the protection of the Municipal President who has exploited this business, not only in that [La Nacha's] house, but in several places where armed men who flaunt their impunity engage in the sale who are nonetheless the employees of the current administration.<sup>22</sup>

The confederation outlined a host of threats to the health of the nation: the showing of banned films, illegal licensing of businesses, prostitution, extortion from tourists, and government corruption. In turn, they demanded that a commission form to study and remedy the numerous problems within the city. Citizens of Ciudad Juárez routinely engaged in a dialogue with government officials regarding graft, corruption, and vice.<sup>23</sup> In this petition, La Nacha was identified as a threat and a highly connected drug dealer in the city. The petition indicates that by 1933 she had the protection of the police and the local government. Governor Quevedo too had been linked to the drug trade, and he and La Nacha had some sort of working relationship. Quevedo and his brothers actively engaged in the vice trade, whether drugs or gambling. In the 1930s, they battled with a competitor and ally of La Nacha, Enrique Fernández. By 1936, the Quevedos had killed Fernández and merged the two gangs, and La Nacha became part of the Quevedos organization.<sup>24</sup> Jasso, like many contemporary men and women, worked within complex network of various groups. What differed was that Jasso had endurance.

In the 1930s, Jasso served as a supplier to city employees who sold drugs to tourists. In this case, these city employees, like others, sold for a commission or as part of a franchise rather than as independent vendors. The multi-faceted means of peddling created system of networks and connections rather than an independent model contained within one person and her family. In other words, those who worked on commission or were part of the franchise had less invested in the business but could access the profits more easily, though arrest from a competitor was always a danger as political changes took place over her long career.

Estévez also gained favor with police, which was noticed by policing agents in the United States.<sup>25</sup> Estévez built her empire in the way she knew best, one understood by women: through familial and sexual connections.<sup>26</sup> She married an ex-police officer, Enrique Jaramillo, whose autoshop in Pachuca, Hidalgo served as a distribution center and whose police contacts provided invaluable networks and protection. Although they were rumored to have allegedly divorced to suppress criticism, her "marriage" into the police force provided alliances with police officers, bureaucrats, and politicians, many of whom she paid for information and protection.<sup>27</sup>

Estévez's ties to Gastón Vaca Cordella, the former chief of the Sanitary Police, represented another example of the collusion between civil authori-

ties, policing agents, and drug traffickers. Vaca Cordella had been the chief narcotics agent for the city of Monterrey. His corruption and that of other federal agents charged with policing drug use and distribution continues to draw attention and analysis in contemporary studies.<sup>28</sup> From the evidence, Estévez had labs in Mexico City but also in other Mexico cities. This demonstrates a series of overlapping networks across the country and into the border region that served to move heroin from different locales in Mexico and on to the US. Moreover, Estévez's power coincided with greater investigations of governors and ex-governors as subjects in the smuggling and production of drugs. Thus, both Jasso and Estévez had extensive links to policing and government officials, a historical continuity in the Mexican drug trade.<sup>29</sup>

Jasso and Estévez share many commonalities. They were from modest backgrounds with few job prospects. They had familial connections to the drug trade. Jasso's first husband Pablote and her lover Zeferino García were both involved in the drug trade. Pablote worked with the Fernández gang but was killed in late 1920s. Her lover García worked for the railroad, and he was also a smuggler.<sup>30</sup> H.J. Anslinger and the Federal Bureau of Narcotics (FBN) recognized Jaramillo, Estévez's husband, as an equally skilled drug trafficker, much like her alleged lover Roberto Escudero.<sup>31</sup>

Both women worked with the men in their lives, and they brought their children into the business. Estévez's daughters Dolores and María Luisa followed her into the business creating a three-generation trafficking matriarchy. Along with her daughters, her family also employed nieces.<sup>32</sup>

Jasso's children Natividad, Manuel, Pabla, and Ignacia, lived in Ciudad Juárez. Some worked in the drug trade alongside their mother, but her oldest son Manuel worked in El Paso for a smelting company. Jasso's grandchildren also entered into the drug trade. Jasso's daughter, Pabla, was the mother of Héctor González, also known as El Arabe, a well-known heroin dealer in the 1960s and 1970s. González built upon the foundations of his grandparents. He ran the Juárez heroin trade in the late 1960s and early 1970s until he died in an automobile accident on 25 November 1973. The *El Paso Times* reported:

The victim, known to police as "El Arabe" (the Arab) grandson of the celebrated and reputed queen of the Juarez "underworld," Mrs. Ignacia "La Nacha" Jasso Vda. de Gonzalez. "La Nacha" is also being sought by federal narcotic police on a fugitive warrant. Police said Rui (sic) Gonzalez was killed instantly when the pickup truck he was driving overturned near Casas Grandes. His wife, Angela, and their two children, also riding in the truck, escaped with minor injuries.<sup>33</sup>

By the time of her grandson's death, Jasso was only peripherally involved in the trade due to her age. She died in 1982, ending her dynasty and creating an opportunity for a new boss, Amado Carrillo Fuentes, the "Lord of

the Skies,” to emerge.<sup>34</sup> While men led the new DTOs, they frequently partnered with women at different levels within the vast commodity chains. Yet, first-hand accounts such as that by Don Henry Ford erased women’s roles.

JASSO, ESTÉVEZ, AND BUENDÍA: HISTORICAL CONTINUITIES IN THE DRUG TRADE  
In the contemporary era, Delia Patricia Buendía Gutierrez, aka “Ma Baker,” offers an example of historical continuities of women in the drug trade. She represents the shifts of place and time and offers a compelling reminder of why women enter the drug trade. Mexico in the 1990s looked very different from the eras of Jasso and Estévez. Similar to the United States, Mexico experienced a feminist movement that gave women access to the birth control pill, education opportunities, and political rights.<sup>35</sup> Yet, by the 1990s, the economic miracle of the 1950s to 1970s was a thing of the past. Beginning in the 1980s, economic instability exacerbated corruption, cronyism, wealth disparity, poverty, and a crumbling public education system, all accompanied by the disappearance of the social safety net.<sup>36</sup>

Buendía was born in Mexico City in July 1957, and she grew up in the neighborhood of Tepito.<sup>37</sup> Tepito and la Merced, La Chata’s home, are the heart of Mexico City’s black market. La Merced was notorious for its “quantity of thieves” and its poverty.<sup>38</sup> Today, as in the early twentieth century, vendors and peddlers in that district plied crockery, food, clothing, live animals, lotions, potions, herbs, powder, spells, and other substances to help alleviate virtually any human ailment. Any type of sexual act could also be purchased. These spaces, whether in the 1920s or the 1990s, provided the perfect educational environments for budding traffickers.

Tepito’s famed *vecinidades* (tenements) entered the US popular imagination from anthropologist Oscar Lewis’ book *The Children of Sánchez: Autobiography of a Mexican Family* and the movie of the same featuring Anthony Quinn.<sup>39</sup> More recently, the neighborhood gained fame as the home to La Santa Muerte, a folk saint who had joined the cults of narco saints such as Jesús Malverde and Juan Soldado.<sup>40</sup> In the early 1990s, *bultos* of Santa Muerte could be purchased in open-air markets of Tepito and La Merced. By the 2000s, the *bultos* could be bought all over Mexico, even in government-supported FONART folk art stores. In the United States, La Santa Muerte candles, *bultos*, and even shrines can be found in Latino herbalerías, botánicas, and mercados. No longer do criminals tattoo the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe on their backs. Now, Santa Muerte guards the backs of criminals and gang members. The icon decorates their homes and streets in make-shift shrines. She is a reflection of the nature of the barrio and the nation and its ties to illicit trade and criminality that remains one of the few vehicles out of poverty.

Just as the veneration of a “female” folk saint appeals to both men and

women, economically marginal neighborhoods give women some form of mobility. Neighborhoods such as Tepito, La Merced, and Bellavista (where Jasso lived) have long been home to women who engage in varieties of street vending, whether electronics, food, drink, their bodies, or those of others.<sup>41</sup> These “dangerous” places allowed women to flourish in the business of men. Street marketing in Mexico, and much of the world, has long been the domain of women. In these neighborhoods, women were public in their entrepreneurial activities and passed them from mother to daughter.

While women’s role in illicit trade in Mexico has long been a feature, many scholars and journalists have created a binary gendered approach to illicit trade that is ahistorical and, frankly, fictional. For many scholars, informal and street level vending was the domain of women, while the highly lucrative transnational trafficking was the work of men. Yet men and women have worked alongside one another in an array of partnerships at the micro street level or in international trafficking.

By 2000, scholars and journalists had begun to recognize that women played key roles in the ever-expanding drug trade as it shifted due to demand and policing. In February 2003, researcher Ramón J. Miró compiled a report for the Library of Congress. In it he argued that the “Ma Baker” Buendía organization captured an opportunity because of changes in the drug market north of the Rio Grande. The ongoing economic crises in Mexico forced more Mexicans to migrate north. This led to increased attention to the flows of people and goods through the border. Drugs, goods, and people became a growing concern of politicians and policing agents. In the wake of 11 September 2001, tightening border security created more problems for Mexican DTOs. These organizations had purchased large amounts of cocaine from Colombian suppliers. They had a product that, while in demand, was becoming more difficult to move north. The raids and captures cut into the profits. To compensate for these losses, DTOs sought to create a domestic market in Mexico. Buendía and her organization assisted in the creation of that market in Mexico City and the state of Mexico, home to over twenty-one million people.<sup>42</sup> Thus, Buendía created a historical shift by helping to encourage cocaine consumption in Mexico. Estévez and Jasso sold drugs to locals, but Buendía was not peddling small amounts of drugs to locals on a cash basis. Instead, she built a large domestic market to absorb the cocaine that could not transport north. By doing so, she changed the overall structure of Mexican drug markets—and drug consumption.

In the 1920s, US public health professionals confirmed low addition rates among Mexicans. Charles Edward Terry, who worked for the Bureau of Social Hygiene and conducted its 1927 study on narcotics use, claimed that in El Paso, few Mexicans consulted medical doctors and few used narcotics. Instead, he wrote,

The poverty of the patient and the disinclination of Mexican physicians to prescribe narcotics make for a very low Mexican legal per capita use. It is noticeable that prescriptions including narcotics issued to Mexicans were, in the large majority of cases, written by American physicians. It was also noted that the number of prescriptions was considerably less in the Mexican drug stores in proportion to their other trade than in the American drug stores, and that ratio of narcotic prescriptions to the general file of prescriptions in the Mexican drug stores was about one-half that obtaining in the American drug stores, although both Americans and Mexicans patronized Mexican drug stores. This feature was so outstanding that it is believed the legal use of narcotics for Mexicans was practically negligible.<sup>43</sup>

Terry appeared to blame American medical doctors for encouraging legalized addiction among Mexicans even though US public health officials and narcotics policing agents ignored their historically low rates of drug use. Their nation's lack of addicts compared to the United States was not lost on Mexican officials who frequently cited the evidence.

By late 1990s, however, politicians in Mexico City and the state of Mexico noted a growing internal drug trade that had expanded beyond the traditional users of Estévez's era. Estévez had sold to users in La Merced, Tepito, and other slums in the city in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. Her clients had been addicts, sex workers, and other habitual users. By the late 1990s, things began to change and addiction rates began to increase in Mexico, and Buendía was a contributing factor.<sup>44</sup>

In the award-winning *El Cartel de Neza*, journalist José Antonio Caporal describes how he learned about the "Ma Baker" organization from an informant named Joaquín Quintero or Sapo (Frog). Sapo approached Caporal while he was living underground to avoid being killed by Ma Baker's organization. From Sapo, Caporal learned that Buendía had been married and had three daughters. She later divorced her husband and lived with Raúl Ramírez Pichardo, who made his living as a *contrabandista*, selling goods (stolen or otherwise) on the black market. While still in Tepito, Buendía sold cocaine. Eventually, she moved to Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl, a rough neighborhood that borders Mexico City and its international airport.<sup>45</sup>

Arizona Donnie Barker, known as Ma Barker, built a criminal family during the Depression years.<sup>46</sup> Her organization gained notoriety in popular culture, including a *narcocorrido* that used her as a muse and that may have influenced her adoption of the nickname "Ma Baker" by reinterpreting Barker's story and combining it with Mexican organized crime in Chicago.<sup>47</sup>

Buendía built a familial-based drug organization that encompassed her children, brothers and sisters, nieces and nephews.<sup>48</sup> Her daughters were Marcela Gabriela (La Gaby) Bustos Buendía (b. 1972), Nadia Isabel (La Japonesa) Bustos Buendía (b. 1974), and Norma Patricia (La Pequeña) Bustos Buendía (b. 1976).<sup>49</sup> Norma was the ex-wife of one of Tepito's main

distributors, Rivelino Contreras Hernández, who remained part of the organization despite a divorce.<sup>50</sup>

In Neza, the Buendía family built a network of small *tenditas* (shops) and *ventanas* (windows) where employees sold low-grade cocaine and “crack” cocaine in small amounts. Behind the walls and gates of individually built cinderblock homes, people could buy *piedras* (rocks) or a *polvo* (powder) for 150 pesos (approximately \$15.00 in 2000) from young men and women who comprised the majority of the Buendía employees. They targeted the young and unemployed who had few economic options due to the peso crisis of the mid-1990s. The rise of “*narcomenudeo*” was something new in Mexico. It changed the Mexican drug trade and the country altering the low rates of domestic consumption that had characterized the country for almost a century.

In *Dreamland: The True Tale of America's Opiate Epidemic*, Sam Quinones, a journalist for the *Los Angeles Times*, describes the changing addiction to opiates and the shifting market forces. In the 1970s, Quinones explains, Mexican drug trafficking organizations distributed their product to certain major US cities using the rail system. In 2000s, however, countless Americans, regardless of class, had developed a taste for opiates due to increased medical use of pharmaceutical narcotics. Timing is everything in business, and the increased demand created a perfect opportunity for Nayarit-based black tar heroin traffickers. Quinones argues that they perfected their delivery methods using relatively mundane technologies such as cell phones to arrange deliveries. Rather than drug consumers seeking heroin in the inner city, drivers delivered heroin anywhere and anytime. Quinones describes the Nayarit dealers as using a “Walmart” approach to distribution, keeping their overhead and costs low and enticing customers with a taste or two. They avoided big cities where organized crime already controlled the heroin trade, instead finding new customers in Charlotte NC, Columbus, OH, Nashville, TN, and other mid-size cities.<sup>51</sup>

Just like dealers operating in the United States created new ways to satisfy user demands, Buendía and her family altered the patterns of drug selling. Their timing was perfect. In Mexico, a country that had a history of low drug consumption, Buendía created what scholars and journalist have described as “*narcomenudeo*” by establishing the network of *tenditas* (shops) or *ventanas* (windows) all over Ciudad Neza and beyond.<sup>52</sup> In the 1990s, Mexicans could still purchase from street vendors individual cigarettes and beverages sold in bags with a straw. With the rise of *tenditas*, they could now buy small quantities of low-grade cocaine and “crack.” Cocaine became highly accessible to millions of potential consumers who had never had access previously, just as crack had become available in American cities in the 1980s. The economic crisis brought high unemployment, ensuring that many young men and women were willing to work in

the trade.

Journalist Jorge Fernández Menéndez recognized that Buendía created a DTO that never intended to sell drugs to the United States; her sole goal was to create an internal market that could absorb losses and shifts in drug consumption. Her focus on a local and internal market meant that she would be policed by local policing agents rather than the *Procuraduría de Nación* (Attorney General of Mexico) or the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA). This was a strategy. Local police in Mexico are poorly paid. In 2000, many made less than \$500 per month, with a chief making \$1,200 per month. Corruption has long been part of policing. Thus, Buendía sought to provide a *mordita* (a bite) to ensure police support and protection. It was not difficult. Like her predecessors, she bought off high- and low-ranking police officials. They became her workers, protectors, and enforcers.

The success of Buendía's organization depended on the support of local officials who facilitated the buying and selling of cocaine throughout the city.<sup>53</sup> Shortly after starting to work with Delia, the informant Sapó told Mexican journalist Caporal that he accompanied her to a restaurant where she paid one of the commanders of the Federal Judicial Police, Florentino Romero Juárez, 50,000 pesos (approximately \$5,000 in 2000) to seal a protection contract. After which, Sapó reported, the commander would receive initially 10,000 pesos (\$1,000) each week to allow the business to continue.<sup>54</sup> Sapó alleged that Romero was the beginning of an array of payoffs to public officials maintained by Buendía and her daughters. Their bribes ensured that they controlled the plaza for selling in Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl-Iztapalapa, and they expanded to surrounding working class barrios that ring Mexico City.<sup>55</sup>

As her business became more successful, Buendía diversified. She worked closely with gangs of truck thieves to steal tractor-trailer trucks full of products as the vehicles left the cargo area of the Benita Juárez International Airport. The thieves hijacked the trunks and drove them to Tepito where Buendía's former lover and ex-son-in-law sold the goods to the residents of Tepito and gifted goods to policing agents as part of their payments. Another member of the organization who ran chop shops dismantled the trucks and sold them for parts.

Along with truck hijacking, Buendía and her daughters owned Arena Neza, a *lucha libre* arena, in Nezahualcóyotl. *Lucha libre* is a very popular form of professional wrestling. The arenas are frequently in working class neighborhoods, and offer a place where men and women mingle to gamble and to watch the spectacle of wrestling.<sup>56</sup> Along with the matches and performances, the arena served as a place to store drugs, and as a venue to launder money.<sup>57</sup> The arena, along with properties and other businesses in the city, allowed the Buendía organization to thrive. During difficult periods, Buendía resorted to other methods such as kidnapping and extortion.

As with the car and trucks, she sought people who specialized in that type of crime and brought them into her organization.<sup>58</sup>

Buendía's success did not go unnoticed by local politicians. Politician Héctor Bautista became familiar with the Ma Baker organization while he was the municipal president (mayor) of Ciudad Neza. He too was from a working-class family. His parents had been one of the first squatters who occupied the land and built the city. They arrived before city services, schools, or roads, staked a claim, and built a house in the 1950s. He told journalist Caporal that he was proud of the people and the city of his home. Ciudad Neza was a city of strivers; people who worked hard in the hopes of getting ahead. As mayor, he argued that drugs undermined that potential for legitimate social mobility, and that the drug trade destroyed the municipality. He reported to the journalist that he estimated that during his tenure as mayor, there were 30,000 *tienditas* in Neza selling tons of cocaine and earning millions of dollars.

Bautista's public acknowledgment and recognition of a growing problem drew attention. His strategic decision to use the press gained the attention of federal authorities and undermined the Buendía organization. As he decried drug trade and the traffickers, he became a potential target. Bautista alleged that the Buendías threatened him and his family. He stopped attending public events; he lived in safe houses; and his family fled the city during mayoral term. Yet his use of the press and his claims of police corruption contributed to a series of internal investigation and increased federal policing of Neza.

The *Agencia Federal de Inteligencia* (AFI, Federal Intelligence Agency), investigators documented the local police officers who worked for Buendía. The AFI discovered that the municipal police offered protection in exchange for payment or merchandise from the stolen tractor-trailers. Most disturbing to the AFI and the *Procuraduría General de la República* (PGR, Attorney General of the Republic), local police assisted the organization in the murders of capital police captain Guillermo Robles Liceaga who had challenged the drug traffickers by orchestrating raids of *tienditas* all over Neza. Ma Baker's enforcers also killed one of the drug prosecutors, Mario Roldán Quirino, who had worked for her and who had continued to demand more and more money as Robles' raids had become more successful. They also killed police agent Nicolás Humberto del Aguila Jiménez.<sup>59</sup>

Once arrested and interrogated, members of the Buendía organization stated that close to fifty police officers, judges, and a federal magistrate assisted them. They guarded the arena, they moved and sold drugs, they protected the buyers and the sellers. Buendía's personal attorney, Agustín Guardado Vázquez, represented both her business and familial interests, and he facilitated the bribes to judges and the magistrate when a member of her organization was arrested. The police, judges, and attorneys were an

integral part of an organization that had altered drug use in the metropolitan area of Mexico City. Their bribes and corruption did not go unnoticed in the United States, as in the past.<sup>60</sup>

By 2002, Buendía, her daughters, extended family, and police protectors had been arrested and convicted. Most received sentences of fifteen to twenty-five years in prison, including Carlos Ernesto Garía García, the *Director General de Seguridad Pública Municipal de Nezahualcóyotl* (General Director of Municipal Public Security), Erick Spook Torner Rivas, an AFI agent, Arturo Andrés Rocha Díaz, a police officer, and countless others. Buendía received a sentence of forty-seven years.

#### NACRO-INNOVATORS: BUENDÍA AND THE CHANGING DRUG TRADE

Buendía died in prison in 2006 from a heart attack. She and her organization represent the quotidian realities of a changing Mexico and the implications of the US-Mexico drug war. Like Jasso and Estévez, she came from a working class neighborhood whose inhabitants had long engaged in illicit trade for economic survival. Like them she built her business around her social and familial network. Like them, she bribed police officers, judges, and other policing agents as her business grew. And like them, she diversified her holdings and created structures to launder money that would not draw attention. Working class women had long owned cantinas, pulquerías, and other venues where working class people gathered for entertainment. Buendía herself was not a drug user like Estévez and Jasso had been, although her daughters allegedly did use. She was a businesswoman.

Buendía's and other organizations remain integral to complex and evolving commodity chains of the drug trade. The changes in policing borders in the aftermath of a series of economic crises and 11 September 2001 altered the drug trade. Mexican DTOs that purchased large amounts of cocaine had to find a market in Mexico to absorb some of the potential losses. They altered their patterns, using networks of small-time dealers such as Buendía who, with more product, expanded her business. Just like the Nayarit dealers who offer free hits and "a taste" at an initial loss, Buendía recognized that having lots of clients who bought small amounts of cocaine could be as lucrative as being a supplier. She and her daughters created a market and model that, unfortunately, will continue to operate in Mexico for years to come.

Buendía represents a historical contingency in which a strategic market shift altered drug consumption patterns at a particularly time and in a particular place. She responded to market saturation in the United States to create a market in Mexico. The series of economic downturns and increased prices of a globalized Mexican market with little social security ensured that unemployed young people, underpaid police, and judges were just as vulnerable to corruption as in the past. Her ability to recognize these

market shifts and tensions altered patterns of drug commerce and use in Mexico City. As Bautista told Caporeal, the arrest of Buendía and her associates did not shut down the *narcomenudo*; instead, other drug traffickers reopened the *tienditas*. By 2013, another family controlled the plaza, and they employed greater uses of technology that facilitated their ability to hide their business.

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