

BIDIRECTIONAL VIOLENCE: A CRITICAL APPROACH TO CENTRAL AMERICAN WOMEN

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Abstract

The central proposal of this paper is to approximate a theoretical model of women in criminal violence based on some Central American dynamics. Through *process tracing*, the stages of *women as recipients of violence* and *women as vehicles of violence* are raised. Indeed, the relationship between gender and criminality reveals the interaction between two fundamental facets: underground integration and criminal governance in the region. Underground and criminal integrations are found to be much more effective to perform because transaction costs between actors are lower, while, between states, by their own configuration, there are more limitations and robust integration costs due to variables such as sovereignty, politics, economy, and security. Based on the above, it should be mentioned that the reduction of violence against women does not lie in the increase in penalties, but in the effective functioning of justice operators. A reduction of such phenomenon must be based on greater agility of investigations and the strengthening of criminal policy, to minimize the capacity for action and coercion. On the other hand, the effectiveness of the policy seeks to increase persuasion against potential members of criminal networks to desist from their participation.

Keywords

Criminal governance, underground integration, woman subject to violence, Central America.

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Introduction

The factors of instability and insecurity in Central America have been concentrated in issues that jeopardize the states' ability to control and fight organized crime. Determinants such as drug trafficking, the presence of armed groups, gang violence, species trafficking and human trafficking, among others, have reshaped the region's security dynamics. This lends itself to a particular contrast in the way criminal groups, unlike states, achieve greater synchrony in activities of integration and fluid dynamism of illicit actions. In fact, regional integration models have been approached from a conventional perspective that generates distortions when it comes to understanding the phenomena that have made a special race to dominate the territories in the area. Issues that have achieved important intersections in academic agendas and in the construction of public policies such as violence, crime, and gender studies, have managed, from this configuration, to expand the research approaches and understand a dynamic and quite heterogeneous region. Therefore, academic approaches from Latin America have been determined by variables specific to the region, such as commercial environments, defense of democracy, human rights, economy, and politics. However, the region lacks its own models for its more complex realities outside the traditional. In other words, the most conservative analytical frameworks leave out issues that rival security policy architectures such as criminal logics.

Within the studies of integration, regionalism, governance and globalization, the literature reaches a great academic heritage in regular, conventional and traditional dimensions (Meyer, 2007). That is, a theoretical apparatus and case studies have been built referring to conventional models on integration with common economic, political, cultural, geographical and even social denominators (Barrett & Kurzman, 2004). In this order of ideas, the models of regional integration in Central America deal with alternatives and solutions to trade, democracy and development to reduce vulnerabilities to the constant sensitivities of the international system. Nevertheless, the region seems to have a subregion, an underground dimension and even an alternative construction of

¹ Article translated by Hugo Alves.



integration and governance defined as a criminal model in which women become recipients and vehicles of violence.

Based on the above, within the social constructions of crime, the role of women has been relegated to a subordinate plane in the gender relationship. This situation enables new approaches to understand a phenomenon little explored so far in the region and that generates great concerns for the elaboration of decisions on public policy in security.

That said, this paper seeks to answer the following question: how are criminal governance and underground integration built in Central America from gender violence? Consequently, the role of women is the center of gravity for the invisibility of crime in the region. In this way, criminal governance has managed to build the rules of the game, institutionalization and normalization among criminal groups that allows them to obtain a climate suitable for integration among them thanks to the institutional weakness of states, the high capacity of adaptation of their structures and the low bureaucratization for illicit businesses. Women's participation has not been addressed in depth in criminal participation, but as a recipient of violence, an exclusion that adds to gender asymmetries in security and organized crime studies.

Structurally, the text is divided into five parts. First, a theoretical and conceptual approach will be made to criminal governance and underground integration. Then, the phenomenon of women as subjects of violence will be exposed: between receiver and criminal vehicle. Subsequently, the theoretical model to explain the role of women in this phenomenon will be presented. Next, we will address underground gender integration as a Central American phenomenon. Finally, some general conclusions will be offered about the model and the horizon that the investigation of this phenomenon should follow.

Theoretical approach: criminal governance and underground integration

The construction of concepts that escape traditional theoretical approaches are strategic challenges for the understanding and solution of the problems of contemporary Central America. Approaches to criminal governance have been focused mostly on casuistic dimensions in South America (Lessing & Graham, 2019). However, the commitment to identify the criminal phenomenon and the relational nature between its power, territorial control, illegal activities, violence and supplanting the state, respond to strategic concerns about the gaps in public policy and justice systems in the countries with the greatest institutional weaknesses. In this sense, works such as that of Desmond (2006) and Lessing & Graham (2019), understand by criminal governance the convergence and formation of structures between government officials, civil society and criminal actors, resulting in systematic practices for the regulation of activities (Desmond, 2006).

It is a parallel order relationship that moves along the fine line between the conventional and the unconventional. Indeed, criminal governance results in networks being voluntary, reciprocal and horizontal patterns of communication and exchange (Keck & Sikkink, 1998; Child, 2020). In this regard, codes of honor, reciprocal protection between individuals, territorial control, patterns of conduct, value system, among others (Núñez & Espinoza, 2017), are some characteristics that are projected on the imperatives of governance. In short, it is a system based on a series of complex relationships that connect the legal world with the illegal one (Garzón, 2012).



The last two decades have been permeated by major concerns about organized crime (Schultze-Kraft, 2016) from countries in the Global South that threaten the stability of the Global North (Ayoob, 1991; Benabdallah, Murillo, & Adetula, 2017; Sharp, 2011). Those concerns have reached a robust and growing material in terms of citizen security, but not in dimensions and explanations about the integration of networks and criminal groups with each other in Central America. The definitional gaps are themselves the first major problems for the design of policies and strategies.

In view of the above, while there has been a valuable attempt to resignify governance under irregular, asymmetric and unconventional conditions, the same is not true for integrations between criminal groups. In this manner, those integrations for the purposes of this document and as a conceptual proposal, are understood as underground due to their irregular condition and alternates to the classic models of integration between states. Although there has not been a robust proposal, works such as Niño (2017) ensure that terrorist groups from different geographies share patterns of communication, behavior and models of understanding that facilitate dialogue between organizations that do not always pursue common goals but do have similar vulnerabilities. For example, the markets of violence and the entropic factor of crime have motivated illegal structures to use parastatal resources to govern significant portions of territories and strategic corridors (Duncan, 2014; Raffo & Gómez, 2017). Taking into account the theoretical and conceptual approach applied to the Central American context, it is necessary to involve the impact of gender violence on the phenomenon of underground integration (Niño, 2020). Indeed, the natural dynamics of criminal governance have a substantial impact on women as the majority victims in the region. On the one hand, they are an actor that serves as a recipient of violence; on the other, as a criminal vehicle. Illegal brokers controlled by parastatal groups (O'Donnell & Wolfson, 1993) reach vital degrees of marketing women as tradable goods and as subjects of violence (Truong, 2001).

Women as subjects of violence: between the recipient and the criminal vehicle

By 1970, some criminological research drew attention to certain studies associated with the causal relationship between female offenders and female emancipation (Smart, 1979). In the same order, it was argued, on the one hand, that wage-earning mothers raised children who would become criminals, while, on the other hand, the hypothesis was maintained that emancipated women become more crime-stinging due to their association with "masculine" values at work and their contact with opportunities for crime outside home (Smart, 1979). This was an argumentative construction that managed to generate distortions about the role of crime in society, a selective notion about the female role in society and crime associated with a subordination of the role of women in society and even in crime. Subsequently, works with a gender focus and different investigations that tried to depart from the classic configuration and causal relationship between emancipated women and crime, such as that of Chesney-Lind (1986), showed substantial changes and advances in the matter. This research warns about the visibility of generalized violence against women, but at the same time recognizes that to determine the analytical equity in this regard, it must be borne in mind that there is no clear information about violent women who attack other women.



On the other hand, it was also possible to construct a perspective in which the controversy about criminal and violent women has stimulated concern for the causes and correlates of female criminal behavior, particularly that of a violent nature in criminal structures (Bunch, Foley, & Urbina, 1983).

At the beginning of the 21st century, the research of Rushforth and Willis (2003) shed new perspectives on the relationship between women and crime. The authors mention that women's drug use is a defining factor in their involvement in crime and argue that the severity of women's drug use is more closely related to their criminality than to men (Willis & Rushforth, 2003). Likewise, female offenders are more likely than men to be incarcerated for nonviolent crimes, such as drug offenses, while men are more likely to go to prison for violent matters (Nazario, 2019; Willis & Rushforth, 2003). This opens up a new spectrum of analysis to dimensions in which women facilitate criminal activities for illegal networks based on the probability of association with minor crimes.

Women constitute a minority in the current global criminal context (Loinaz, 2016). However, the invisibility of women as protagonists of criminality has been constant both in the criminal sphere and the bibliographic and academic dynamics; also, though, women represent a sustained increase in captures, investigations, convictions and imprisonments in recent years (Loinaz, 2016). Global estimates in 2010 showed important results warning that 25% of offenders belonged to an exclusively female population, concentrating on the 10% being violent and 5% associated with sexual ones (Cortoni, Hanson, & Coache, 2010; Loinaz, 2016). And yet, the remaining 10% do not have an attribution and record for an absolute and determined type of crime.

Lastly, Central America is one of the most violent regions in the world, besides asymmetrical and volatile in terms of domestic conflicts, in particular the most unequal (Dalby & Carranza, 2019). On the other hand, it is also a region in which large manifestations of violence against women are estimated and its receptive character has attracted attention worldwide, contradicting the thesis of the works of the 1970s, in which a relationship between criminal women and their emancipation process was warned (Blanchard, 2003; IEEP, 2017). Undeniably, within the framework of criminal governance and underground integration, women become the turning point as subjects of violence in two dimensions: as receivers and vehicles. This phenomenon configures the two-dimensional proportion of violence (Niño & Méndez, 2020), a kind of dimension in which women have traditionally been violated but also have a participation in violent structures.

Proposal for theorization of women in violence

To address the phenomenon of women as subjects of violence in the Central American context, *process tracing* method will be used. This method makes use of documentary evidence to infer the causal chain between the causes and outcomes of a given phenomenon (George & Bennett, 2005). Specifically, it will be used the variant of *theory-building process tracing* (Beach & Pedersen, 2019) to elaborate a theoretical proposal that expresses the underground integration from the gender perspective in Central America from the incorporation of the phenomena of women as *recipients of violence* and *vehicles of violence*.



The theoretical model assumes that there is a structural and visible phenomenon such as women as recipients of violence that is expressed in variables such as social behaviors towards women and the action of the state for the protection of their rights:

$$WRP = SPW + DPP$$

The Woman Recipient of Violence (WRV) is the result of the confluence of factors such as the social perception of women (SPW) and the distortions of public policies (DPP) to face their vulnerability to the phenomena of gender violence.

Nonetheless, this element of the model is what we could refer to as traditional in studies on violence and gender that identify only one side of the violence that is exercised against women. Our theorization proposal goes further by incorporating into the explanation the phenomenon of Women as Vehicles of Violence (WVV), which is characterized by the instrumentalization of women for criminal activities and that highlights the progressive change in the imaginaries and roles of women in criminal organizations:

$$WVV = WRV * CA$$

In the same sense, the state inability (SI) to regulate the activities and displacement of the state itself in the exercise of classical functions such as defense, effective border control and security, or the provision of public goods (Wickham-Crowley, 1987) suggests that the phenomenon as a whole has an intermestic nuance, and that there is a continuous interaction between domestic and international levels around gender violence. The sum of domestic violence at the structural and criminal actor levels, reinforced by the incapacity of the State, generates what we have called Underground Gender Integration (UGI):

$$WRV(IE) + WVV(SI) = UGI$$

The state incapacity (EI) is, thus, the constant in the dynamics of underground gender integration. Namely, it affects the process in a differentiated way with special emphasis on the woman who receives violence because it is she who implements weak public policies for the prevention of violence and protection of women.

One also must consider – and in addition to the above – the inability of the state in its basic functions in accordance with the protection and effective territorial control, that increases the probability for women to mutate from a recipient to a vehicle of violence because they become an actor part of the criminal chain. Indeed, this involvement of women in criminal organizations has its center of gravity in the stimuli and incentives offered by the porosity of borders, the learning of criminals about the strategic value of women in their structures and the weakness of public institutions to prevent recruitment for such activities.

For the Central American context, this means that the region includes a phenomenon of violence², where such determines the dimensions and roles assumed by women in the Northern Triangle; therefore, crimes such as femicide, sexual and symbolic violence produce violent scenarios against women.

² Concept coined by the authors referring to violence as a phenomenon transversal to social relations in all its dimensions.



In this respect, for the purposes of this article, the underground integration of gender is the product of a violent and criminal process around the role of women in the region. Based on the foregoing, there is a structural cause that is the woman receiving violence evidenced in abuse, discrimination, and crimes against women. Due to the violence and presence of criminal actors, a new notion of women as a vehicle of violence is configured. The latter has become a criminal strategy and innovation that allows the underground integration of gender due to the little effective control of the territory that occurs especially in the border areas. Causal mechanisms such as state instability, border porosity and the exploitation of the role of women in society by criminal groups are vital for the understanding of the role and participation of women in transnational crime.

Underground gender integration: a Central American phenomenon

The woman of the Northern Triangle is constructed as a subject of violence from a convergence of structural variables such as the perception of women in society and their economic autonomy. Additionally, symbolic violence opens a new unaddressed spectrum of violent women, whose roles in criminal structures build underground circuits of delinquency. Consequently, we find that public policy designs are focused on mitigating the first dimension (woman receiving violence), leaving aside the prevention of the phenomenon of violent women. Women opt for violence and crime as a plausible space to protect their active role within a structure, generate codes of respect and aspirations for promotion in a criminal pyramid.

For the first dimension on women as recipients of violence in the region, it is configured in various ways: sexual, economic, emotional, or psychological (IEEP, 2017). According to the above, the countries belonging to the Central America Northern Triangle showed the highest rates of violent deaths of women in the world during the period 2007-2012 (Montti, Bolaños, & Cerén, 2018). Namely, El Salvador was the one that during the recorded period had the highest rate of violent deaths of women in the world with 14.4 women killed per hundred thousand, then Honduras with 10.9 violent deaths and in third place Guatemala with 9.3 deaths of women (OHCHR, 2014). Consequently, women configure a center of gravity in the reception of violence due to cultural factors such as violent masculinities, the historical behavioral normalization of cultural violence, violent family environments and the invisibility of violence.

On the other hand, the crimes of trafficking and smuggling of women have an interesting point for analysis on criminal governance frameworks³. Both smuggling and trafficking have become attractive crimes for criminal organizations in the region such as El Salvador's "Los Perrones". They possess the routes, contacts and an architecture of underground integration with illegal Honduran, Cuban, Mexican, Panamanian, Colombian, European and even African groups (Pérez, 2014), but in particular their closest underground associations are with Barrio 18 and Mara Salvatrucha (InSight Crime, 2016).

³ While human trafficking has a characteristic of the victim's voluntariness with the event and involves the crossing of borders, the trafficked woman, despite her will and consent, is also a victim. In the area of trafficking, contact is under deception and coercion and the consent of the female victim is flawed and does not involve the crossing of a border. (SEGOB, 2011).



A second dimension of study is that of a vehicle for crime. Women are used as means of committing crimes such as extortion. Research conducted by Demoscopía S.A. (2007) on gender composition has shown that women make up between 20 and 40% of Central American gangs. They assume functions of collecting information on potential victims and collecting extortion (Bonello, 2019), the main source of income for these organizations. In this regard, women have been strategically involved in the criminal chain, exploiting the advantages offered by judicial loopholes when it comes to persecuting them.

This dimension redefines the historical role of women, transforming their passive role into an active one within criminal organizations. Social construction and "otherness" (Mouffe & Laclau, 2007; Prozorov, 2015) have allowed their participation to become a hinge between groups and networks and, at the same time, a blind spot in front of security and justice operators.

Conclusions

This work reflects an academic effort to build a new concept and involve it in the regional debate on violence and criminality associated with women, as well as a contribution to the state of the art of such knowledge. Underground integration, from a gender perspective, has been built from two dimensions associated with women as subjects of violence: receiver and criminal vehicle. This is a commitment to resignify regional integration in terms of new problems that imply strategic solutions. In short, integration is also understood from alternative and unconventional points, such as trade and politics, but are extended to spheres where the state is not the center of gravity and criminality reaches to design less bureaucratic underground ecosystems, yet with high lucrative returns.

On the other hand, the limited academic and documentary sources on violent women represent a difficulty in building a state of the art on this field. Subsequently, this research is an invitation to deepen and expand academic advances on two phenomena that have been addressed in a traditional, way such as gender and regional integration. On the one hand, gender as an explanation of new mobility of women in the social structure and on the other, regional integration as a phenomenon that has multiple edges that deserve to be studied such as criminal governance, the roles of conventional and unconventional actors, corruption, the supplanting of states by irregular actors, organized crime with the capacity to overwhelm the system and regular institutions. In fact, for crime there are no borders comparable to the conception of states; in crime, institutions are created irregularly to compete and even replace the rules of the state game. This modifies and reconfigures the regional, geopolitical, economic, and legal space on which traditional regional integration models are built.

In fact, one of the main challenges to correct regional weaknesses in this area is to standardize and systematize statistics and data on gender violence, which are mostly aimed at evidencing the phenomenon of women who have been violated and to show in the same way the dimensions in which violent women integrate the criminal structures of the region. On the other hand, criminal policy must incorporate a differentiated gender and regional component. In this way, to agree on public policy strategies that imply the



protection of women who have been violated and, at the same time, the disengagement of women from criminal structures. In effect, private companies must facilitate the insertion of women into the workforce while state operators must redefine and conquer natural spaces of their constitutional configuration. Finally, in social terms, the community must assume an active role in the denormalization of violence as a social practice.

It should, hence, be mentioned that the reduction of violence against women does not lie in the increase in penalties, but in the effective functioning of justice operators. A reduction in the phenomenon must be based on greater agility of investigations and the strengthening of criminal policy to minimize the capacity for action and coercion. On the other hand, the effectiveness of the policy seeks to increase persuasion against potential members of criminal networks to cease from their participation.

Security strategies must be built based on the particularities and phenomenologies of the region and be solved in that the gender approach, beyond the discussion between femininities and masculinities, contributes to the understanding of criminal governance and underground integration against women as subject and tradable pattern of regional violence.

Overall, this document is an effort to try to explain what concerns a phenomenon of great concern to regional security and justice operators. The role of women in the criminal spheres as victims and criminals has led to some of the invisibility that is of concern when developing public policies and comprehensive security strategies. Throughout the study it is determined that underground and criminal integrations are much more effective to perform because the transaction costs between the actors are lower, while, between states, by their own configuration, there are more limitations and robust costs of integration due to variables such as sovereignty, politics, economy, and security.

This work also seeks to contribute to future new lines and agendas of research in Latin America. Gender studies have been related to explaining issues concerning equity, participation, women's demands with politics, rights, access to justice, work, and the economy. Overall, this research seeks, among others, to contribute from gender studies to the understanding of the phenomenon of integration, particularly in Central America and in new approaches to the role of women in security dynamics.

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