

# The Daughters of La Nacha: Profiles of Women Traffickers

By Elaine Carey and José Carlos Cisneros Guzmán

**I**GNACIA JASSO LA VIUDA DE GONZÁLEZ controlled much of the Ciudad Juárez heroin, morphine, and marijuana trade beginning in the late 1920s. Jasso, popularly known as La Nacha, supplied drugs to El Paso and other U.S. cities for more than 50 years, creating an enduring trafficking organization. Like her contemporary María Dolores Estévez Zuleta, alias Lola la Chata, the drug-trafficking boss of Mexico City, La Nacha built a family-based organized crime entity that brought her sons, daughters, grandchildren, nieces, and nephews into the business.<sup>1</sup>

She entered the trade together with her husband in the 1920s; after his death, she continued to sell opiates and marijuana from her home but also operated labs, fields, and legitimate businesses. In 1942, the head of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics, Harry J. Anslinger, tried unsuccessfully to extradite her to stand trial in the United States.<sup>2</sup> After some of her men were arrested in San Antonio with 55 ounces of smuggled morphine, Missouri congressman John J. Cochran denounced her on the floor of the House of Representatives.<sup>3</sup> Though she was in and out of jail many times, she likely died sometime in the 1980s a free woman. Her name became associated with transnational organized crime.

La Nacha's story resonates with those of today's women drug traffickers in Mexico, some of whom have attracted sensational media attention in recent years—such as Sandra Ávila Beltrán, dubbed the Queen of the Pacific by the Mexican media, and Enedina Arellano Félix, the suspected head of the Tijuana Cartel, now on the lam from the Drug Enforcement Agency. One of the characteristic features of women traffickers is that, unlike men, their credentials usually derive from their kinship lines rather than from their association with criminal groups.<sup>4</sup> It is their credentials that make them trust-worthy within the male-dominated drug trade. Like La Nacha—who inherited and then expanded her dead husband's network of



Ignacia "La Nacha" Jasso poses for a mug shot in 1942, during one of her many run-ins with the law. La Nacha is one of Mexico's most famous women drug traffickers.

contacts and employees—many enter the trade due to the role of a father, brother, husband, or even son. Like La Nacha, many women expand their male relative's business or branch off to start their own. Their familial relationships provide protection but also allow women to draw revenue from their family lines to start legitimate business, which usually serve to launder money. This is evident in the sensationalist case of Ávila, the niece of Miguel Ángel Félix Gallardo and Juan José Quintero Payán, both onetime drug lords based in Guadalajara.

But La Nacha's echoes can be found in the lives of less high-profile women as well. Take, for example, Sofia, 30, who has lived in Ciudad Juárez since the age of 10. (All the names of the women interviewed for this story have been changed to protect their anonymity.) Like

*Elaine Carey is Associate Professor at St. John's University in Queens, New York. She is the author of Plaza of Sacrifices: Gender, Power, and Terror in 1968 Mexico (University of New Mexico Press, 2005). José Carlos Cisneros Guzmán is an ethnographer and a graduate student in North American Studies at the Universidad Autónoma de Sinaloa.*

## REPORT: MEXICO

women involved in the high levels of the trade, Sofia is both different from and similar to La Nacha. She easily moves between cultures and speaks flawless English. The only daughter in a family of four, she grew up around men. Like her brothers, she entered her father's business of drug trafficking. She has never hidden nor run from her identity as the daughter of a boss, she said, and this has affected all aspects of her life. For example, her name drew attention from other narcos who saw her as a potential lover. Members of trafficking families, she said, often use their daughters to solidify alliances through marriage. Sofia acknowledged that many of her cousins became lovers (and widows) of successful narcos, but she opted to work in the business as a single woman.

In terms of entering the business, Sofia's kinship lines were "a double-edged sword," she said. On the one hand, her name opened doors for her; on the other, she faced competition and resentment. Like La Nacha, women in contemporary drug trafficking may be betrayed or worse. La Nacha's two lieutenants cut her out of a deal to make more money in 1942, and she was beaten by police who confiscated her drugs for resale. Sofia said that a woman competing with a man can just as easily be killed as a man. So far, however, Sofia has been successful, partly because she puts much distance between herself and the actual sale of the product. Instead, she works in distribution. Further resembling Lola la Chata and La Nacha, she does not use the drugs she sells. Moreover, she has selected a more modest path in the trafficking of drugs: She is not interested in being an assassin or "a *machito* who wants to eat half the world," as she put it. Instead, she operates a smaller business with four other women who entered the trade on their own, without a male relative's credentials.

Unlike Sofia, Andrea, 24, is a small-time peddler who moves in and out of drug selling with no kinship connections. She comes from an upper-class family and is a *fresa*, or young woman who was lured into the narco-lifestyle by the easy money, the parties, and the economic freedom. A fan of techno music and active in the rave scene, she began selling drugs in the clubs of El Paso. As a small-time dealer, she crosses the border with her designer handbags stuffed with Ecstasy, cocaine, LSD, morphine, and products for huffing that she sells to children. Andrea's business offers her freedom and fun, and her youth and beauty contribute to her success. She does not see herself as a narca and says she plans to return to studying medicine, as she did before she started selling. As a club girl, she uses drugs more than women who are older than her.

Other women like Miranda and Maria survive despite the violence. Miranda, a 56-year-old Sinaloan businesswoman, entered the trade with her husband. She grew up in an impoverished family, and through the selling and trafficking of drugs, she and her husband climbed the socio-economic ladder. The boss they worked for, however, eventually caught her husband skimming and killed him for it. Miranda nonetheless remained a trusted partner within the organization. Her credentials as a vendor and distributor outweighed the actions of her husband. In an interview, Miranda discussed his death as rational part of the business: One can never avoid paying the boss. With his death, she maintained the business and expanded it, just as La Nacha did. She married another narco but remained in control of her business and finances. Like La Nacha, Miranda employs her sons, nieces, and nephews creating a family dynasty. Her dynasty, like that of La Nacha, offers her children credentials.

María is also a narco-widow. She grew up in the trade: Her mother sold drugs to sustain her family, and so María came of age surrounded by bags of heroin and marijuana. At age 15 she married her mother's distributor. She and her husband worked together, but her husband grew concerned that she would steal his contacts and start moving her own product. When her husband fell victim to a revenge killing, she entered the trade with his contacts. She encountered difficulties because she lacked true credentials and also because of a persistent distrust of women. As a mother, she differs from Miranda, having kept her children far from the business.

María and Miranda share similarities to both La Nacha and Sofia. María and Sofia became involved in the trade because it was a family business. María moved up the socio-economic ladder through marriage, but she gained control of the business due to her husband's murder. More than 70 years after La Nacha entered the trade, María encountered difficulties from male competitors and vendors who won't work for or with a woman. All of the women said they preferred to develop their businesses step by step and to avoid a rapid rise. They argued that those who ascend too quickly are destined to fall sooner. All the women claimed to have observed and learned from the mistakes of their husbands and male competitors.

Their stories make clear that women often gain greater economic control and personal power from drug trafficking, operating as equal partners with or independently of men. More importantly, successful women pass on their credentials to their children, just as their father's and husband's did to them, creating matrilineal-based organized crime families. ■

NOTES

- University of Mexico, 1980), 80–81.
8. Figures cited in Francisco Abundis, “Las drogas en la opinión pública,” *El Universal* (Mexico City), August 19, 2010.
  9. “Arrest File: José del Moral,” Caja 0729, Folio 128284 (Tribunal Superior de Justicia del Distrito Federal, Archivo General de la Nación, Mexico City, October 27, 1908).
  10. Richard DeGrandpre, *The Cult of Pharmacology: How America Became the World’s Most Troubled Drug Culture* (Duke University Press, 2006).
  11. James Q. Wilson, “Against the Legalization of Drugs,” *Commentary* 89, no. 2 (1990): 21–28.
  12. Degrandpre, *The Cult of Pharmacology*, 120–1, 185–6.
  13. *Ibid.*
  14. For some early examples, see Thomas Crittenden, “The Mexican National Drink,” *Current Literature* 20, no. 6 (1896); “A Bad Mexican Habit,” *The Broad Ax* (Salt Lake City), October 29, 1898; “Along the Border, Curious and Interesting Things on the Mexican Frontier,” *The Ohio Democrat* (New Philadelphia, Ohio), November 18, 1897; “A Seductive Weed,” *Spirit Lake Beacon* (Spirit Lake, Iowa), January 21, 1898; “A New Opiate,” *Marysville Tribune* (Marysville, Ohio), March 23, 1898.
  15. William O. Walker III, *Drug Control in the Americas*, rev. ed. (University of New Mexico Press, 1989), 119–26; Luis A. Astorga, *El Siglo de las drogas* (Mexico City: Espasa-Calpe, 1996), 52–53.
  16. Bob Wiedrich, “Mexico Still Hard on the Soft Drugs,” *Chicago Tribune*, August 21, 1974.
  17. Ken Ellingwood and Richard Marosi “Mexico’s President Opposes Marijuana Legalization,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 9, 2010.

**How Can We Help Mexico?**

1. For numbers on illicit-drug users in the United States, see U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *Results From the 2009 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: Volume I. Summary of National Findings*, Figure 2.1, “Past Month Illicit Drug Use among Persons Aged 12 or Older: 2009,” [oas.samhsa.gov/NSDUH/2k9NSDUH/2k9Results.htm#Ch2](http://oas.samhsa.gov/NSDUH/2k9NSDUH/2k9Results.htm#Ch2).
2. Elizabeth Mendes, “New High of 46% of Americans Support Legalizing Marijuana,” Gallup.com, October 28, 2010.
3. See, for example, Karen Kaplan, “Let Them Take Heroin, Study Says,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 19, 2009; Benedict Carey, “Study Backs Heroin to Treat Addiction,” *The New York Times*, August 20, 2009; John Tierney, “Prescription Heroin?” *The New York Times*, August 20, 2009.

**No End in Sight**

1. For the sake of readability, the author has omitted copious references to the massive reportage about the Juárez situation. But he would like to express his gratitude to others who have studied or written about the city and border issues, including Rico Ainslie, Cecilia Ballí, Eduardo Barrera, Charles Bowden, John Burnett, Julian Cardona, Alfredo Corchado, Gustavo de la Rosa, Richard Dugan, Josiah Heyman, Alejandro Lugo, Molly Molloy, Rafael Nuñez, Tony Payan, Alfredo Quijano, Sandra Rodríguez, David Shirk, Kathy Staudt, Pablo Vila, Ed Vulliamy, and Melissa Wright.
2. Oscar Martínez, *Border Boom Town: Ciudad Juárez Since 1848* (University of Texas Press, 1983).
3. Howard Campbell, *Drug War Zone: Frontline Dispatches From the Streets of El Paso and Juárez* (University of Texas Press, 2009), 32.
4. Howard Campbell, “Drug Trafficking Stories: Everyday Forms of Narco-Folklore on the U.S.-Mexico Border,” *International Journal of Drug Policy* 16, no. 5 (2005): 326–33.
5. Campbell, *Drug War Zone*, 1–33.
6. Damien Cave, “A Mexican City’s Troubles Reshape Its Families,” *The New York Times*, February 9, 2011.
7. On maquiladoras, see Alejandro Lugo, *Fragmented Lives, Assembled Parts: Culture, Capitalism, and Conquest at the U.S.-Mexico Border* (University of Texas Press, 2008).
8. Timothy J. Dunn, *Blockading the Border and Human Rights: The El Paso Operation That Remade Immigration Enforcement* (University of Texas Press, 2009).
9. Matthew C. Gutmann, *The Romance of Democracy: Compliant Defiance in*

- Contemporary Mexico* (University of California Press, 2002).
10. Campbell, *Drug War Zone*, 265–74.
  11. The Associated Press, “Clinton: U.S. Drug Use Fuels Mexico Cartels,” March 23, 2011.
  12. Howard Campbell, “Narco-Propaganda in the Mexican Drug War: An Anthropological Perspective,” *Latin American Perspectives* (forthcoming).

**The Daughters of La Nacha**

1. Elaine Carey, “‘Selling Is More of a Habit Than Using’: Narcotraficante Lola la Chata and Her Threat to Civilization, 1930–1960,” *Journal of Women’s History* 21, no. 2 (summer 2009): 62–89. For a discussion of La Nacha, see also Howard Campbell, *Drug War Zone: Frontline Dispatches From the Streets of El Paso and Juárez* (University of Texas, 2009), 40–52.
2. Affidavit of W. H. Crook, *The United States of America v. Ignacia Jasso Gonzalez et al.*, September 16, 1942, State Department (RG 59), Central Decimal Files, 1940–1944, 212.11 Gonzalez Ignacia Jasso, Box 105, National Archives II.
3. Extension of Remarks of John J. Cochran, Proceedings and Debate of the 78th Cong., 1st sess., *Congressional Record* 89, no. 23 (February 10, 1943). Harry J. Anslinger Archive, Box 2, Folder 20, Pennsylvania State University.
4. Howard Abadinsky, *Organized Crime* (New York: Wadsworth Publishing, 2009). Discussion with Elaine Carey, January 20, 2011, Queens, New York.

**Marketing Violence in Mexico’s Drug War**

1. Silvia Otero, “No investigan 95% de muertes en ‘guerra,’” *El Universal* (Mexico City), June 21, 2010.
2. Jorge Ramos, “Muertes de civiles son las menos: FCH,” *El Universal*, April 16, 2010.

**Machos y Putas**

1. Duncan Kennedy, “Domestic Violence Stalks Mexican Women,” BBC News, May 22, 2007; Mexican government survey cited in Human Rights Watch, “The Second Assault: Obstructing Access to Legal Abortion After Rape in Mexico,” *Human Rights Watch* 18, no. 1(B) (March 6, 2006): 11 (n. 11); rape statistic cited in *ibid.*, 9 (n. 4).
2. Comunicación e Información de la Mujer, AC (CIMAC), “Hacia la construcción de un periodismo no sexista,” (2009), [cimac.org.mx/cedoc/publicaciones.../hacia\\_la\\_construccion.pdf](http://cimac.org.mx/cedoc/publicaciones.../hacia_la_construccion.pdf).
3. For more of Castillo’s analysis, see her *Easy Women: Sex and Gender in Modern Mexican Fiction* (University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 39.
4. Marc Lacy, “The Mexican Border’s Lost World,” *The New York Times*, July 31, 2010.
5. “Survivor of Mexico Slaughter Details Immigrants’ Final Moments,” *Houston Chronicle*, August 25, 2010.
6. *The New York Review of Books*, October 28, 2010.
7. Laura Poy Solano, “Ninis, 33% de jóvenes en Ciudad Juárez,” *La Jornada* (Mexico City), April 14, 2010.
8. Quoted in Julia Preston, “Asylum Granted to Mexican Woman in Case Setting Standard on Domestic Abuse,” *The New York Times*, August 12, 2010.
9. Julian Cardona, “Pink Bikers Fight Mexican Drug War by Helping Poor,” Reuters, January 24, 2011.
10. *El Chilito* (Tamaulipas), “Crónica: La histórica visita de Blake y Eugenio al Pueblo Mágico,” December 7, 2010.

**The Colombia FTA**

1. “Barack Obama’s Feb. 12 Speech,” transcript, *The New York Times*, February 12, 2008.
2. Figure cited in Helene Cooper and Steven Greenhouse, “U.S. and Colombia Near Trade Pact,” *The New York Times*, April 6, 2011.
3. José Antonio Ocampo and Camilo Ernesto Tovar, *Price-Based Capital Account Regulations: The Colombian Experience*, Economic Commission for Latin America “Financiamiento de Desarrollo” series no. 87 (Santiago, Chile: United Nations, October 1999).