Debunking the Narco Myth

By **Karina García-Reyes**

Who is a narco? The details may vary, but our mental image is usually very similar. We picture a young man, working class, non-white, poorly educated, festooned in a cowboy hat or other flamboyant outfit. In this, the entertainment industry has done a brilliant job in (re)producing a stereotype. But it's also a myth, and this myth has led to ineffective policies that allow the real narcos to remain the shadows.

My doctoral research focused on analysing the life stories of thirty-three men who worked in the drug trafficking industry in Mexico[1]. Their first-hand narratives of the everyday of the drug trade and their reflections on their own roles in it, debunk some of the common myths prevalent in movies and TV shows, as well as the discourses produced by governments. In this article, I discuss why we must challenge these myths and turn our attention to the figures of power who really control and benefit from this global enterprise.

At first glance the stereotypes about narcos may seem to have a grain of truth. In Mexico, for example, statistics demonstrate that almost 90% of people involved in drug trafficking crimes are men from poor backgrounds, aged between 18 and 34 years old (Vilalta, 2012). This statistic is a selective analysis, however, only capturing the sociodemographics of individuals at the base of the drug trade hierarchy.

What is crucial to highlight is that narcos are not only the producers, smugglers or sicarios we constantly see in the movies. This myth is the cornerstone of a wider fallacy: the idea that cartels are only run by regional drug lords, and that the profits are retained in countries such as Mexico or Colombia (see Ferragut, 2011). This assumption, in turn, justifies intrusive and violent policies in order to win a war that cannot be won (Woods, 2017). Furthermore, the strategy of capturing or killing the most dangerous drug lords, such as Pablo Escobar in Colombia and Joaquín Guzmán in Mexico, does not work. The supply of drugs has not been affected (Nájar, 2019). Why? Because the most powerful kingpins operate in the shadows, protected by their invisibility.

The drug trade is an international business and, as in any other multinational, there are multiple disciplines and hierarchies comprising the business model. The figure of narcos should also include the "armchair" narcos, who are not directly involved in the trafficking of drugs, but whose job allows this business to run efficiently: ranging from accountants and architects, to IT services and even human resources. More importantly, we have to bring to the fore the high-ranking narcos, including bankers and financiers, politicians, the military, policemen, economists, judges, and entrepreneurs, among others, who live and operate in the most important financial capitals in the world (Young and Woodiwiss, 2020). These individuals are positioned at the top of the hierarchy. They are truly the most powerful drug kingpins.

When I spoke to former narcos, they confirmed that the big bosses did not resemble the stereotypes but were rather members of the power elite in Mexico and the United States. This perhaps does not come as a surprise, but it is hardly reflected in policy that almost exclusively chases, attacks, and prosecutes low-ranking narcos at great human and financial cost. When we acknowledge that most powerful actors and those who control the drug trade are not directly involved at the grassroot level, it becomes clear why these policies have also had a negligible effect on the drug trafficking enterprise. In this sense, even the much discussed 'kingpin' strategy is an illusion. If there was a real political will to 'behead' drug cartels, policies would focus on investigating these powerful actors and the international companies and banks who engage in money laundry and arms trafficking. Such

efforts would more efficiently disrupt the drug business, but would also challenge a status quo that is comfortable for many.

]The narco myth is thus a useful lie, serving to justify militarized and intrusive policies, and protect the political capital and financial rewards the system creates. The sooner that we, as society, start questioning oversimplified narratives of who narcos are, where they live, and what they do, the sooner the governments will have to adjust their ineffective policies and open the door to new, sustainable solutions.

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[1] Full research available at: https://research-information.bris.ac.uk/en/studentTheses/poverty-gender-and-violence-in-the-narratives-of-former-narcos