

Chapter 17

Women's Involvement in Organised Crime and Drug Trafficking: A Comparative Analysis of the Sinaloa and Yamaguchi-gumi Organisations

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On 31 October 2017, when children living in the United States dressed up in costumes and asked for 'trick or treat' in their neighbourhoods, the Yamaguchi-gumi organisation, one of the main groups of the Japanese mafia known as Yakuza, hosted its own Halloween celebration at its headquarters in Kobe, Japan. According to media reports, the festivities included cotton candy made by the Yamaguchi-gumi, known associates dressed up in costumes, and approximately 800 people and children in attendance (Vega, 2017). A day later, the families of known members of the Mexico-based Sinaloa drug trafficking organisation (DTO), rejoiced and remembered their loved ones in Mexico's Day of the Dead celebrations at the Jardines del Humaya; a notorious cemetery with the graves of prominent drug traffickers of the Sinaloa DTO. As tradition dictates, the festivities included the favourite food and beverages of the departed accompanied by live music among the extravagant mausoleums (Ibarra, 2017).

Beyond adding to the lore of organised crime, these anecdotes are just two of many similarities between the Sinaloa DTO and the Yamaguchi-gumi criminal group. Despite being two long-standing criminal organisations, Japanese and Mexican organised crime are seldom analysed in tandem. While Mexican organised crime and, in particular drug trafficking, is linked to the demand for illicit drugs in the United States, Japanese organised crime is hardly seen in relationship to the United States, although both the Sinaloa DTO and the Yamaguchi-gumi have been designated under the United States' transnational criminal

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organisations sanctions programme under the Department of Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC).

In the past 13 years, Mexican organised crime has received increased media and scholarly attention due to the escalation of lethal and non-lethal forms of violence. Whereas in Mexico a well-known fragmentation within the Sinaloa DTO led to 1,413 homicides in the state in 2009 (INEGI, 2019), in Japan, the Yama-Ichi war in the late 1980s among splitting groups of the Yakuza resulted in 29 deaths over the course of 2 years (Iibochi as cited in Schreiber, 2015). While highly violent for Japanese standards, it pales in comparison to the 1,330 homicides of men that happened in Sinaloa in 2009. Notably, international headlines on the split within the Yamaguchi-gumi had the same tone to the ones used when covering organised crime in Mexico. This further underscores how complex dynamics within criminal groups are often overlooked in favour of sensationalist narratives.

Yet, despite differences in the use and intensity of lethal violence, the Sinaloa and Yamaguchi-gumi organisations exhibit important similarities as criminal groups. These similarities further our understanding of their operations and specifically what are the internal traits that improve their likelihood of survival. After all, not all criminal groups are created equal and while some are the equivalent of a flash in the pan, others such as the Naples-based Camorra can boast longevity.

This chapter is not an extensive history of the Sinaloa DTO and the Yamaguchi-gumi organisations, nor does it constitute an explanation of evolving roles for women within these groups. Instead, it offers a contemporary comparison of the roles of women within two sophisticated organised criminal groups that have withstood the test of time both in Mexico and Japan. It contends that the current academic and media understanding of the role of women in these groups has created a paradox that ultimately benefits the criminal groups. By thinking of female roles as exceptional or solely important because of their family and or romantic relationships, it has invisibilised the managerial functions they perform, which ultimately turns them into optimal criminal associates.

The paradox is simple: by thinking of women as outsiders, they become valuable members of sophisticated criminal groups. Law enforcement will not suspect them with the same attention and media will perpetuate the stereotype of the exception rather than the norm. To be clear, this chapter is not an analysis of women in relation to the men in these groups. Rather it seeks to highlight the agency of these women within these organisations even if their participation within the criminal groups derives from romantic relationships or family ties.

A note on definitions is important. In this chapter, Yamaguchi-gumi and Sinaloa are considered organised criminal groups. However, whereas the Sinaloa group can be understood as primarily a DTO, the Yamaguchi-gumi does not fit that category. Therefore, while drug trafficking is considered an organised criminal activity, organised crime and drug trafficking are not equivalent terms. Furthermore, for the purpose of this chapter, Sinaloa refers to the Mexico-based DTO and not the state within Mexico unless otherwise noted.

The chapter discusses how female participation in the Sinaloa DTO and the Yamaguchi-gumi has been treated in the media and scholarly literature. It is then

argued that the absence of scholarship, and the treatment of women in crime as an exception has created a paradox that benefits criminal groups. It discusses two case studies, one on informal participation through member retention in the Yamaguchi-gumi and one on formal participation through money laundering in the Sinaloa DTO. Finally, this chapter proposes potential avenues for research beyond the Sinaloa and Yamaguchi-gumi groups.

Scholarly and Media Coverage of Female Participation in Yamaguchi-gumi and Sinaloa Criminal Groups

Academic scholarship on female participation in the Yamaguchi-gumi and Sinaloa DTO is characterised by its paucity. Even considering the limitations of conducting research related to illicit activities, lack of academic work on the women within the Yamaguchi-gumi is exacerbated by the fact that formally it is considered a male-only organisation. Peter B. E. Hill's tour de force *The Japanese Mafia: Yakuza, Law, and the State* discounts the participation of women – even informally – and only mentions women in the context of one of five internal rules within the Yakuza. Namely 'do not touch the woman of a fellow gang member' (Hill, 2003, p. 73). Hill also discusses sex work but solely focuses in its role as a source of income for the group.

To the knowledge of the author, there are only two English-language studies focussed on female participation in the Yakuza: Otomo (2007) and Alkemade (2014). Both authors agree that the idea of a 'lady gangster' as portrayed in Japanese pop culture is inaccurate and that depending on the prominence your partner has within the group, your role will vary. Notably, in the lower levels, men are financially dependent on their companion or wife. Per one study by the National Police Agency 28 per cent of organised crime members acknowledge this financial dependence (Otomo, 2007, p. 210).

The authors also agree that female participation in the Yakuza is distinct from how their counterparts collaborate in Western criminal groups, and in particular Italian ones. However, whereas Otomo contends the increased participation of women in the Yakuza is a response to economic development where management of criminal activities involves covers such as restaurants and variety shows (p. 215), Alkemade argues there is female agency or a 'subculture within a subculture'. And while 'they may seem less "emancipated" [than their Western counterparts], they seek to reclaim their own agency in an overly patriarchal underworld' (Alkemade, 2014, p. 14).

Journalistic portrayals of Yakuza wives and lovers in general, and Yamaguchi-gumi ones in particular, seem informed by the notion of these criminal groups as male-only associations. Jake Adelstein, the best-known Western journalist covering the Yakuza, and author of *Tokyo Vice: An American Reporter on the Police Beat in Japan* does not discuss women in the Yakuza. Instead, Adelstein presents the case of a hostess employed in one of Japan's hostess bars, where patrons pay for drinks and conversation. Similar to Hill (2003), the discussion of the hostess has to do with the Yakuza's income sources rather than female agency in the criminal group.

Recently, the most comprehensive English-language coverage involved the photography collection, *I Give You My Life* by Chloé Jafé, (2020) who was able to capture the lives of Yakuza wives, including body covering tattoos, that turn them into outcasts of society but mirror the lives of their husbands. The photographs give the spectator an intimate view of their lives and Jafé's work suggests they occupy more prominent roles than previously considered. For the academic, Jafé's work is an invitation to dig deeper into female participation in Japan's illicit economies.

Academic work on female participation within the Sinaloa DTO is equally scant. To the knowledge of the author, only two edited volumes, Santamaría (2012) and Ramírez-Pimienta and Tabuenca (2016) have attempted to shed light on the role of women within Mexican organised crime with some chapters dedicated to the Sinaloa organisation. Unlike the Yamaguchi-gumi where formal membership is considered male-only, affiliation with the Sinaloa DTO does not follow that rule, although it is considered as a male-dominated world.

Even though the volume edited by Santamaría (2012) contains original data collected through fieldwork, including interviews with female participants, a common thread to the chapters is the explicit assumption of the exceptionality of female work within organised crime. The volume, therefore, advances a narrative where women, of all social and economic backgrounds, find themselves working for criminal groups through their romantic involvement or kinship ties with *male* criminals. Female *choice* to participate within the Sinaloa DTO is considered as an impossibility and instead their role within the underworld is understood as the product of happenstance.

In contrast, the volume edited by Ramírez-Pimienta and Tabuenca (2016) calls into question this male-centred approach. By analysing female portrayal in organised crime in popular culture, the authors bring to the fore the sexist paradigm informing discussions of women in illicit economies. Notably, the chapter by Polit Dueñas (2016) aptly titled 'Leaving the Queen Alone' in reference to the book written about Sandra Avila Beltrán also known as 'The Queen of the Pacific', and which she analyses argues:

The book [...] can be read as a type of metonymy in which the protagonist allows the author to write about the powerful men in the business. In that shift of the subject of the narrative, the author makes evident the silence of what it means to be a woman in drug trafficking [...]. The silence about the human experience of Sandra Avila Beltrán as a woman in drug trafficking shows that *the interest of the author was to talk about men*. (Polit Dueñas as cited in Ramírez-Pimienta & Tabuenca, 2016, p. 166, author's translation, emphasis added)

The problem identified by Polit Dueñas (2016) is but one example of how Mexican media generally covers women in organised crime. Certainly, investigative journalism is a central input in the research of illicit economies, and even more so considering that Mexico is one of the deadliest places to be a journalist.

However, the silence of the human experience of women in drug trafficking is epitomised in *Miss Narco*, a book of essays by Javier Valdéz first published in 2009 that is now in its 10th reprint. The work by Valdéz is distinct considering his prominent position in Mexican journalism and his legacy in covering drug trafficking and violence in Mexico.

In 2011, Valdéz received the International Press Freedom Award given by the Committee to Protect Journalists and, in the same year, *Ríodoce*, the newspaper he founded, received the Maria Moors Cabot Prize given by Columbia University. In 2017, Valdéz was murdered in his native Sinaloa allegedly by members of a faction that split from the Sinaloa DTO. In 2018, the 'Javier Valdéz Cárdenas Award' was started and has been given on an annual basis as an 'homage to combative and critical journalism'.

In *Miss Narco*, Valdéz often focusses on the physical attributes of women and those associated with femininity in patriarchal societies as intrinsic to their identity within organised crime. The book begins describing a woman by the name of Yoselín whose 'breasts had a sensual dance when she walked' (2009, p. 15, author's translation). Later, in describing a police woman who worked in Ciudad Juárez, Valdéz describes her as 'having a macabre coquetry' (p. 178, author's translation) and a way of walking that 'is the perfect movement that grabs looks and masculine hearts are active craters very, very close to erupting' (p. 184, author's translation). The last section of the book is entitled 'Narco Beauty' where he describes Laura, 'almost 1.80 meters tall, 80 centimeters of bust, and 62 centimeters of waist. A goddess' (p. 251).

Even when the book provides information that can be corroborated in other sources related to conflicts between the state and organised crime, as well as intra-conflict group, the author uses the bodies of women as the conduit for explaining life within organised crime. Therefore, a book that is allegedly about women in drug trafficking is, in reality, about how the perceived beauty of women serves to convey power for the men in criminal groups. This perpetuates the simplistic narrative that female participation in organised crime can only be understood in relation to men.

The Paradox of Invisibility: Women as Optimal Partners in Crime

The exceptionality conferred to female participation in organised crime in scholarly and journalistic literature has contributed in creating an invisibility paradox that ultimately tilts the scales in favour of criminal groups over law enforcement agencies. The concept of an invisibility paradox builds on the work by Dino (2007) who argues that stereotypes of women in crime advance the notion of women with power but without authority.

Organised criminal groups, such as Sinaloa and Yamaguchi-gumi, that generally operate with a low profile, will benefit from human assets that can go undetected by the state or rival groups. This type of operation, along with a selective use of violence, stands in stark contrast to criminal groups that require public demonstrations of violence as an essential component to their business model (Farfán-Méndez, 2016, 2019). Therefore, it is not obvious that all criminal groups

require or want human assets that operate under the radar and by extension, women who will formally or informally collaborate with the criminal group.

Given that law enforcement collects intelligence from open sources, including media reports, the coverage of women as mere accessories also informs law enforcement strategies that seek to weaken or preclude the activities of organised crime. When law enforcement also adopts this conceptualisation, female participation becomes an optimal asset in organised criminal activities either through formal or informal membership in the group.

Member Retention

Over the past 15 years, membership in the Yakuza has dwindled. The gray zone between illegality and legality where the Japanese mafia operates, has allowed the National Police Agency to have a greater understanding of membership compared to other countries with established organised criminal groups where estimates are unavailable or span a wide range. Case in point, in Mexico, there is no reliable official data on the number of organised criminal groups operating in the country, let alone a membership count.

Estimates from 1988 placed membership at 80,000 (Hakusho as cited in Hill, 2003, p. 46), but according to Japan's National Police Agency, in 2018, there were 15,600 individuals designated as members of organised crime (*bōryokudan*) and another 14,900 considered associates (Japan Data, 2019). Of the 30,500 Yakuza members and associates, 9,500 belonged to the Yamaguchi-gumi, 4,900 to the Sumiyoshi-kai and 3,700 to the Inagawa-kai (Kyodo News, 2019). To put the 30,500 into perspective, Japan has a population of 126.8 million.

Whereas the Anti-Boryokudan law implemented in 1992 had important effects in decreasing membership by criminalising conducting business with these groups, the Yakuza's present decline is partially due to a loss of interest by young people in joining. The perception is that it is a very rigid structure, where one must work hard for many years with unclear benefits and a career path (Drugs and Firearms Division National Police Agency Japan, personal communication, April 2019). This echoes the finding by Ryo Fujiwara who interviewed dozens of Yakuza members for the book *The Three Yamaguchi-gumi*. According to Fujiwara, working for the Yamaguchi-gumi

was like working for the Toyota [...] If you were an underboss, you had to be at the headquarters every day before 7:30 a.m because Takayama (a top lieutenant) would arrive at 8 a.m [...] There was no clowning around, everything was deadly serious. That's not fun at all. (Fujiwara as cited in Adelstein, 2017)

This loss of interest by Japanese youth in participating in illicit economies, compounded by Japan's aging population and shrinking birth rate, has created for the Yakuza in general, and the Yamaguchi-gumi in particular, a problem of recruitment and retention of personnel similar to the one that exists in organisations that operate in licit economies. Just like any other organisation that needs to

attract and retain talent for surviving and growing, the Yamaguchi-gumi needs to develop and retain human capital in order to continue with its operations.

The challenges with recruitment, and particularly retention, have created spaces for female participation in the Yakuza in ways that were less likely available in the past, even if membership within the Yakuza can only formally be male-only. These roles, however, are mostly available to wives of members in the top echelons because as previous work shows, the lives of wives and lovers in lower levels of the Yakuza involve financially supporting their mafia husbands and vary considerably from those in romantic or family relationships to management (Alkemade, 2014).

The *ane-san* (the boss's wife) performs vital functions in ensuring the cohesiveness of the group via her relationship to subordinates and their female companions.

The top wives are also often the ones who come to resolve any quarrels between the group's subordinates or between the subordinates and their wives; where the oyabun (boss), too far removed from the interpersonal relationships of his subordinate members falls short, his wife steps in as the advisor and mediator for such conflicts. (Alkemade, 2014, p. 7)

Furthermore, in photographing wives of Yakuza members, which she could only meet after access was granted by a Yakuza boss, artist Chloé Jafé found that

The wife of the boss has a vital role in the group. She is the boss's shadow. She walks by his side and knows everything. Her role is to look after the young recruits and advise the boss. If the boss goes to jail, or dies, his wife takes over the group. (Jafé as cited in Clifford, 2019)

Similar to other organisations that operate in the margins of the law, her enforcement is credible insofar members of the group cannot resort to the state for conflict resolution. What is critical, is that even if the *ane-san* gets her position by virtue of her marriage to a top member of the Yamaguchi-gumi, and she is not a formal member of the Yakuza, she exerts her authority by fostering collective action that formal membership rules alone cannot guarantee. Following Dino's argument, *ane-sans* have power *and* authority, rather than just power without authority.

In times where Yakuza membership, including the Yamaguchi-gumi is declining, the role of women in group cohesiveness cannot be overstated. Law enforcement's focus on male-only membership data, can obscure the *type* of member that remains within the group. To fully understand how a group operates, and the internal characteristics that allow it to survive, it is not only important to know how many members it has, but also the different levels of commitment individuals have to the group. Previous work shows the wives of managers within the Yakuza have this information which is of interest not only to the group itself but to law enforcement.

Money Laundering

For Halloween parties in 2019, the police in Culiacán, the capital city of Sinaloa, announced it would not detain and fine individuals who wore costume masks of famous drug traffickers. However, having toy guns as part of the costume would result in an administrative sanction (Monarrez, 2019). While one of the best-selling masks has been that of Joaquín Guzmán Loera also known as ‘El Chapo’, there are other prominent drug traffickers from the Sinaloa DTO who have had long-standing careers, and fortunately for them, without the fame that ‘El Chapo’ achieved.

Ismael Zambada also known as ‘El Mayo’ and Juan José Esparragoza also known as ‘El Azul’ are two central cases of how the Sinaloa DTO has been able to survive, grow, and outsmart law enforcement. Among other common elements, both drug traffickers incorporated their wives and daughters into their money laundering operations. Unlike other cases where male criminals only use their female relatives as fronts, Zambada and Esparragoza employed them. This is important because it took advantage of two stereotypes of organised crime in Mexico: (1) that it is a male-dominated space and (2) asset management and money laundering involve ostentation.

Esparragoza was first indicted on charges of drug trafficking in the Western District of Texas in April 2003 but the involvement of his first and second wife, and daughters was not public until July 2012. According to the United States’ Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), his daughter Brenda owned and managed ‘Socialika Rentas and Catering’ an event planning company registered in Cancún in the state of Quintana Roo. Under ‘Socialika Rentas y Catering’, Brenda also owned and managed ‘Terraza 9140’ a banquet hall located in Zapopan in the state of Jalisco (OFAC, 2012a). Ever a busy woman, Brenda also owned and controlled ‘Provenza Residencial’ a residential community in Tlajomulco de Zúñiga, Jalisco. Brenda’s older sister, Nadia, owned and managed ‘Casa V’ a banquet hall in the city of Guadalajara in the state of Jalisco (OFAC, 2013).

Esparragoza’s first wife, Maria Guadalupe, and mother of Brenda and Nadia, co-owned two real estate companies, one involved in real estate development, ‘Desarrollos Everest’ and a residential community called ‘Residencial Del Lago’ both located in Culiacán, Sinaloa (OFAC, 2012b). Esparragoza’s second wife, Ofelia managed seven gas stations in Culiacán, Sinaloa. Notably, after OFAC first identified in 2012 these properties as money laundering locations, the Sinaloa DTO changed their legal names. In 2013, OFAC identified them once again under their new legal names.

Ismael Zambada was identified in May 2002 under the Foreign Narcotics Kingpin Designation Act, but the involvement of his wife and four daughters was not public until May 2007. According to OFAC, his female family members were involved in the operation of seven companies, but his daughters Patricia and Teresa occupied management positions. The seven companies included a gas station, a stable, a construction company, a trucking company, a design company, and a dairy (OFAC, 2007).

While the designation of the female relatives of Esparragoza and Zambada could have hindered their money laundering operations, by revealing their identities and businesses, their active participation in the operation of the Sinaloa DTO allowed them to outsmart law enforcement. As previously stated, they benefited from the stereotype of Mexican organised crime as a male-dominated space. Furthermore, the lapsed time between their designation and that of their fathers also demonstrates an advantage for the Sinaloa DTO. Not only were wives and daughters active in a crucial component of their criminal activities, by integrating their gains into the financial system, but they also had several years to do so without attracting attention from law enforcement. After all, while gas stations are cash intensive businesses, and useful for money laundering, they don't really fit Hollywood portrayals of the kingpin with his *nouveau riche* taste.

Using family members, in this case wives and daughters, also presented an additional advantage. In the same way that the Yamaguchi-gumi creates bonds within the organisation that generate incentives for long-term participation rather than defection, actual blood ties in the case of the Sinaloa DTO further strengthen these incentives. While one of Zambada's sons, Vicente, is serving a sentence for drug trafficking in the United States, none of his sisters have been arrested and extradited. Moreover, despite their designation by OFAC, they do not have criminal records in Mexico which suggests family members don't snitch on each other.

Next Steps in Research of Female Participation in Organised Crime

This chapter showed that scholarly and media coverage of female participation in the Yamaguchi-gumi and Sinaloa DTO is scant. Furthermore, the media coverage that exists often uses women as an instrument to tell the stories of men within organised crime and in doing so neglects the possibility of agency. Organised crime benefits from this paradox of invisibility by allowing women to become optimal partners in criminal activities who will not be suspected by law enforcement or outed by the media.

Membership does not need to be formal for women to participate. As the cases of boss's wives within the Yakuza show, they fulfil an important role in ensuring collective action from the members outside the rules that exist for the everyday operation for the group. As membership in the Yamaguchi-gumi has decreased, women married to managers become important assets for the organisation in member retention. By extension, this also means that the knowledge they have is instrumental for law enforcement. It is not only relevant how many members the group has, but the type of members who have remained.

The Sinaloa DTO has also taken advantage of media portrayals of organised crime. By employing female family members, they have been able to incorporate women into money laundering operations which are key for the organisation's survival and endurance. Despite evidence to the contrary, law enforcement and media in Mexico keep treating female participation in crime as an exception which benefits criminal groups that exploit the stereotypes.

Academic work on female participation can be greatly expanded. While there are important limitations in the study of illicit economies, scholars need to modify their starting assumption of female participants as outsiders to questions on *how* a criminal group employs women. The key point is not if there is gender parity in terms of numbers, but which functions are performed by women that are integral to a group's survival and expansion.