



Drug Trafficking and Gender: The Invisible Role of Women as Victims and Agents

Dr. Jaspal Kaur

Assistant Professor in Laws, G.H.G Institute of Law, Sidhwan ,Khurd Ludhiana, Punjab, India

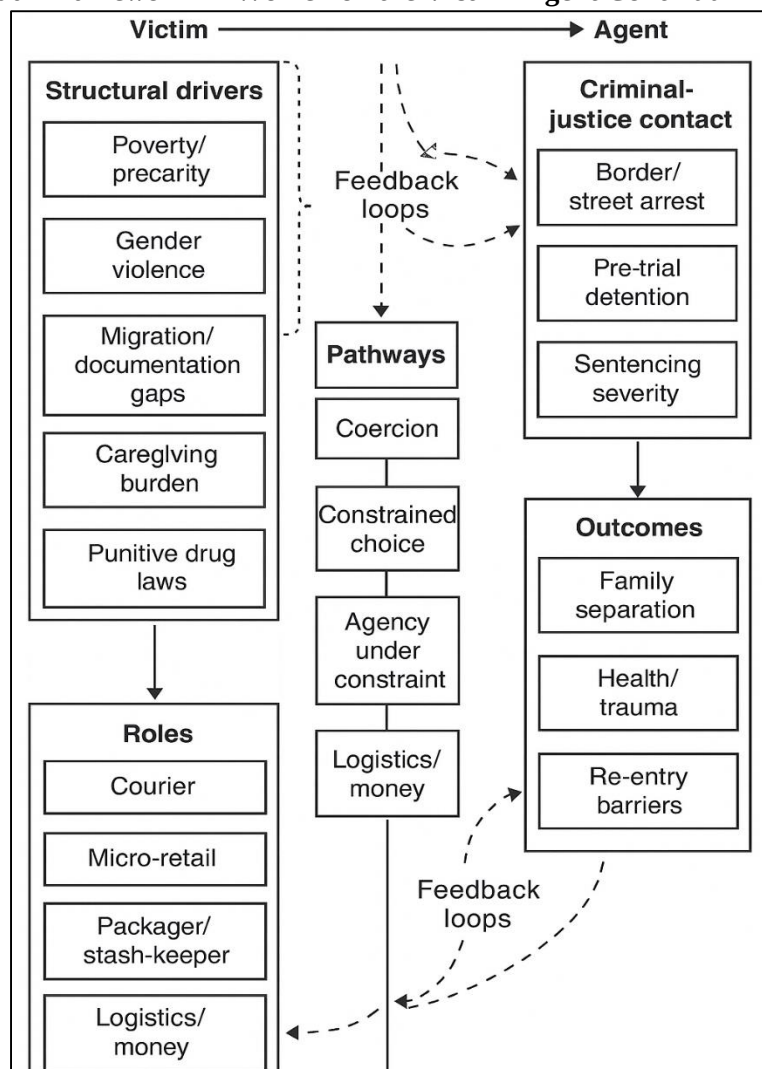
Abstract

Drug trafficking has been acknowledged as a universal vice that impacts socially, economically and politically in a destructive manner. Nevertheless, its gendered aspects are still under-investigated, especially the two-fold roles that females play in this criminal enterprise both as victims of exploitation and as participants in illegal activities. The use of women in drug activities is usually coerced, exploited or manipulated by poverty, gender inequality, and domestic violence, but women are also strategic participants, and some are compelled to be active because of their survival instinct or because of the marginalization of the system. The paper analyzes the interplay of drug trafficking and gender with special attention to how women are placed invisibly in positions that straddles the victimhood and the agency. Based on international reports, scholarly research, and case studies, the study will examine socio-economic and cultural reasons that force women into drug networks, stigma against them, and how this impacts families and communities. The paper states that women are disproportionately punished in the criminal justice systems, but their structural vulnerabilities are usually overlooked. The research ends with a recommendation of gender-sensitive policies, rehabilitation strategies, and the criminal justice reforms, which deal with the intricacy of the roles of women in drug trafficking.

Keywords: Drug Trafficking, Gender, Women victims, Women agents, Criminal Justice.

1. Introduction

Drug trafficking is considered to be the most lucrative and violent transnational crime since it yields billions of dollars every year. Although studies have enumerated that male dominance is a dominant feature in trafficking organizations, the gendered aspects of the trade have not been given much focus. Women are still mostly obscured in the discourse although they are increasingly victims and increasingly as agents. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2020) states that women are progressively making up a larger share of people arrested on drug-related crimes all over the world. Meanwhile, an overwhelming number of women are trafficked by their partners or through financial dependency, or even threats towards their relatives (Fleetwood, 2014).

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework — Women on the Victim–Agent Continuum in Drug Trafficking.

Structural drivers (poverty/precarity, gender violence, migration/documentation gaps, caregiving burden, punitive drug laws) feed distinct pathways (coercion, constrained choice, agency under constraint), which concentrate women in lower-tier, high-risk roles (courier, micro-retail, packager/stash-keeper, logistics/money). Criminal-justice contact (border/street arrest, pre-trial detention, sentencing severity) leads to outcomes (family separation, health/trauma, re-entry barriers), with feedback loops that can reinforce vulnerability.

The fact that people cannot see women in drug trafficking discussion is a challenge since it continues to promote gender biasness in criminal justice systems. Women are often the subject of being treated as criminals without taking into account the systemic inequalities which influence their participation. According to scholars, women in the drug trade tend to be used as mules that carry drugs across borders or engage in menial distribution activities, a contributor that is characterized by high-risk and low-profit (Campbell and Hansen, 2012). Women experience highly disproportionate punishment in comparison with men in leadership position even though they play a marginal role in decisions.

The social, familial and educational effects of the women engaging in drug trafficking are also harsh. Incarceration of women, separation of children without primary caregivers and communities are disrupted (Maher and Hudson, 2007). Therefore, it is essential to examine drug trafficking in terms of gender in order to come up with efficient solutions. The paper addresses two-sided victimization and agency of women in drug trafficking, and it is necessary to implement gender sensitive in law, policy, and rehabilitation initiatives.

Background of the Study

Traditionally, women have always been a marginalized subject in the research of drug trafficking because it is traditionally a male-dominated business, yet current research indicates that women are increasingly becoming part of this activity. According to UNODC (2018), in Latin America and especially in Brazil and Ecuador, up to 60 percent of women are incarcerated because of drug-related offenses. Likewise, in Southeast Asia, women are becoming more utilised as smugglers since they are viewed as less questionable at the border crossing (Giacomello, 2013).

The case of women being vulnerable in drug trafficking situations is usually linked to inequality in the society they live

in. Women are recruited into the trafficking networks by poverty, lack of education, unemployment and domestic abuse where women can be manipulated or coerced. It has been found that women often hold peripheral positions (packaging, storing, and transporting drugs) instead of being at the helm of the company (Fleetwood, 2014). These roles place them in the high legal risks with no financial rewards.

Relationships with the male partners influence the participation of women in most instances. Research conducted in Mexico and Colombia shows that women are physically forced by their boyfriends, husbands, or relatives into trafficking and therefore, become victims of the systemic exploitation (Campbell & Hansen, 2012). However, it is not only a victim story. Other women are willing to take part, as they want financial independence or as they want to resist the normal gender roles. They remain involved in structures, however, which do not favor them and make their agency restricted.

The background, therefore, highlights the two-sidedness of the female role in drug trafficking since women are victims of coercion and poverty, but at the same time, they make tough decisions under the limits of the situation.

Justification

This study is justifiable by the invisibility of the experience of women in drug trafficking research and policy. To begin with, the Latin America and Asia have disproportionately higher numbers of women in prisons as a result of drug related offenses (UNODC, 2020). Although they play a minor role in drug hierarchies, they tend to be punished the most because of zero-tolerance drug laws (Giacomello, 2013).

Second, the issue of women victimization in drug trafficking is not sufficiently recognized. Even a great number of women are forced to accept the positions of courier or distributor, but the criminal justice system seldom considers the coercive conditions of their participation (Fleetwood, 2014). Such invisibility leads to policies that criminalize women rather than structural imbalances like poverty, gender violence, and unemployment.

Third, women have dual roles that need to be understood to develop effective interventions. Considering women as criminals only and women as victims only leaves out their vulnerabilities and their agency. The balance of view is important in the design of the rehabilitation and reintegration programs. According to scholars, recognition of the interplay between gender and crime would help to change drug policy into a restorative type rather than a punitive model (Maher and Hudson, 2007).

Objectives of the Study

- This research aims at the following:
- To analyse the experiences of women as victims and participants in drug trafficking.
- To examine socio-economic and cultural issues that lead women to participate.
- To examine the implications of women involvement on families and communities.
- To suggest gender-sensitive policy measures concerning the role of women in the trafficking of drugs.

Literature Review

Drug trafficking and gender literature has grown over the past few years, but it still has not developed sufficiently as compared to general criminological studies. Fleetwood (2014) presents an innovative ethnographic research on women drug couriers and it has been identified that in most circumstances, women are recruited either through coercion or economic distress. Her work stresses the fact that the participation of women can never be discussed without references to such structural inequalities as gender discrimination and poverty.

As Campbell and Hansen (2012) develop the case of Mexico, Mexican women are often forced by male partners into drug networks. Their study demonstrates that the women are brought to the periphery, low-power position, but they are punished harder by the law. This is in concurrence with those findings of Maher and Hudson (2007) in Australia, who found women in drug economies to be stigmatized as criminals, and as failed mothers, which only served to marginalize them.

Giacomello (2013) discusses the issue of women imprisonment in Latin America and observes that most women end up in prison because of drug related crimes. She claims that women suffer disproportionately due to punishment drug policies because in most cases, they are mere couriers or small distributors but not leaders. Equally, Sudbury (2005) explores the increase in the number of women in prisons around the world attributing it to the growth of punitive drug policies and points out that gender, race and class intersect.

Other scholars stress that women must be seen as an agent in addition to being victims. Sinha (2019) gives instances where women had been engaged in drug networks with an active role in the pursuit of financial autonomy, but in limited socio-economic settings. However, their agency is constrained since their decisions are curtailed by structural inequalities.

Collectively, the above studies expose a multi-layered image: women in drug trafficking are both forced victims and decision-makers, who operate within a range of susceptibilities and options that are preconditioned by the larger social,

economic, and cultural frameworks.

6. Material and Methodology

6.1 Study Design

The proposed research will follow a qualitative secondary research design to integrate knowledge available on the topic of women in drug trafficking, and specifically address their roles in a victim/agent continuum (e.g., coercion, constrained choice, economic strategy, organisational participation). The qualitative synthesis is fitting to (i) embrace complex and context-specific experiences, (ii) combine the perspectives of the law/criminological, gender, and public-health lenses, and (iii) track the mechanisms of association between structural drivers (poverty, violence, migrant/non-migrant status, caregiving burden, sentencing regimes) and the journey of women along the illicit markets. It is comparative in the analysis of Latin America and Asia and in other areas to see both general patterns and specific region dynamics.

6.2 Data Sources

Three streams of evidence have been collected:

- Both peer-reviewed criminology, gender studies, sociology, law, and public-health articles, along with review essays and qualitative/mixed-method studies.
- United NationsODC publications and datasets (e.g., global/regional reports, thematic briefs) that apply to women, drug markets, and criminal justice outcomes.
- NGO/INGO and policy grey literature, such as ethnographic case studies, programme evaluations and court/prison monitoring reports by organisations involved in drug policy, human rights, and women justice.
- First-person narratives (interviews, life histories), where present, in embedded reports were kept to provide insight into lived experience.

6.3 Search and Selection

Multidisciplinary and legal/health databases (Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed, JSTOR, HeinOnline, ERIC) and institutional repositories (UNODC, major NGOs) were searched in a structured search (coverage 2010-2025). A typical Boolean string was:

(women OR female OR gender) and (drug trafficking OR drug markets OR micro-trafficking OR courier OR mule) and (victim OR coerced OR agency OR decision making) and (Latin America OR Asia OR Africa OR Europe OR global).

Inclusion criteria:

Empirical/ systematically reported qualitative/ mixed-methods research, UNODC / NGO reports, or ethnographies on the role of women in drug trafficking.

Findings on roles, pathways, constraints/coercion, agency, and criminal-justice responses (e.g., policing, prosecution, sentencing, incarceration), and/or social/health consequences. Regional applicability to Latin America, to Asia, or to other contexts of clear similarity.

Exclusion criteria:

Opinion articles lacking methodological clarity; wholly quantitative trend notes lacking a qualitative frame; articles that do not disaggregate the experience of women. The process of screening was undertaken in two phases (title/abstract → full-text). Snowballing of reference lists of included items was done to find other sources. Priority was given to English-language material; and wherever possible, Spanish/Portuguese abstracts that updated Latin American situations were provided. Reasons why not included (e.g., no gender detail, not trafficking-specific) were captured to have a record of audit trail.

6.4 Analytical Approach

We have used reflexive thematic (hybrid deductive/inductive) analysis aided by CAQDAS (e.g., NVivo/ATLAS.ti). A list of deductive codes (gendered labour segmentation; coercion/violence; migration/documentation; care burden; income strategies; policing/prosecution; sentencing/plea bargaining; prison conditions; harm reduction; re-entry) was augmented with the inductive codes that arose through the texts (e.g., intimate-partner coercion, debt-bonded couriership, border-site vulnerable, micro-retail in urban peripheries).

Comparative lens: Themes compared across Latin America, Asia, and other parts of the world to find common mechanics (e.g., economic precarity) and context specific drivers (e.g., mandatory minimums, cartel/organised-crime governance, migration enforcement).

Reliability and rigor: Double coding: between 15 and 20 percent of the documents were recoded; disagreements were resolved by discussing them and refining the codebook. Decisions, negative-case testing and reflexivity of the victim-agent framing were captured in analytic memos.

Synthesis Findings are presented in narrative format, plotting paths (structural drivers - recruitment/entry - role performance - criminal-justice contact - outcomes) and identifying leverages of policy interest (sentencing discretion, alternatives to incarceration, social protection, access to harm-reduction).

Results

7.1 Evidence Overview

The involvement of women in drug markets is distributed at the lower and riskier levels, and the power of decision making is relatively weak, as it can be seen in peer-reviewed studies, UNODC reports, NGO publications, and ethnographies. There is never a pure binary of account of victimisation and agency, but overlapping.

Table 1. Roles on the victim–agent continuum: risks, legal exposure, and typical recruitment (thematic synthesis)

Role (lower-tier)	Typical recruitment / entry	Risk profile (physical & legal)	Legal exposure (common arrest points)	Pay/benefit pattern	Notes / evidence anchors
Courier / mule	Partner/friend coercion; debt-bondage; border brokers; migration precarity	Very high (body-packing, cross-border checks)	Borders, airports, highway checkpoints	One-off or per-trip lump sums; high loss if intercepted	Fleetwood (2014); UNODC (2018, 2020)
Micro-retail / runner	Neighborhood peers; survival income; caregiving constraints (flexible hours)	High street-level policing risk; violence exposure	Street sweeps; buy-bust operations	Small margins; piece-rate; unstable	Maher & Hudson (2007); Campbell & Hansen (2012)
Packager / stash-keeper / lookout	Home-based roles; kinship ties; partner direction	Medium physical risk; high collateral legal risk if raided	House/storehouse raids; proximity to contraband	Minimal wages / in-kind support	Giacomello (2013); NGO/INGO reports
Logistics / money handling	Trust via kin/prison networks; digital intermediaries (small scale)	Medium; financial-crime overlays	AML/KYC checks; cash seizures	Low-to-moderate, episodic	Otero & Rodríguez (2018); Sudbury (2005)
Local cell coordinator (minority)	Prison networks; succession from partners	Higher command risk; targeted enforcement	Coordinated operations; conspiracy charges	Slightly higher but volatile	Mixed ethnographies

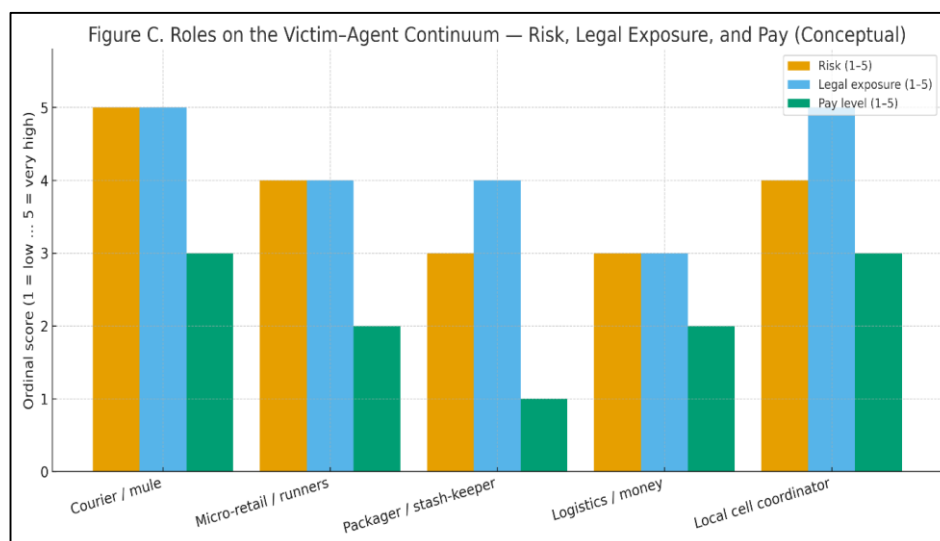


Figure C. Roles on the Victim–Agent Continuum — Risk, Legal Exposure, and Pay (Conceptual).

Grouped bars show ordinal scores (1 = low ... 5 = very high) for Risk, Legal exposure, and Pay level across roles from your table. These scores translate your qualitative descriptors into a single comparative view for section 7.

7.2 Roles on the Victim-Agent Continuum

low-level, high-risk positions (preeminent):

- Courier/mule (across the border or domestically): recruited through partners, friends or debt-brokers; selected as less likely to be suspected; high legal liability.
- Micro-retail/street level sales & runners: piece rates based on domestic demand; come in close contact with the police.
- Packagers/stash-keepers/lookouts: in many cases, home based; caregiving functions overlap; raids are exposed.
- Money carriers/money mules, and low-level logistics: transfers, safehouse management, messaging.

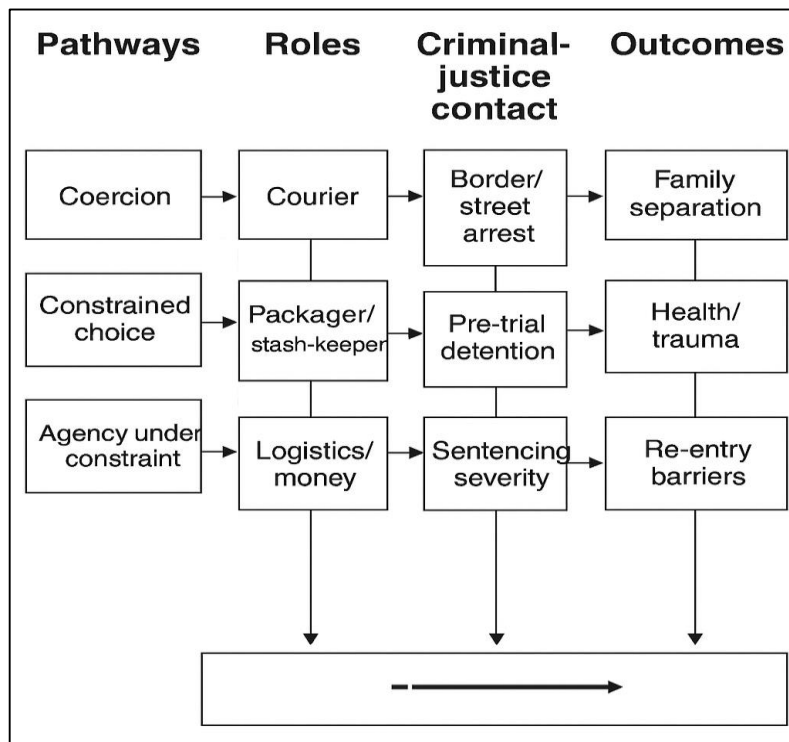


Figure 2. Results Map — Pathways, Roles, Contact, and Outcomes (Conceptual)

A visual synthesis of the literature: typical flows from pathways → roles → criminal-justice contact → outcomes.

Mid-level/organising (minor, however, they exist):

Local cell coordinators/ recruiters: use kin, neighbourhood, or prison networks.

Digital intermediaries: small scale online brokering, payments or customer lists.

Pattern: The women are concentrated in areas that labour is interchangeable, risks are externalised and payment depends, and men more frequently have wholesale, protection or command jobs.

7.3 Pathways into Involvement

Coercion and bound choice:

Intimate-partner control, threats and violence (including threats to children).

- Debt bondage and survival pressures (rent, food, medical bills), following loss of jobs or the imprisonment of partner.
- Migration/legal precarity: the absence of papers, brokers who exploit at the border or transitional points.
- Care burdens: single motherhood and unpaid care: single mothers and unpaid carers have fewer work opportunities in the formal sector and therefore more vulnerable to quick-cash positions.
- Agency under constraint: There are women who select entry as calculated income plan (e.g. single high-pay courier trip, flexible micro-retail). This agency is constrained by poverty, violence and few options, which are depicted in ethnographies.

7.4 Criminal-Justice Contact and Outcomes presents the data related to criminal justice contact and criminal justice outcomes

1. The borders (couriers) and street-level markets (micro-retail) are the focus of the concentration of arrest points.
2. Pre-trial jail is common in the event of inaccessibility to bail causing family division and income/housing.
3. Patterns of sentencing: bottom-tier women tend to be disproportionately harshly sentenced compared to their market strength (e.g., weight-based compulsory regimes), and have less chance of bargaining on a plea or diversion.
4. Conditions in the prison: reports include poor medical access, reproductive care and harm-reduction, and visitation/child access restrictions.
5. Re-entry: having criminal records, stigma and debt result in the risk of recidivism, particularly in the absence of income support or childcare.

7.5 Health and Social Consequences

- Physical/mental health: high levels of stress, anxiety and trauma; risk of carrying; exposure to partner violence.
- Motherly effects: pregnancy in prosecution or jail; loss of child custody; intergenerational effects of schooling and wellbeing.
- Service access: there is less legal aid, shelter, and harm-reduction access among women than need.

7.6 Regional Comparative Insights

Latin America

Good micro-tráfico and courier activity among women; recruiting through partners/kinship. Pre-trial imprisonment and overcrowding in prisons is a widespread truth, and alternative sentencing is uneven. Community ethnographies emphasize burdens of caregiving as a close cause of entry and persistence.

Asia

Border-zone couriership and maritime/land transit are the most characteristic; recruitment is linked to labour migration and lack of documentation. Some jurisdictions have especially harsh punishments on the offences of trafficking; legal assistance is diverse. Women are employed strategically where lower suspicion is supposed at the checkpoints.

Other Regions (e.g. Sub-Saharan Africa, Europe, North America)

Urban micro-retail and couriership re-occur; in certain contexts, specialised courts/diversion are present but unevenly available.

Reports report disparities in arrests, detention and sentencing based on racial/ethnic and immigration status.

7.7 Mechanisms that connect Structure to Outcomes

Economic precarity / partner control to low-tier jobs to frequent police exposure to detention to family disruption. Migration/documentation holes → predatory brokers → couriership → harsh sentencing, long-term stigma and barriers to re-entry. Burdens of care - preference towards flexible micro-retail - chronic police contact - cyclic fines/detention with no escape routes available.

7.8 Disparate or subtle Results

A minority advance to coordination/recruitment positions, usually via prison networks or succession by partners; the income plateaus but there is continued danger of violence and prosecution. Participation in alternative livelihood programmes/legal assistance is also linked to lower recidivism in a number of NGO reports, but it requires stable housing, childcare and debt relief. Some, however, record instrumental agency (e.g., financing schooling of children), but cumulative legal/health damages are likely to override short-term advantages.

7.9 Summary Statement

The evidence is convergent across regions: women involvement in drug trafficking is determined by coercion, care burden, migration/legal precarity, and poverty, aligning women in high risk, low power positions. Criminal-justice responses tend to penalize market-peripheral actors more than structural drivers, and generate family separation, health harms, and re-entry barriers. In cases where legal assistance, diversion, income support and childcare are provided in combination, lines of flight out of illicit positions are more realistic-but coverage is uneven.

Limitations of the Study

The limitation of the present study is the use of secondary data. The experience of women is underrepresented in many reports because the process of drug trafficking is a secret (Fleetwood, 2014). Moreover, there are cultural variations; therefore, the roles of women differ a great deal in different regions, creating a challenge in generalizations. One more shortcoming is that there are no first-hand testimonies, which would be more informative in relation to coercion, victimization, and agency. Lastly, the research is not comprehensive enough to encompass the changes in the nature of

trafficking in the post-COVID-19 era, which may have influenced the role of women in the same manner (UNODC, 2020).

Future Scope

The future studies need to focus on the primary, field based investigation, using women who are engaged in drug trafficking and recording their experiences. The cross-country comparisons would show how various legal systems contribute to -or lack- contributions to the gendered aspects of trafficking. The scholars must also discuss rehabilitation patterns which aim at educating women offenders, developing skills and reintegrating them into the family (Maher and Hudson, 2007). Further, the role of digital technologies and online trafficking in the role of women could also be explored in future work because these possibilities could either pose additional vulnerabilities or opportunities (Sinha, 2019). Lastly, gender sensitivity of drug law reforms need to be examined through policy-oriented studies.

Conclusion

Drug trafficking is one of the international crimes that have gender intricate aspects. The role of women in trafficking brings out the duality of victimhood and agency; they are forced into positions by inequalities in the system, but some are willing to make tough decisions to survive in the marginalized environment. Although women are in peripheral positions, their punishments are disproportionately severe, whereas their weaknesses are not considered.

The conclusions that the paper drew are as follows: good responses should be gender-sensitive and accountability should be balanced with compassion. The governments need to reform punitive drug policies, shift the emphasis towards alternatives to imprisonment, and introduce rehabilitation policies acknowledging structural disfavor of women. There should be further advocacy by NGOs and international bodies to bring into the limelight the invisible contribution of women. Finally, the gendered approach to drug trafficking needs to be taken to secure justice, equality, and social stability.

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