

# Drug cartels and sexual slavery of migrant women from Central America in Mexico

## Cárteles de la droga y esclavitud sexual en México de mujeres migrantes centroamericanas

Simón Pedro Izcara Palacios<sup>a\*</sup>  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0523-305X>

<sup>a</sup> Universidad Autónoma de Tamaulipas, Unidad Académica Multidisciplinaria de Ciencias, Educación y Humanidades, Ciudad Victoria, México, e-mail: sizcara@uat.edu.mx

### Abstract

This paper, based on qualitative interviews realized between 2014 and 2022 with 36 Central American migrant women captured by drug cartels when they transited through Mexico, aims to examine the different repertoires used by criminal organizations to capture, exploit, and subject the victims to a condition of sexual slavery. It is concluded that criminal groups have developed four different repertoires, which aim to tame the body and mind of the slaves to achieve total submission: kidnapping, deception, recruitment in the country of origin and extortion. Inside these organizations the roles of victim and perpetrator are interchangeable, and enslaved women are not always passive victims, but some rescue themselves using both astuteness and brute force.

Keywords: drug cartels, migrant women, prostitution, sexual slavery, Mexico.

### Resumen

Esta investigación, sustentada en entrevistas cualitativas realizadas entre 2014 y 2022 con 36 mujeres migrantes centroamericanas capturadas por cárteles de la droga cuando transitaban por México, tiene como objetivo examinar los diferentes repertorios que utilizan estas organizaciones criminales para captar, explotar y someter a las víctimas a una situación de esclavitud sexual. Se concluye que estos grupos delictivos han desarrollado cuatro repertorios diferentes, que tienen como propósito domeñar el cuerpo y mente de las esclavas hasta lograr una total sumisión: el secuestro, el engaño, la captación en el país de origen y la extorsión. En estas organizaciones los roles de víctima y victimario son intercambiables, y las mujeres esclavizadas no son siempre víctimas pasivas, sino que algunas se rescatan a sí mismas utilizando tanto la astucia como la fuerza bruta.

Palabras clave: cárteles de las drogas, mujeres migrantes, prostitución, esclavitud sexual, México.

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\* Corresponding author: Simón Pedro Izcara Palacios. E-mail: sizcara@uat.edu.mx

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## Introduction

Mexican cartels are transnational criminal organizations whose operations and interests have expanded into various illicit activities beyond drug trafficking (Correa-Cabrera, 2017, p. 84). The conversion of Mexican drug traffickers into illicit business entrepreneurs has been attributed to the war on drugs initiated during the presidential term of Felipe Calderón (Andrade Rubio, 2020, p. 84; De la Rosa Rodríguez, 2021, p. 216, 2022, p. 9). As Pereyra (2012, p. 439) points out, the confrontation between the government and drug groups led to an increase in the number of criminal organizations that adopted a strategy based on the intensive use of violence. While large-scale drug trafficking remained in the hands of criminal groups with greater control of the borders, such as the Gulf and Sinaloa cartels, criminal organizations based in the center, south, east and west of the country became involved in more violent illicit businesses, such as kidnapping and trafficking.

Multiple studies point to the involvement of Mexican cartels in prostitution activities (Correa-Cabrera & Schaefer, 2022; Nuñez & Fuentes, 2017, p. 461; Ramos Lira et al., 2016, p. 669). Some studies claim that cartels prostitute victims in brothels, bars and cantinas (De la Rosa Rodríguez, 2021, p. 217; Treviño Rangel, 2021), while other studies highlight that these organizations own many of the premises operating in areas where the sex trade is tolerated (Luna, 2018, p. 62). Other researchers state that Mexican cartels profit from both the sale of kidnapped women to prostitution rings and the operation of prostitution and child pornography rings (Walters & Davis, 2011). Prostitution as an instrument of extortion has also been reported in other studies (Reig, 2010). Nevertheless, evidence linking Mexican cartels to the business of sexual exploitation is weak. In recent research, Correa-Cabrera and Schaefer (2022, p. 9) noted that “it is rare for drug cartels to directly manage human trafficking rings beyond their involvement in the distribution of drugs in bars and brothels”.

There have been no studies in Mexico based on the collection of systematic information that examine how cartels have entered the sexual exploitation market, how they profit from this activity and what *modus operandi* they use. This article aims to examine, based on the testimonies of 36 migrant women captured by cartels while in transit through Mexico, the different repertoires used by these criminal organizations to enslave their victims. First, the metaphorical and metonymic meanings of the concept of sexual slavery are differentiated. Next, the methodology is discussed and the sample is described. Then, the different repertoires used by the cartels to enslave victims are analyzed: kidnapping, deception, recruitment in the country of origin and extortion. Afterward, the interchangeability of the roles of victim and victimizer is studied, and finally, the degree of agency of the enslaved victims is explored.

## Sexual slavery as metaphor and metonymy

At the end of the last century, Bales (1999) painted a bleak picture of a world where the forces of globalization and population growth favored the flourishing of slavery. Bales (1999, p. 25) compared modern slavery with classical slavery, concluding that the former generated greater profits than the latter because it eliminated ownership and the bond between owner and enslaved person.

The concept of modern slavery has gained ground in the political and academic arenas and in public opinion due to the push from neo-abolitionist activism, joined by religious and political leaders of all spectrums, trade unions, large corporations, celebrities, NGOs and so on (Andrijasevic & Mai, 2016, p. 1; Kempadoo, 2016; O'Connell Davidson, 2015, p. 2). The profusion of statistical data and exhortations to combat modern slavery from a range of domains creates the impression that this concept identifies a particular phenomenon (O'Connell Davidson, 2015, p. 26) when in fact it is a metaphor (Cruz et al., 2019, p. 201). Metaphors have the power to amplify a phenomenon by expressing one reality through another with which it bears a certain analogy. The result of the metaphorical use of this imprecise and inconsistent concept (Weitzer, 2020, p. 42) has been an explosion in the number of enslaved people. By classifying under the umbrella of modern slavery all situations bearing some resemblance to slavery, the number of worldwide enslaved people rose to tens of millions. According to Kara (2009, p. 12), "At the end of 2006, there were 28.4 million slaves in the world". In 2013, the number of enslaved people was calculated at 29.8 million (Walk Free Foundation, 2013). More recent statistical data yield figures of over 40 million enslaved people (International Labour Organization et al., 2017, p. 5; Walk Free Foundation, 2018).

The metaphorical use of the notion of slavery as a ubiquitous phenomenon has been useful in achieving a global mobilization of resources and consciences, yet it does not provide legal clarity. The result has been inconsistent between statistical data quantifying the number of enslaved people worldwide: 40.3 million in 2018 (Walk Free Foundation, 2018, p. 16) and the number of identified victims: 85 613 in 2018 (Department of State, 2020, p. 43). Apparently, only one in 500 victims of slavery is identified. Neoabolitionist feminism has argued that the small number of identified victims is due to the recondite nature of the crime and demands stronger action to combat modern slavery (Barrick et al., 2021, p. 581; Farrell et al., 2014, p. 141). Conversely, pro-sex worker feminism has argued that these data reveal that the concept of modern slavery incites a moral panic intended to cover up the fact that only a small number of victims exist (Andrijasevic & Mai, 2016, p. 2; Doezema, 2010, p. 124; Kempadoo, 2007, p. 82).

Sexual slavery, conceptualized as a metaphor, implies an association between prostitution and slavery. The neoabolitionist perspective adopts this prism by emphasizing that both the enslaved and the prostituted are subject to the domination or arbitrary desire of a third party. As a consequence, prostitution cannot be understood as an occupational choice (De Miguel, 2015, p. 165; Farley, 2018, p. 102), as it implies a social death, a social excommunication and a loss of power that does not occur in other forms of work (Fraisie, 2012, p. 91; Jeffreys, 2008, p. 177). In this perspective, the main barrier to eradicating sexual slavery lies in the fact that most enslaved people have convinced themselves that they are not enslaved people (Kara, 2009, p. 18). In

contrast, from the pro-sex worker perspective, the sex slavery metaphor is invalidated because it starts from the false assumption that there is a line dividing the sex trade from decent and respectable jobs (Cruz et al., 2019, p. 201). It is concluded that prostitution is not slavery because the sex trade is no different from other jobs (Agustín, 2008; Kempadoo, 2016).

Unlike metaphor, metonymy expresses contiguity and immediacy and not a certain similarity with the supplanted reality. This is the meaning of the term slavery that the League of Nations (1926), the Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery (United Nations, 1956) and the Rome Statute of 1989 adopted under the paradigm of property. Slavery, in a metonymic sense, is understood as the condition of a person over whom the attributes of the right of ownership are exercised. Nonetheless, after the worldwide abolition of the right of ownership over persons, a certain legal opacity was generated in the interpretation of this concept. To solve the paradox of the persistence of slavery in societies that abolished it, the so-called Bellagio-Harvard Guidelines were developed between 2010 and 2012. These guidelines reconceptualize the paradigm of ownership through the notion of possession. Possession is the control of one person over another that creates the factual conditions for exercising the attributes of the right to property: buying, selling, transferring, using, benefiting or abusing a person. In essence, slavery is defined as the exercise of the attributes of the right to property to deprive a person of individual freedom and exploit them by using violence, deception or coercion (Members of the Research Network on the Legal Parameters of Slavery, 2012).

International law and the legal systems of countries that have criminalized trafficking make a metaphorical interpretation of the concept of slavery, which is associated with the exploitation of the prostitution of others. A paradigmatic example is the supplanting of the concept of trafficking by the notion of slavery in the Modern Slavery Act 2015 of the United Kingdom (Broad & Turnbull, 2019, p. 120).

This paper rejects the metaphorical interpretation of the concept of sexual slavery made by the neoabolitionist movement because the metaphor does not distinguish the referenced social fact from those events or situations that bear some kind of resemblance to the first one. This makes neoabolitionism present two different realities as identical: voluntary prostitution and sexual slavery. The first of these scenarios takes place between two parties who find themselves in a situation of asymmetry; however, in this scenario, the person chooses the sex trade to improve their economic situation. In the second scenario, the person is deprived of freedom, raped and forcibly prostituted. Therefore, confusing the metaphorical with the metonymic leads to the design of policies that, instead of protecting the victims of forced prostitution, stigmatize and victimize those who have decided to make a living from the sex trade. This investigation agrees with Abdul Hamid (2023, p. 182) in that the neo-abolitionist condemnation of all forms of sex work, translated into anti-trafficking laws that do not differentiate precisely between voluntary sex trade and sex trafficking, is aimed primarily at eradicating prostitution. According to Abdul Hamid (2023), this impacts victims in three adverse ways: 1. It grants authorities broad discretion to define who is a victim (p. 164); 2. It denies victims' capacity to make their own decisions, infantilizes them and turns them into dependent subjects lacking autonomy (p. 166); and 3. It exposes victims to being abused, exploited, traumatized and humiliated by law enforcement authorities (p. 175).

## Methodology

This research is based on a qualitative methodology. The technique used to collect the information is the in-depth interview, and the procedure used to select the participants is chain sampling. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Three criteria were used to select the interviewees: 1. Being over 18 years of age; 2. Having been kidnapped by a cartel while in transit through Mexico on their way to the United States; and, 3. Having been sexually exploited until they managed to escape. Between April 2014 and July 2022, 36 migrant women enslaved in Mexico by drug cartels were interviewed in Mexico City, Veracruz, Nuevo León, Tamaulipas, Coahuila and Chihuahua.

The method used to analyze the discourses collected in the interviews comprised three technical stages: 1. Simplification of the information; 2. Categorization of the information; and, 3. Analysis of the results. The first stage consisted of reducing and simplifying the data collected under the criterion of interpretative relevance (Tójar Hurtado, 2006, p. 287). Once all the core thematic lines had been defined, a reverse process was carried out: a categorization of the information. This is an inductive process of conceptual classification of units under the same criteria (Tójar Hurtado, 2006, p. 290). There was no prior identification of the codes based on a deductive logic subjugated to a *theoretical corpus*, but the coding was carried out according to the meanings expressed in the interviewees' discourses. Preference was given to inductive processes over deductive ones since the subordination and dependence of the latter on theoretical and conceptual frameworks blurs the sighting of new categories. In contrast, the inductive processes enable listening to the interviewees' discourses without interference from *aprioristic* categories. After this stage, in which the qualitative material was categorized, the discursive data analysis phase began, which led to the final structuring of the information (Durand, 2012, p. 52).

The fieldwork was conducted according to the guidelines proposed by the World Health Organization to investigate this type of population (Zimmerman & Watts, 2003). The Research Ethics Committee of the Academic Body "Migration, Development and Human Rights" of the Universidad Autónoma de Tamaulipas approved the methodological design of this research. Consent for voluntary participation in the study was obtained orally, and each interviewee was assigned a code to ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of the data collected. The purpose of the research and the voluntary nature of their participation in the study were explained to the participants. Likewise, the names of the participants are pseudonyms.

It should also be noted that the sample used has important limitations. First, it is a non-probabilistic sample of small size. Second, this sample mainly represents the experiences of older migrant women captured by Mexican cartels. Only five of the interviewees were minors when they were enslaved. This is because, due to ethical considerations, all interviewees were adult women. Nevertheless, almost all of the interviewees indicated that most of the victims captured by the cartels were minors. Thirdly, the fieldwork did not cover the entire national geography, as it was carried out only in the center and northeast of the country.

### *Description of the sample studied*

The interviewees came from Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua (see Table 1). Their ages ranged from 19 to 36 years old. The ages of the interviewees when they were abducted in Mexico ranged from 13 to 35 years, and they were enslaved for an average of 10.5 months, within a range of two to 34 months (see Table 2).

**Table 1. Country of origin of the interviewees**

	Guatemala	El Salvador	Honduras	Nicaragua	Total
n	15	11	9	1	36
%	41.7	30.5	25.0	2.8	100

Source: based on data from interviews

**Table 2. Characteristics of the interviewees**

	Mean	Minimum	Maximum
Age	24.1	19	36
Age when a cartel captured them	22	13	35
Months in sexual slavery	10.5	2	34

Source: based on data from interviews

Respondents were asked to estimate the approximate number of women enslaved together with them and to differentiate between minors and adults. Thirteen did not answer this question, whereas twenty-three did. Nonetheless, the figures they gave are approximate because the number of victims going in and out of the places where they were forcibly held varied continuously. The interviewees gave a figure of 1 090 enslaved women, of whom 361 were minors and 170 adults (see Table 3). The sum of minors and adults is less than the total since nine interviewees only gave an approximate total number.

Three of the interviewees did not provide answers about the nationality of the women who were enslaved along with them. Nevertheless, women from Central America and Mexico predominated, and to a lesser extent, from South America and Europe. Also, six interviewees could not identify the country of origin of some of the women because they spoke languages they did not know or were not allowed to communicate with each other (see Table 4).

**Table 3. Number of women in slavery**

	Total	Mean	Mode	Median	Minimum	Maximum	Standard deviation
Total	1 090	47.4	50	50	9	100	25.13
Minors	361	27.8	20	30	2	60	17.70
Adults	170	17	20	15	5	50	12.92

Source: based on data from interviews

**Table 4. Places of origin of enslaved women**

	Central America	Mexico	South America	Europe	Other countries	Does not know/ No answer
n	33	28	4	2	6	3
%	91.7	77.8	11.1	5.6	16.7	8.3

Source: based on data from interviews

Cartels enslaved the interviewees in 14 of Mexico's 32 states. However, most of the cases were registered in the center and south of the country (see Table 5).

**Table 5. Places where the interviewees were enslaved**

State	n	%	State	n	%
Mexico City	12	33.3	Tamaulipas	2	5.6
Chiapas	6	16.7	Baja California	1	2.8
Veracruz	5	13.9	State of Mexico	1	2.8
Puebla	3	8.3	Guadalajara	1	2.8
Chihuahua	2	5.6	Michoacan	1	2.8
Guerrero	2	5.6	Quintana Roo	1	2.8
Nuevo León	2	5.6	Tlaxcala	1	2.8

The sum of n is 40 because four women were enslaved in two different states.

Source: based on data from interviews

The interviewees were victims of sexual slavery while in transit through Mexico heading north and were interviewed in public spaces after escaping from their captors. They recounted events that took place an average of 16.1 months earlier. However, in only seven cases did the account occur more than 15 months earlier. In contrast, almost three-fifths of the stories referred to events in the previous three months (see Table 6). Only Raquel, interviewed in February 2020, was still enslaved at the time of the interview. Her case differed from the rest of the interviewees, as she was apparently living in freedom. Raquel's contact initiated in a convenience store, where she was told about the research project and quickly identified herself with the issue under study. After leaving the store, the author and Raquel sat down on the steps of the porch of an uninhabited house, where she agreed to be interviewed. Raquel regretted having

emigrated. Three cartels were extorting her. If she did not pay the quotas imposed by the cartels, reported them, or tried to escape the city, they would harm her and attack her daughter. Therefore, she had no other way out but to prostitute herself every day to cope with the constant payments. Although it was explained to her that she should report this situation and was given information about institutions that could help her, she did not want to accept the help, as she did not trust the authorities and feared that what was proposed could harm her. At the end of the interview, she only asked for financial assistance for personal expenses. To guarantee the anonymity and confidentiality of the conversational interaction, as in the other interviews, no information was collected that could identify either the interviewee or any of the persons mentioned in the conversational account. She was not asked her name, nor that of other people, nor the location of the bar-cantina where she was prostituted.

**Table 6. Months elapsed between the date of the story and the escape from the slavery situation**

	Mean	Mode	Median	Minimum	Maximum	Standard deviation
	16.1	1	3	0	113	29.06
<b>Months</b>	0	1	2 to 3	4 to 9	10 to 14	Over 15
<b>n</b>	1	10	10	3	5	7
<b>%</b>	2.8	27.8	27.8	8.3	13.9	19.4

Source: based on data from interviews

## Repertoires used by cartels to enslave women migrants

Sexual slavery generates greater economic benefits than the uncoerced sex trade because the former eliminates the payment of wages, days off and rest time. To eliminate wages and time off, it is necessary to include a costly element: a structure for exercising violence (Gambetta, 1993, p. 252). When the cost of access to violence to monitor, coerce and discipline enslaved people is greater than the savings generated by not paying wages and eliminating rest, sexual slavery is not profitable. Moreover, not paying wages or allowing women to rest involves greater risks than giving them freedom. A woman who prostitutes herself of her own free will has no reason either to run away or to report third parties who profit from prostitution. By contrast, an enslaved woman does. Therefore, for a pimp who lacks a structure for violence, it is more profitable to pay a salary than to enslave a victim. In contrast, organizations with a structure for violence can achieve economies of scale with sexual slavery since the cost incurred in expanding violence from one context (drug trafficking, extortion, among others) to another (sexual slavery) is reduced (Gambetta, 1993, p. 252). For these organizations, the economic benefit of sexual slavery exceeds that of the sex trade without coercion.

In some cases, the Mexican cartels prostitute the victims through catalogs on Internet sites where the enslaved people look smiling; other times, the victims are escorted to hotels or residences where wealthy clients await them; some are taken to nightclubs where they are prostituted along with other women who are not forced. According to the interviewees, the clientele demanding women enslaved by the cartels includes

businessmen, politicians, international tourists and to a lesser extent ordinary people. For the interviewees, this made sense, as important people run less risk of being involved in a sex scandal if they use enslaved people. As Yolanda (2021) said: “I say that [the clients] did know what was going on there, they did know, and that’s why they went looking for sex, because we were forced”. One of the aspects repeatedly mentioned in many of the stories was that the clients paid high amounts to the criminals for the services of the enslaved people. This was emphasized in expressions such as: “Only rich people with money got there, tourists, businessmen, politicians and gangsters” (Isabel, 2014); “They were rich clients, men who had enough money to pay what they were charged (...) They wanted them to be petite. As the clients had to pay, they paid a lot for sex” (Lucía, 2015); “They were rich clients, well-known men and some from politics” (Natalia, 2018); “They were not poor because they paid well” (Valentina, 2021); “They were rich, very well-dressed men with money, because the services were expensive” (Verónica, 2021); or “They were rich men, men with power and public positions, government people” (Yolanda, 2021). Police authorities are also a regular part of this clientele (Izcara Palacios, 2022).

Four recruitment repertoires used by Mexican cartels to enslave victims have been identified. These are based on kidnapping, deception, recruitment in the country of origin and extortion (see Table 7). Kidnapping appeared in the center and northeast of the country; deception in the south and center; recruitment in the country of origin in the south, center and north; and extortion in the center and northeast. The average age of the interviewees who were captured through kidnapping or deception was similar. Nonetheless, while the former were adult women whose ages ranged from 19 to 28 years, the latter were distributed across a range of ages that included both minors and women up to 35 years of age. The victims recruited in the country of origin were almost all minors; only Catalina (2014) was of legal age when she was recruited in Nicaragua. Finally, two of the extorted victims were adults and one was a minor.

**Table 7. Sexual slavery repertoires used by Mexican cartels**

	n	%	Place where they were enslaved	Age		
				Mean	Min.	Max.
Recruitment through kidnapping	16	44.5	Mexico City, State of Mexico, Guadalajara, Michoacan, Puebla, Tamaulipas, Tlaxcala, Veracruz	22.6	19	28
Recruitment through deception	13	36.1	Chiapas, Mexico City, Guadalajara, Quintana Roo, Veracruz	24.1	14	35
Recruitment in the country of origin	4	11.1	Baja California, Chiapas, Mexico City, Nuevo León	16.8	13	26
Extortion	3	8.3	Mexico City, Guerrero, Nuevo León	18	14	22
Total	36	100				

Source: created by the author based on interview data

### *Recruitment through kidnapping*

According to Casillas R. (2012, p. 124), the kidnapping of Central American transmigrants began during the last years of the Vicente Fox administration; however, it was not until the Felipe Calderón administration that this new criminal market niche reached its height. It was the National Human Rights Commission (Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos, 2009, p. 9) that revealed the massive nature of the kidnapping of Central American migrants by counting 9 857 victims in six months. Another report two years later raised the number of victims to 11 333 over the same period (Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos, 2011, p. 26). Likewise, an Amnesty International report noted that in Mexico, the kidnapping of migrants for ransom was a widespread practice; thus, victims were tortured, and the disappearance and murder of migrants were not uncommon (Amnesty International, 2010, p. 11). Mexico is not the only migrant transit country where organized crime carries out mass kidnappings for ransom. Migrants from Northeast Africa in transit through Libya trying to reach Europe suffer the same kidnapping, extortion and torture scenarios as migrants from Central America transiting through Mexico to reach the United States (Kuschminder & Triandafyllidou, 2020, p. 219).

Kidnapping is the victim recruitment procedure most frequently used by Mexican cartels. The kidnapping of migrant women for forced prostitution has been documented in numerous investigations (Cortés, 2018, p. 50; De la Rosa Rodríguez, 2021, p. 217, 2022, p. 11; Furlong & Netzahualcoyotzi, 2013, p. 53; Ramos Lira et al., 2016, p. 670). The repertoire of kidnapping includes three phases: abduction, ransom collection and sexual slavery. This is a brutal method. Women are subdued by armed criminals when they are in public spaces or when traveling on buses or trains (Amnesty International, 2010, p. 16; De la Rosa Rodríguez, 2022, p. 13). Other victims are stolen from the migrant traffickers (*polleros*) who transport them to the north. In some cases, the migrant traffickers who drive the women are killed for trying to defend them (París-Pombo, 2016, p. 161). As Alejandra (2014) stated, “We were traveling with the migrant trafficker, the migrant trafficker was kidnapped, then they killed him”. In other cases, the criminals choose some of the women led by the migrant traffickers and let the rest of the group continue on their way north. As Marta (2016) pointed out, “Not all the people were taken from the migrant trafficker, just the women, and not all of them, just the younger ones”. However, some migrant traffickers collaborate with the cartels. Two of the interviewees were kidnapped by armed criminals one day after the migrant trafficker who tricked them abandoned them in a hotel and escaped with the money they paid.

Mexican cartels have specialized in the upper end of the prostitution market, whose clientele demands young, attractive women, preferably underage. Therefore, not all women are suitable for this market. Criminals generally kidnap young and attractive women who have curvaceous figures. In the words of Laura (2014), “They were looking for selected women, with good bodies, curvy and with good posture. Ugly women were not taken off [the buses]”.

Kidnapped women are taken to a safe house. There, those who possess some form of social capital are tortured into revealing the names of acquaintances or relatives who will pay for their ransom (Amnesty International, 2010, p. 11; Riediger-Röhm, 2013, p. 175). However, after paying the ransom, their release never takes place. As

Carmen (2014) stated, “My brothers paid the ransom from Texas and, according to them, they were going to release me; but they did not”, or as Dorotea (2014) said, “My family paid, and they did not let me free, they kept me with them”. During the time that the negotiation with the families lasts, the women are not prostituted. As Marcela (2015) said, “The ones they had kidnapped, and who somebody was going to pay to release, were not taken out to the street”. It is after the family pays the ransom that the women enter a new regime: sexual slavery.

To achieve the submission of the victims, the cartels subject them to situations of brutal violence. Those women who resist being dominated or who do not quietly satisfy the whims of the clients are beaten and deprived of food until exhaustion, or they were subjected to electric shocks. This regime of violence is evident in expressions such as: “They killed women who did not obey, I watched one be beaten to death” (Marcela, 2015); “They beat me almost until I was unconscious, almost dead” (Marta, 2016); “When a man said that I did not serve him as he wanted, they beat me, they beat me with a board, like this very thick bar type” (Rosalía, 2020); “Some of them were even killed, because there were some women who didn’t accept it and fought with their fists and screamed” (Sandra, 2021); “Some of them were killed, beaten very badly, or shot and died” (Teresa, 2021). Those who try to escape are generally killed. The murder of migrant women kidnapped by the cartels has been documented in different investigations (Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos, 2009, p. 17; Gabanes García, 2020, p. 209; Riediger-Röhm, 2013, p. 174). As Eusebia (2014) stated, “Women who tried to escape were killed”, or as Helena (2014) said, “Those who did not want to work, or who wanted to leave, had their tits cut off, were killed and thrown or buried in pits in the ground”. This infernal regime of violence causes women to experience overwhelming fear. They lose track of the passing days. Time slows down, and they are unable to distinguish day from night. The following account reflects a state of mind that was repeated in many of the interviews.

You are afraid, very afraid. You hear a voice, and you shudder. You hear someone screaming and crying, and you are afraid; days are long, very long. Time passes very slowly; you don’t know if it’s getting dark, and you don’t know if you will see the sun again, the daylight; you feel tremendous fear with these people. (Dorotea, 2014)

### *Recruitment through deception*

Deception is a more subtle method than kidnapping because the recruiters are not armed men but rather friendly people who offer an apparently disinterested service to the victims. The *modus operandi* of traffickers who recruit victims through deception has been described in numerous investigations (Andrade Rubio, 2021, p. 79; Andrade-Rubio et al., 2023, p. 118; Kumar Acharya, 2013, p. 241; López Marroquín, 2019, p. 169). This form of slave recruitment involves a more thorough process of selection. Kidnapping implies immediacy. Criminals decide in a few seconds which women they will kidnap. Deception takes time. Recruiters take the time to study the most suitable victims. This repertoire includes three phases: deception, confinement and enslavement.

The recruiters are characters belonging to the social field of migration: fake migrant traffickers, migrants and migration or police authorities. These people are friendly and helpful to the victims (Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos, 2011, p. 79). They walk and talk with the women for hours and offer them a job or a way to take them to the United States at no cost. While the kidnappers are hired killers or members of gangs whose job is to cause pain, the recruiters do not usually belong to the cartel structure. Some are freelancers who sell women to criminal organizations in exchange for payment; others are migrant women coerced into deceiving their fellow countrywomen. Victims generally lack economic resources, as women who can pay the fees charged by migrant trafficker networks make decisions based on recommendations from compatriots or family members (París-Pombo, 2016, p. 164). Those who do not possess any form of capital are easily deceived by recruiters, whom they follow enthusiastically because of their generous offer. As Paulina (2018) stated, “I was not taken by force; I was going because I knew they would help me reach the north. That’s why I was going, and I was even happy to go because they were going to help me”. Nevertheless, far from being taken to the United States, they are taken to a safe house where they are locked up, disciplined and enslaved. As Guadalupe (2014) said:

When I arrived there, with them, they told me that they would take me to the north, they promised to take me, that’s why I went where they took me (...) When I realized it wouldn’t be like that, I wanted to leave, but I couldn’t anymore.

or as Nicolasa (2018) said, “At first, when they took me, they did tell me, ‘We will help you do what you want.’ When I got to where I would be, they didn’t tell me anything and I couldn’t talk anymore”. As many of these women lack social capital, they are prostituted when criminals discover that no family member will pay for their release. As Helena (2014) said, “They asked someone to pay for me, as no one paid because they have no money, they took me down to the city to work [in a brothel] to earn money for them”. However, there are cases where a victim’s family member pays the ransom for other victims who do not have social capital. As Zara (2022) said: “They asked money for our lives (four female caravanners). I had nobody, but my friend’s brother paid for me and for them”. When the recruiters are police or immigration agents, the victims have no choice. They must obey the authorities, who order them to get off the buses because they cannot prove their legal status in the country. The women think they will be deported, but they are sold to cartels (Amnesty International, 2010, p. 13).

The migrant caravans formed in October 2018 have become a fruitful space for stockpiling enslaved people for cartels, mainly through kidnapping. Along the caravan route, cells of hitmen watch the migrants to target the weakest links. Sometimes, they target women who stray from the caravan to continue the journey alone. In an instantaneous move, they kidnap them, and in a few days, they move them hundreds or thousands of kilometers away. As Susana (2021) said: “They took us by force, me and my friend and more women we didn’t know”. In other cases, these gangs wait until some women are left behind from the group to attack them. As Teresa (2021) stated: “They took me by force, it wasn’t with my consent (...) It wasn’t only me; they also took more women who were in the caravan”. The caravan migrants think that nothing bad will happen to them because they walk with a group of hundreds or thousands of people watched by police officers. However, when an armed gang attacks them, no one takes any action. Both their fellow travelers and the police authorities seem to look the

other way. As Valentina (2021) said:

They kidnapped me and took me away, and that's how I left the caravan. When I was in it, I thought it was safe because many people were coming, and I thought we were taking care of ourselves, but no one did anything, nor did the police know what happened, or if they did, they did nothing.

Nonetheless, kidnapping is not the only repertoire used by the cartels to recruit the women who migrate in caravans. Groups of men and women of the same nationalities and social strata as the victims have also made inroads here. These people set their sights on young, attractive women with whom they make friends. They approach them, tell them they know people who can take them to the United States, and convince them to leave the caravan. This process is not immediate. The recruiters walk for hours alongside the victims. When the latter accepts the invitation of the former, everything changes. The victims are taken to remote areas where they are sold to cartels, who lock them up in safe houses. This is the case of Valeriana (2021). She met four nationals, two men and two women, who walked twenty kilometers with her. They told her that they were also heading to the United States, and that they knew someone who would help them cross the border and invited her to join them. After thinking about it for hours, she decided to leave the caravan, as these people seemed sincere and well-meaning. Nevertheless, shortly after leaving the caravan, she was sold; an armed group paid for her. Veronica (2021), Yolanda (2021) and Zara (2022) told similar stories.

### *Recruitment in the country of origin*

The recruitment of victims in the country of origin constitutes a repertoire that has been extensively explained in the academic literature. The victim is recruited in a poor country through deception and false expectations of prospering economically in a rich country; they are then transported and exploited in the prostitution market of the destination country (Campana, 2016; Salt & Stein, 1997, p. 477; Sánchez Linde, 2012, p. 24). Likewise, the basic elements of the Palermo Protocol's definition of the concept of trafficking in persons, recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring and receipt of persons, are related to this repertoire. Accordingly, the 2000 U.S. human trafficking law was amended in 2003, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2015 and 2017, in part because the defining terms of the concept of sex trafficking contained in the 2000 law indirectly emphasized the repertoire mentioned above of recruitment of victims in the country of origin, such that the law above did not adequately address other repertoires that over the years were considered more important, such as the recruitment of domestic minors.

This repertoire includes three phases: recruitment in the country of origin, transportation to the destination and enslavement. Recruitment at origin occurs through a fake employment agency offering victims an irresistible economic opportunity. Through fake modeling agencies, the cartels target girls who have left home or suffer domestic abuse. In this context, the National Human Rights Commission (Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos, 2021, p. 27) has highlighted the repertoire of recruiting South American women invited to Mexico to provide modeling services. A recruiter offers to take them to Mexico to work as models or in other glamorous pro-

fessions. As Olivia (2018) said, “Whoever took me told me that I was good, that they could provide me with work in Mexico, that I could work wearing clothes, as well as modeling, that they would pay me very well”. For minors, this opportunity is a dream come true. They have nothing, only their youth, and a slim figure. Nor do they ask their parents for permission because what they want is to escape from a violent environment. They set off on a journey to the north, where other minors join them. As Patricia (2018) said: “At the beginning, they didn’t take me by force; I went because I wanted to”. Different Mexican cartels have tried out this repertoire, as Olivia (2018), Paula (2018), and Patricia (2018) described the same *modus operandi*. They were 13, 13 and 15 years old, respectively, when they were captured. The first two were captured in Honduras, and the third in El Salvador. They were taken to Monterrey, Mexico City and Tijuana, respectively, where they were held in hotels and forced to receive clients at all hours of the day. The victims are minors without family ties who are disciplined through drug use, insufficient food intake, and continuous beatings. The reward for being submissive and obedient is, as Olivia (2018) said, “just to stay alive”. When they are not compliant with clients, refuse to prostitute themselves, or try to escape, the response is always the same: they receive beatings that leave them on the verge of death. As Paula (2018) said: “Those who left and didn’t escape were beaten to death; they almost left them dead from so many blows,” or as Patricia (2018) said: “They beat me badly, with no mercy”.

The case of Catalina (2014) differed from the previous ones. She was 26 years old when she was recruited in Nicaragua through a fake labor agency that offered her a job in Mexico at a grocery packing plant. Catalina filled out a form to work in Mexico under the subterfuge that under the Free Trade Agreement, this company would arrange her papers to work in the United States.

### *Extortion procedure*

Extortion is the reverse of kidnapping. In the latter procedure, the family is forced to pay to save the life of the kidnapped victim. In the former, the victim must pay so that the cartel does not retaliate against a family member (Gabanés García, 2020, p. 210; Thill & Giménez Armentia, 2016, p. 450). For extortion to be effective, the family member’s life must matter more to the victim than their own. One method of punishment used by cartels against a member who makes a mistake is to enslave a minor daughter of the member. If she escapes, the father will be killed. However, the life of an abusive parent is often no more valuable to the victim than their freedom. As Mariana (2015) said, “When I escaped, my dad’s boss got the signal, and they killed my dad; according to him, because of me”. When the threat falls on a child, the situation changes. The victim will be willing to make any sacrifice to save their life.

The extortion procedure includes three phases: locating vulnerable migrant women, threatening to harm their children, and collecting the revenues from sexual exploitation. This repertoire is less onerous than the previous ones because the cartels do not incur costs for shelter, food and surveillance of the victims. It is also more effective because the victim imposes a severe self-exploitation regime on themselves when their child’s life is at risk. The women are exploited on premises whose owners are also extorted. Apparently, the victims can escape because no one is watching them, but they

receive constant phone calls letting them know that if they do not pay, their children will suffer the consequences. Bernarda (2014) left El Salvador with her six-year-old son in October 2013. In Chiapas, she boarded a bus bound for Mexico City. At the bus station in Chiapas, a 'hawk' realized that Bernarda was an ideal victim because she was traveling with her son. The 'hawk' informed the cartel of the victim's itinerary, and she was kidnapped upon arrival at the destination. They took her son from her and threatened to sell him if she escaped. She was forced to prostitute herself in a nightclub until she paid a fee for her son's freedom. Bernarda said that

I did everything possible to work more and collect what they asked to give me and my son the freedom (...) I worked night and day; I gave it all I had (...) I had more than 30 clients (...); the more they came, the better.

Finally, after five months, she finished paying the agreed amount, and her son was released.

Mexican cartels are transnational entities whose 'tentacles' extend beyond the national territory (Correa-Cabrera, 2017, p. 23). This allows them to extort migrant women who left their children in the country of origin. In the extortion business, it is common for cartels to reach agreements to avoid competition. The cartels negotiate how much a victim can pay per week and divide this quantity according to the weight or degree of influence of each organization involved in the pact. Raquel (2020) left in 2018 with her older daughter in the first caravan in San Pedro Sula, Honduras. Her youngest daughter remained in Honduras with her grandmother. She left the caravan and hitchhiked with three truck drivers, who drove her to Nuevo León in exchange for sexual favors. There, she agreed to work as a prostitute in a bar-cantina because she could find no other way to feed her daughter. Soon, however, gangsters from three cartels arrived, copied her phone data, and threatened to hurt her youngest daughter if she was late in paying the weekly fees imposed on her or if she ran away. She had to make payments on Mondays, Thursdays and Saturdays so that they would not hurt her daughter. One cartel collected the payments on the premises, the other two by bank deposit. Raquel rented an apartment with other countrywomen. She was free to go out on the street and was not pressured by the owner of the bar-cantina where she was prostituted, but she could not rest any day, nor could she refuse any client because then she would have no money to pay the criminals. On paydays, she received intimidating phone calls, which stopped when the debt was paid.

### Interchangeability of the roles of victim and victimizer

In the cartel environment, the roles of victim and victimizer are fluid. Many of the kidnapped women are not only prostituted, but they are also forced to kidnap and assault their fellow countrywomen (Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos, 2011, p. 86; De la Rosa Rodríguez, 2022, p. 12), to sell drugs, or to work as informants. Some women must romance drug traffickers from a rival cartel, record what they say, or lead them to a place where they will be ambushed. Others act as informants who facilitate the kidnapping of wealthy clients. This was reflected in expressions such as: "They forced me to prostitute myself, to get information from clients, to tell the locations of clients and their families" (Eusebia, 2014) or "They forced me to give

information about everything the clients did. What they told me I told them, I even recorded conversations, and all that to give information about the clients they could kidnap” (Laura, 2014). As a consequence, the clients of the enslaved people run the risk of being kidnapped or killed when a mishap occurs. As Francisca (2014) said: “Even the clients themselves were beaten; one was beaten to death by the people in charge of the place because he refused to pay a bill”.

The interchangeability of the roles of enslaved person and kidnapper was exemplified by the cases of Guadalupe (2014) and Marcela (2015). Guadalupe was forced to prostitute herself and orchestrate kidnappings of Central American women who trusted her. However, on the day that security forces raided a safe house in Chiapas, according to Guadalupe: “A raid happened (...) I was there, and I was among those kidnapped because that day I had been beaten (...) Those who were there said nothing about me”. Likewise, Marcela (2015) was forced to prostitute herself, to orchestrate kidnappings, and to sell drugs in Mexico City. However, on the day the police raided the safe house where she was staying, she was not guarding the kidnap victims; rather, as Marcela said: “That day they had punished me and beaten me, and they left me there because of the beatings”. If the raid had taken place the day before, Guadalupe and Marcela would have been arrested and imprisoned for the crimes of kidnapping, trafficking and organized crime. Nevertheless, they were lucky. The day before, they disobeyed the cartel and were severely disciplined. Therefore, when the police raided them, they were among the rescued victims, not the arrested victimizers. They were also lucky that none of the rescued people testified against them, as they were the masterminds of some of these kidnappings.

The role of the kidnappers can also alternate between victim and victimizer. Some of the interviewees were able to escape because those who kidnapped them literally gave their lives for them. The kidnapper’s job includes tasks such as raping, beating and mistreating women who do not obey, do not perform, or do not treat clients well. Some die, others commit suicide. When the women show no signs of life, they are left uncared for, and when the corpses pile up, they are dumped in a secluded place or buried. As the following excerpts show, some of the interviewees escaped because they lost consciousness, were left for dead, and were thrown into a ravine along with other bodies. When they regained consciousness, they made their way by pushing aside the corpses piled up around them.

Some new and very young girls arrived, between 15 and 17 years old, and they didn’t like me anymore, and they beat me. They took me to the street and left me there, thinking that I would die, but I recovered. (Rosalía, 2020)

One day, I was so badly beaten that I didn’t wake up, I lost consciousness, I didn’t know who I was, and they took me to be thrown together with other companions who had received the same treatment. Some of them were dead, and I was not; I was able to wake up. (Valeriana, 2021)

They beat me so that I could not get up on my own, and left me there, in a room. But from there, I managed to escape. I don't know how I got my strength and escaped. (Verónica, 2021)

Nonetheless, not all kidnapers tolerate this hellish regime of terror and death. For some criminals, continuing to live in the midst of so much suffering ceases to make sense. That is when they decide to free their victims and wait for the cartel to kill them for the act of treason they have committed; others escape with their victims, while others commit suicide in front of their victims, whom they order to escape. As Valentina (2021) said:

The one in charge of caring for us helped me (...) He took courage and helped us escape. There were four of us who escaped at that moment; later, he killed himself (...) Anyway, he said they would kill him for helping us and letting us escape.

The case of Catalina (2014) is the one that best exemplifies how the roles of victim and victimizer are transposed and disrupted. Catalina was an enslaved person who also played the role of kidnapper. On one occasion, she was left in charge of a safe house and was charged with guarding two bound men. One was a criminal who had been punished for making a mistake. He knew how to escape, having worked for the cartel for years, and knew both the area's geography and the criminals' itineraries. He told Catalina to untie them, and he would help them escape. Catalina accepted this proposal, and when they arrived at a distant location, each went their own way.

## Victims' agency

Women enslaved by Mexican cartels are not always passive victims. More than a third of those interviewed rescued themselves. Many showed unusual courage. The nature of this courage, unimaginable in ordinary people, was reflected in expressions such as: "I escaped in the company of one of the women they had there, I told her: 'we are leaving, we are going to live a different life, or we are leaving dead, but we are leaving'" (Eusebia, 2014).

I was able to escape from there, because not everyone could do it; rather, few had done it. Some had tried and had been killed for doing it and not succeeding (...) I could not be worse off than I already was, so I said: "If they kill me, they kill me, no way". Anything was better than staying where I was. (Nicolasa, 2018)

These women, after weighing the alternative between a brutal death if they tried to escape or a life of slavery, humiliation and continuous beatings, did not hesitate to choose the first option. Some used cunning to escape; others resorted to brute force,

so that tiny and malnourished women managed to subdue burly armed men. As Helena (2014) pointed out: “The three of us working together escaped from the place where they kept us; one distracted the ‘hawk’ who was guarding, and the other two of us beat him on the head”, or as Raquel (2020) said

There were six of us (...) One of us threw a towel over the gun, and another girl pushed him hard in the back, knocking him to the ground and his gun came off, and a girl grabbed it.

Nevertheless, it is possible to infer that an indefinite number of victims fail for every woman who manages to escape. As Zara (2022) pointed out:

On one occasion, a woman crying a lot went with a client and asked for help. I think she also wanted to escape. And they sent for her, and they killed her. Then they took her away, but she was already dead, for telling the client and trying to escape.

The victims captured by the cartels sometimes wished to be killed to put an end to their suffering. As Yolanda (2021) said: “I wanted to die, to be killed, sometimes I wished for it, but it didn’t happen. This traumatic experience meant that almost all the interviewees suffered from some form of post-traumatic stress disorder. Many suffered from migraine headaches, and almost all had difficulty falling asleep and frequently suffered from nightmares that took them back to their lives as enslaved people. To calm their anxiety and irritability, some had found protection and solace in witchcraft. As Sandra (2021) stated: “There are people here who heal with witchcraft, and I went to be healed and given protection, and that’s how I am more relaxed now”, or as Susana (2021) said: “I was afraid at the beginning, now I am not, it has passed, I’ve been cured, I’ve protected myself [with witchcraft] and I’m calm”. Paradoxically, none of the interviewees wished to ask for help from the Mexican authorities to be repatriated to their countries of origin and reunited with their families. All were impatient to contact a smuggler to take them to the United States, fearing that the criminals might find them.

## Conclusions

Mexican cartels profit more from sex slavery than from the sex trade without coercion because they have an infrastructure of violence that they can move from one sector to another without incurring additional costs. The same means used to monitor and control the movements of other cartels, the police, or the military are used to monitor the movements of the enslaved people they prostitute.

Mexican cartels have developed different repertoires aimed at taming the bodies and minds of enslaved women into total submission. These repertoires are kidnapping, deception, recruitment in the country of origin and extortion. The most frequent and harmful repertoire is kidnapping, as the victim is tortured in a safe house until their family pays a ransom for their life before being forcibly prostituted. In contrast, the least frequent and most benign repertoire is extortion since the victim is apparently free; what chains her to the criminals is the fear that they will harm a loved one. Moreover, in the latter repertoire, the victim is completely innocent. She self-imposes a

regime of self-exploitation to save the life of her loved one, but she is not forced to play the role of victimizer. In all three of the above repertoires, the cartels dehumanize their victims, as it is not uncommon for them to be forced to act as victimizers. Adult victims often experience more traumatic scenarios than minors. The latter are more valuable in the prostitution market, so they are only subjected to a regime of sexual slavery. In addition, they lack the maturity to play the role of victimizers, so they never lose their legal innocence. The former, in addition to being enslaved, must often earn the right to live through their participation in the cartel's criminal activity. They are thus dispossessed of their innocence. This has pernicious consequences when they reach freedom. The victims/victimizers had to betray their fellow countrywomen to earn the right to stay alive. When they were enslaved, they did not realize the meaning of their actions because every day they had to earn the right to survive. Nevertheless, after they are free, the feeling of guilt cascades and plunges them into a wave of depression, anxiety and despondency as they become fully aware of their participation in activities such as the kidnapping and torture of their fellow compatriots, some of whom lost their lives.

In the prostitution market operated by the cartels, victims are exploited to the point of exhaustion because the cost of replacing bodies is so low that it is more profitable to replace a deceased woman than to decrease the levels of exploitation to increase her life expectancy. Migrant women are the main victims of these groups because they are more vulnerable than native women since they are in a foreign country, and their disappearance is rarely reported. However, in Mexico, the fight against trafficking appears to be focused on police operations in nightclubs where low-income clients come and the women are not usually forced. This approach corresponds to a metaphorical conception of sexual slavery, which does not make it possible to distinguish slavery from voluntary prostitution. Nevertheless, sexual slavery must be understood in a metonymic sense. Enslaved people are victims held by force through the forceful use of violence, intimidation and terror.

Some enslaved people manage to escape, others are freed, but a significant number of women kidnapped by the cartels disappear. The sexual exploitation imposed by the cartels reaches such high levels that it quickly consumes the lives of the enslaved people. The victims do not rest, are poorly fed and are continually disciplined. If they speak to other victims or ask clients for help, they are beaten, and when clients complain, they are bruised. The slightest act of disobedience is brutally repressed. As a result, the victims' life expectancy is often not very long. Therefore, the fight against trafficking in Mexico must focus its efforts on the abatement of the slavery-like practices of prostitution implemented by organized crime.

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Simón Pedro Izcara Palacios

Spanish. PhD in sociology from the Universidad Complutense de Madrid. Professor of sociology at the Multidisciplinary Academic Unit of Sciences, Education and Humanities, Universidad Autónoma de Tamaulipas, Mexico. Lines of research: migration studies, human trafficking and smuggling. Recent publication: Izcara Palacios, S. P. (2022). 'Males are undeserving; females are ideal victims': gender bias hides demand in human-smuggling networks. *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 54(3). <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022216X22000244>