

## Women of Gangsters: chronicle of a less-than-musical city—

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Whenever the subject is violent crime, where outlaws are in charge, women are not the main protagonists. They are not the bosses (or “they don’t have their noses on the line”, as the group slang would have it), and they don’t defend their place in this business through the constant use of guns. Guns, the epitome of phallic symbols, are men’s business, and they mark the passage from occasional, peripheral crime to a full-time career in this violent enterprise. However, women are not left out of the world of crime entirely. On the contrary, they play a diversified, complex role in it. Statistically speaking, women generally participate much less than men do in crime. According to a survey we did in a poor neighborhood of Rio de Janeiro, women represented less than 25% of the 370 individuals involved in the drug gangs there and only a slightly higher percentage of the some 1,500 individuals involved in either occasional theft (“moonlighting”) or full-time careers in theft and robbery.

Such statistics differ little from data in penitentiaries in other countries. In England, for example, men now stand six times greater chance than women of ending up in a penitentiary, while young people (under 21 years of age) run a risk of imprisonment five times greater than people over 21, and working-class individuals are four times more likely to be put in jail than those from the middle class.<sup>1</sup> We can attribute such

<sup>1</sup> JONES, Howard. *Society Against Crime*. London: Penguin Books, 1981.

discrepancies both to the more repressive public policies in relation to poor youth and the pervasive male-chauvinist culture in this institutional context.

According to street slang, the majority of the women “involved” in this business (those who are not actually counted as members of drug or robbery gangs) play a secondary role in such delinquent activities. They specialize in robbing shops and supermarkets, where they take clothing, food, drink, and anything else they can get their hands on to divide up among themselves or share with their men. The older women are more skillful at the art of carrying various kinds of merchandise between their legs and walking around the supermarket as if nothing were going on. They are the so-called “*minas<sup>2</sup> de pisa*” (or “light-stepping girls”), since they walk around the stores without arousing suspicion. The younger women, who are not as skillful at “stepping light”, walk into the stores, fill up shopping bags, and walk right out past the cashiers and security guards, taking their chance. They are known as “baggers”. They are not considered thieves, nor do they see themselves as such, since they don’t carry guns or get involved in the drug wars. As one bagger put it:

“women go for the goods, but they’re afraid when they do.... It’s easier for men, since men can pull their guns and start a war. Me, a woman, I’d never do that, because there aren’t any women’s gangs<sup>3</sup> in Rio de Janeiro.”

<sup>2</sup> “Minas”: a corruption of *meninas*, or girls, akin to “chicks”.

<sup>3</sup> The term “gang” (“*quadrilha*” in Portuguese) is only used when the members carry guns to defend themselves from the police, victims, possible witnesses, and competing robbers and are at war with other gangs. The term is thus not used to

I only met three women who were not thieves per se but had become famous in the poor neighborhood I studied because of their part in criminal activity: old Dadá<sup>4</sup>, owner of a marijuana drop-off point since the 1960s; Suelli Brazão, a brave thief who fought for her men at knifepoint; and Dona Erinis, mother of a convict, who minded a marijuana hustle for her son. Nearly all of the rest of the women merge into this mass of juvenile delinquents who practice petty theft, shoplifting, picking pockets, etc., either to supplement their low wages (many of them both work and steal) or because they no longer want to work. It is an anonymous mass that is ignored by official crime statistics and never makes newspaper headlines. However, the relationship between women and criminals is extremely complex and interesting and helps explain the division of labor in crime.

Dadá belonged to the underworld in the old days, when the drug traffic was not such a lucrative business, organized at gunpoint. It was a sleepy, almost family business, since it only involved anonymous pushers, a supplier who brought the goods in by truck, and a small, familiar bunch of customers. Dona Dadá was no different from other women who headed families, a common situation in poor Brazilian neighborhoods. With several children by various fathers who she raised by herself, she set up in business without fighting for the spot or having to kill off her competitors. She and another woman, Dona Maria, sold for the same supplier. But she was different from other mothers of matricentric families in that she was familiar with the underworld - old and battered, she used to force some of her customers to have sex with her before she would give them their drugs. She was a mixture of mother-woman and macho who chooses and imposes his will on his sex partners. When the drug war began in

designate any other group of individuals that may join together for some criminal act, like the "arrastão", or "dragnet", which is more the result of a momentary, contagious experience, even though it is also performed by a group.

<sup>4</sup> All names are fictitious.

1977, she gave up selling marijuana and turned her spot over to Zé Pequeno (Little Joe), a famous neighborhood gangster, since deceased. Dona Dadá is still alive and has a number of grandchildren.

Suelli Brazão was a strong, brave, independent woman who became famous in the neighborhood in the seventies. She had neither a permanent hustle nor a permanent man. She did not hesitate to employ violence, robbing and stealing in order to keep her economic independence and support whatever man happened to be with her. She used a stiletto to hold off rival women. She was a samba dancer with a passionate temper. Men and women feared her. In her own way, she warded off the kind of violence that women in the marijuana traffic usually suffer, but the price she paid was to become like the men in their methods for solving disputes. She was a female in her love for men and a male in her way of fighting for them. When street life changed and gunfights became commonplace, Suelli decided to straighten up. She got married and had kids and is now a respectable housewife.

Dona Erinis got into the action when the drug trade had already become a synonym for warfare. To keep hold of a marijuana outlet, you could not lower your guard for a minute, and that is how things still are today. A "front man" is obliged to keep all his underlings in line, to keep his eyes peeled, to make sure his competitors are not taking too big a slice of the action by selling more or better goods or acquiring more fire power. He has to do right by his supplier, who is no longer just a man coming around in a truck. Otherwise, he gets ripped off, has his spot taken, or is simply wiped out by competitors from both inside and outside his gang. To carry a gun at all times, to kill or be killed, and to keep constant surveillance over the gang's power are simply everyday concerns for Dona Erinis. She only took charge when her son was arrested, and she did it to guarantee his control over a marijuana outlet. She is also a mixture of mother-woman and macho in her dispute over men. Old and toothless, she even uses

a gun to force men to have sex with her. She once kept a cocaine addict at gunpoint, with a lot of coke, to force him to spend an entire weekend with her. He left her place straight for the hospital. Dona Erinis is still in charge of her son's gang, and every day she runs the risk of violent death. These three masculine women were always referred to by people from the neighborhood as special cases, out of the ordinary. In fact, in their life histories, they deny the more common experiences old by women who take part in the world of crime. Yet they managed to be accepted like this and to become famous in their respective neighborhoods.

Women's involvement usually begins either when they fall in love with criminals or get hooked on drugs. They start to steal in order to help support their boy-friends or to buy dope. They also hide drugs and guns at home and shoplift to give their men fancy clothes and money. However, hanging around a drug outlet and a gang of men means running the risk of getting raped by the boys. The rationale, in the words of some gangs, is a twisted one: "She gave in to my brother," or "She gave in to somebody," so now, "She has to give in to everybody else", whether she likes it or not. Still, other women are not free from danger, especially the prettier, more coveted ones. To insinuate, to be seductive, to dress up in such a way as to highlight the beauty of one's body, can be fatal for a woman in the neighborhood. To go out too much and with several different men is interpreted as behavior fitting of a "slut". Some of the "sluts" had been gang-raped by members of the "bad", "heavy", "bloody" gangs. Others had been raped by just one man. But "dykes" are also at risk. One of the more terribly moving interviews was with a lesbian who had been gang-raped by all of the boys from one gang on the same night. This woman left the neighborhood and never returned. Some of the criminals who were seen in the neighborhood as twisted and cruel became famous, like Maninho Negão ("Little Big Black Brother"), who claims to have raped over a hundred poor, middle-

class, and rich women in the course of years of activity as a rapist and thief. Even today, years after being killed, the mention of his name arouses disgust in neighborhood women and probably helped sow hatred of poor youth in the adjacent middle-class neighborhoods, where he used to wait for husbands to leave home before breaking in and raping the women. Maninho Negão, however, was killed in prison as revenge for having murdered a truck driver who furnished dope to local gangs.

Gang members thus keep strict, violent control over women's sexual behavior. Meanwhile, men brag about their own prowess whenever the women they seduce or rape are considered "sluts" and only half-censure each other good-naturedly when one of the guys goes overboard and rapes any other woman for just any reason. The only ones who are considered rapists are the ones who do it as a habit. Only then do the men talk about somebody "raping other men's daughters" or "not respecting families".

While the law of the streets used to radically condemn rape and prescribe exemplary punishment for transgressors, at a time when family morals still prevailed, nowadays sexual liberation has become so intertwined with rape that, like death, it has become banal.<sup>5</sup> Only habitual rapists are identified and sometimes thrown out of the neighborhood or lynched.<sup>6</sup> The problem

<sup>5</sup> Some anthropologists, like Sahlins (SAHLINS, Marshall. *Island of History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987) and Dumézil (after Sahlins) have suggested a relationship between power that is external to society, which takes on the signs of virility, and the violation of the people, which takes the signs of femininity. Hawaiian chiefs came from the sea and were considered foreign gods; they symbolically received native women during the enthronement rituals. Dumézil, taking the rape of the Sabine women in Roman historical formation, differentiates between a virile, youthful, violent power prevailing in the beginning (*celéritas*) and a mature power based on the peaceful, procreative character of a well-established people (*grávititas*). The paradoxes and problems of legitimacy and force are present in the utilization of rape of women by a violent yet virile power.

<sup>6</sup> The gang responsible for the most rapings was

is that gangs have abandoned the kind of "respect" for others that used to prevail in the underworld, although some attempts have been made to politicize and maintain a respectable façade for organized crime in Rio de Janeiro.

Yet it is the criminals themselves who are quick to cite seductive women as the cause of feuding among men: "It was a woman who led me into the life of crime." Many of them speak of the enemies they have made because of women. Everyone knows the story of the fight between Zé Pequeno and Manoel Galinha, the first big fight in the neighborhood, at dances that were held by post-rock hippies. Peace and love as an ideology had already run its course at these dances, and gangs waged violent fights over women. Manoel Galinha was a handsome working man with a beautiful girlfriend, who was coveted by Zé Pequeno, a gang leader who expanded his drug business at the point of a gun. He wanted to "have it all", to take over all the drug outlets in the neighborhood. Zé Pequeno, who was short and ugly, was unsuccessful in winning the woman's heart and took vengeance, humiliating Manoel in front of his girlfriend by shooting him in the buttocks and slapping her around. Manoel decided to organize his own gang and take revenge. A war had been started that would last for several years, involving other gangs even after the main protagonists had been killed.

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called the "lower cases", a band of thieves that went to war with the most powerful gang in the neighborhood because of the high cuts taken on valuable stolen goods the "lower cases" brought back to fence. After Zé Pequeno's murder, the "lower cases" took over the hustle after a violent struggle and were nearly all killed off during a subsequent battle with the Comando Vermelho (the Red Commando, an organized crime ring). Because of their disrespectful behavior, the "lower cases" were held in low esteem by the community. The Red Commando follows a policy of seeking support from the local population and therefore combats local criminals who mess up the business. It also follows a strict rule of capital punishment for stoolies or those who kill merely out of personal revenge. Death is their punishment for individuals (men, women, and children) who squeal or kill for personal motives, but not for rapists.

Hundreds of young people died in the process.<sup>7</sup>

While women would appear to be the main bone of contention, they are in fact just one more factor in the significance of relations between men, which is in fact the key issue. The same kind of struggle is waged over weapons, dope, and stolen goods. As one disillusioned young pusher said in an interview: "...dealing dope is a business of getting even. Pushers have always got an eye on other men's goods, even their women. They'll kill just to get another man's woman."

It takes violence for the leader of a drug gang to prevail. Many inexperienced young men get into warfare because of rivalry over a woman. Dope hustling is thus cited by disillusioned pushers as a place of distrust and animosity, where there is no mutual respect except for the other man's gun. It is also a sexually charged, virile world. All the men carry guns, and to carry a gun is to "fucking strut" or to "have your iron in your belt". To show off your weapon, or "to pull your gun out", is a common characteristic of such urban outlaws, yet one which can often prove fatal. Instead of the verb to rob, they say "to mount" their victims, used both for mugging people on the streets and for breaking and entering. To kill somebody is to "lay them down". The prime audiences for such displays are apparently the women they are trying to impress with their power and the money in their pockets. Yet these are the first men to be grabbed in police raids. In spite of this notorious fact, the young outlaws never tire of bragging that the "chicks" go for men who carry guns, because they fell more protected. Women confirm this version:

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<sup>7</sup> Many women died in this war from stray bullets or bullets on target. There were young women, girls, even pregnant women killed, often after being tortured because they were suspected of informing or treason, while for others there was no apparent motive. A total of 722 young people were killed in the course of 15 years of warfare. ZALUAR, Alba. *A Máquina e a Revolta*. São Paulo: Editora Brasiliense, 1985 and *A Proibição das Drogas e o Reencantamento do Mal*. *Revista do Rio de Janeiro*, UERJ, year 1, n° 1, 1992.

"...so a guy goes and puts a gun in this belt, thinks he's really cool, picks up a whole bunch of women, makes a baby in one of them, and ides overnight. Sometimes the older guys get women involved in this who have nothing to do with the scene, and they think it's all gonna be cool, like it's gonna be like that famous guy with all kinds of women, with silver necklaces, and they're gonna have it easy, go to a nice motel in a fancy car and all that.... Most women like outlaws...because of their guns, they figure if anybody messes with them, they're gonna get it.... I think a guy like this things, like, he's got an iron in his belt, he's got a gold chain and a Champion watch and he thinks tomorrow he's gonna have a calculator and I don't know what all, and that he's cool. And then, one fine day, he goes out to rob for his lady, and he gets it."

In this game of seduction, it's important to flaunt fancy clothes and other outward symbols of wealth: a gold chain, car, expenses at motels, etc.. That's what shows you have money in your pocket that you can spend any time you want, since "women don't like to rough it". Young men say they go into crime to show off for women and conquer them. However, under this emblem of the *femme fatale*, womanhood is reduced to a prop for a young man's prestige in the neighborhood: to go to a dance, surrounded by women, with money in you pocket, to have everyone greet you, admire you, envy you. Even here, femininity is just one more factor in the competition between men.

Still, womanhood can take on other meanings. When the subject is prison, women are something else, like Amelia, a "true woman" in the eyes of the streetwise carioca of yesteryear, who hated to work and loved samba and a vagabond lifestyle.<sup>8</sup> An outlaw's true woman is one

<sup>8</sup> "Amelia was a true woman" is the refrain from a famous samba sung for decades in Rio de Janeiro, telling of a woman with no vanity. The meaning of the name Amelia was expanded beyond the song itself and came to designate any woman who stays home without complaining, doing the housework and taking care of the children.

who - together with his mother and sisters - helps him in his hour of need, when he's in prison and needs money, a lawyer, clothing, food, and everything else. Like Amelia, she suffers for her husband, brother, or son. But unlike Amelia, this devoted woman may come to steal, lie, deal drugs, and even kill (or be killed) if necessary in order to help her prisoner, either in collusion with his narcissism or to save his life. However, she cannot remain transfixed in the domestic world of womanly concerns and traditional roles that Amelia never gave up. This woman's struggle is one of life and death. While some of these women are blinded to the evil done by the men they are protecting, in the words of the criminals, they may be their last link with morality. Such women represent both protection and authority. They are the only ones who can get some kind of respect from these men.<sup>9</sup> They are sometimes successful in convincing their men to give up their lives of crime. The moral and sentimental discourse I heard from some criminals about giving up crime reflected both the fear that their mothers might find out where the money was coming from and the subsequent shame and worry attached to such a discovery, in addition to the suffering of having a son in prison. In families torn by the indifference of the father figure<sup>10</sup>, for those

<sup>9</sup> People from the neighborhood and the juvenile delinquents themselves tell a number of stories about these women that are respected because of their moral authority. One of these women, called "tia" ("auntie") by the young men, used to care for a little flower garden in an empty lot they used to play football. In the interviews, many of them reported being careful not to let the ball fall on the flowers.

<sup>10</sup> It is a mistake to think that the main cause of opting for crime is the lack of a father figure in the family. Of the some 100 people interviewed that were involved in crime, 68% were from complete families. Father figures were lacking in only 27% of the cases. However, aloof, indifferent, or authoritarian fathers are common, a situation which overburdens the mothers with the responsibility for the children's moral upbringing. "My mother was the one that taught me morals." is a common statement in poor neighborhoods. The problem is that fathers, even when they are present, have a bad relationship with the children (both boys and girls), showing

on the cutting edge between crime and work, mothers can help them stay away from crime, which is otherwise fostered by a lack of dialogue with figures of authority like fathers, teachers, the police, and judges. A careful reading of the interviews revealed the multiple meanings ascribed to femininity by violent outlaws. Yet it also showed the critical view women have of them. As a former woman thief and now respectable housewife told me, the men cannot stand going without: "They think, you've either got it, or you ain't got it, there's no two ways." Neither will they submit to anything or anyone: "They think they can get away with anything." Here may be the crux of the issue: exacerbated male pride and a thirst for unbridled power in a historical context of moral and institutional crisis, with no restraints on the highly lucrative, expanding market for illicit drugs, sought by consumers as part of the good life.

While the indifference of the father figure leads to this unbridled search for goods and power by violent means, feminist psychoanalytical theory is correct in affirming that conventional masculine identity (patriarchal, authoritarian, and chauvinistic), due to the father's negligence in raising children, becomes an unbridled flight from submission to the mother and everything she represents. And in this case, it is the only moral upbringing these young men have had. Feminist psychoanalytical theory is also correct when it suggests that these revolted men are far from being post-conventional subjects, characterized by pluralism and acceptance of and/or conviviality with others, who might be capable of overcoming the dominant system. On the contrary, these young men reproduce the system in various ways, in the way they conceive of masculine identity and relate to their "others", the women. In this case, to say that the women's moral

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indifference and a lack of disposition for dialogue. Even so, one cannot affirm that the problem is situated only in the family. On the contrary, in modern society, parents are not the only ones responsible for the socialization of youth. The moral crisis is more institutional than anything else.

strength comes from their police power within families<sup>11</sup> and that it prevents men from manifesting their revolt is to imply that the drug traffic, gang war, and violent crime are viable alternatives to an unjust society. The powers deriving from the drug traffic are as horrifying as the worst of tyrannies and in no way contribute to the building of a new, more just society. There is an undeniable fact in many Brazilian cities today, particularly Rio de Janeiro, that the drug traffic is destroying poor working families and that the warfare it unleashes is taking the lives of thousands of young people, particularly those of color. For these social groups, this "way out" has been self-destructive. Donzelot's theory belies his male-sexist and intellectually-imperialist character, since it ascribes a negative value to aspects of the feminine experience in the home, including raising children, while it exalts such values as greed, warfare, and violence, results of male aggressiveness and thirst for power which turns women into both objects of avarice and preferential victims.

In the current historical context, revolt in the face of injustice and hypocrisy is lost in acts of violence that escape comprehension by common people and are increasingly attributed to an absolute evil, in which women are nothing more than bit actresses or victims. Hatred is no longer devoted to witches, but to twisted criminals who seem to stop at nothing with their destructive action. Like characters from Dostoevsky, these outlaws have not learned to live with freedom in modern times, in which God no longer exists, moral parameters have weakened, and institutional restraints are unjust, inefficient, or nonexistent, as in the case of the drug trade. What these young men fantasize as absolute independence is actually a death trap, both for them and those around them.

While they are just bit actresses in this modern tragedy, some poor women have succeeded in overcoming the new social

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<sup>11</sup> DONZELOT, Jacques. *La Police des Familles*. Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1977.

roles imposed on them by this economic system of drug traffic and organized crime. Together with children, they resist falling prey to this world of violence. Some reaffirm their protagonism, changing themselves and their lives by choosing conventional feminine roles, as housewives, wives, and mild-mannered mothers. Others, who are much less common, try to escape from violence by taking up arms themselves. In the process, they lose their femininity and embody male attributes developed in these times of rage. Like Maria Moura, a character from a novel by Rachel de Queiroz who in the violent 18<sup>th</sup> century experienced the same kind of dilemmas in a struggle that

could only be won by plunging into the men's war:

"...No one had ever heard of a woman standing up to a soldier by force. A man like that thinks the only thing women are good for is having conniptions. Well, I'll teach them. And I have the feeling that I'm losing the battle, that I'll have to retreat with my men, but that I'll be firing back as I go. And I'm leaving a trail of blood behind me. I'm going to look for land in Serra dos Padres, and maybe there I can start a new life, me and the boys. With nobody tramping on my neck or hanging me from a hammock hook."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> QUEIROZ, Rachel de. *Memorial de Maria Moura*. Rio de Janeiro: Siciliano, 1992.