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Thousands of widows, mothers and children are paying dearly for Mexico's drug trade, which in three years has killed 17,000 people, the vast majority young men

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Mexico's drug war

leaves a generation of narco widows

Deep in western Mexico's sun-baked marijuana hills, where the presence of drug gangs hangs heavy in the air, Norma Bello and her five children live in a tatty storeroom since her husband was knifed to death and her eldest son jailed over a narco slaying.

Her eerily quiet town, Arteaga, sits in the shadow of a top drug lord's ranch in Michoacan state and Bello sleeps fitfully, reliving the night armed police kicked down her door and slashed grain sacks looking for cocaine.

In the nearby city of Uruapan, Isandra, 45, has battled to build a life for her kids away from the drug world that turned her husband into a womanizing cokehead and eventually killed him.

Behind the daily toll of drug murders, thousands of "narco widows," along with mothers, sisters and children, are paying dearly for a trade that has killed some 17,000 people in three years, the vast majority healthy young men.

"We are the ones who suffer," said Bello, 38, whose son is accused of working for the La Familia gang and taking part in the 2009 slaying of 12 police officers whose bound and partly stripped bodies were dumped by a road in a bloodied heap.

In Michoacan, where opium and marijuana have been grown for decades and corrupt former governments let smuggling flourish, poverty drives young men to work as cartel lookouts, informants and runners. Increasingly, many end up dead or in jail.

For every gruesome news photo of a hacked-up corpse or severed human head there is at least one woman, often several, left with her life in pieces. Some are women who entered the narco world as teenage beauties brought to adorn drug ranch parties.

The crackdown has also put some 80,000 suspected drug gang members behind bars, many of whom are beaten into confessions.

Bello's jailed son Evaristo, 20, was the main breadwinner since her husband was murdered a few years ago and his body dumped on a train track. "I am all alone. I'm frightened,

I'm scared to go to sleep, but who am I going to complain to?" Bello said.

TRAPPED FOR LIFE

Since Mexican President Felipe Calderon launched a nationwide army crackdown on drug cartels in late 2006, turf wars between rival gangs have exploded, alarming the US government, foreign investors and tourists.

After a recent slaying in Michoacan, the mothers of two of the victims sped to the crime scene, hauled all nine corpses into the back of their van and drove them off for a private wake without waiting for the authorities to file a report.

Last month, revenge-seeking gunmen stormed into the home of a marine named a hero hours before at his funeral after he died during a drug raid. They murdered his grieving mother, aunt and two siblings in a spray of bullets.

The wives or girlfriends of fallen drug traffickers must choose either to stay under cartel control and enjoy a few more years of drug money, or flee and keep a low profile.

The luckiest hang on to any property, cars, jewels or bank accounts their erstwhile partner had kept in their name.

Others have fled as far as the US and Peru, drug experts say, sometimes using undercover safe houses that shelter women escaping domestic and other violence.

"We suffer the consequences of our menfolk getting into this," said Isandra, a striking-looking woman with large black eyes whose husband headed a marijuana-trafficking cell in the 1990s. He fled the drug from Michoacan up to Ciudad Juarez on the US border, aided by corrupt Mexican customs officials.

Isandra married him at 16 but left him at 32 and used nursing and barmaid jobs to put her kids through school and higher education as he sank deeper into a drug kingpin lifestyle. His addiction to cocaine and hard liquor eventually destroyed his internal organs, according to his co-smugglers.

She was barely in touch with him when she received a chilling phone call to say he was dead and his body was being flown to his family home in the city of Guadalajara. "The drug world makes men selfish. My husband spent

all his money on other women, I had to fend for myself," Isandra said.

"I was lucky, it's not always so easy to leave that situation. Young girls, especially, don't stay alone long if their husbands are killed. They can end up trapped for life."

FROM COOKS TO COCKROACHES

La Familia, a cultish Bible-thumping drug cartel that forbids its members from consuming drugs and alcohol, is unusual in that it pays the widows of drug violence victims a monthly stipend.

The cartel formally hires some women as informers or "cooks" who work in Michoacan's estimated 4,000 methamphetamine labs.

Other widows hunker down with their in-laws or move on to a different lover in the same cartel, local experts say.

"They get married very young and get used to the good life, so it's hard to leave," said Ana Maria Perez, an economic advisor for the Michoacan government. "But they suffer for it. They are treated badly and subjected to male machismo."

Stories abound in north and western Mexico of girls who walked away with a lifetime of riches after being widowed young, but others are not so lucky, especially those who succumb to the temptation to get involved in the business.

"Drug trafficking doesn't have the same stigma here as elsewhere. Young women in villages are very ignorant and get sucked in very easily," said a local government security official in Michoacan who asked not to be quoted by name.

"But it is dangerous. They become harnessed, economically, and downtrodden. Often the guy will beat them one day then make it up the next by paying for some surgery."

One of Mexico's most famous narco widows is Sandra Avila, dubbed "Queen of the Pacific," who was born into a family of drug smugglers and was twice widowed. A dark-haired beauty who graced Mexico City's finest restaurants, she owned crate loads of precious jewels, several luxury cars and seafarers' condominiums.

Avila now dwells in a dank prison cell where she complains about bad food and cockroaches.



Engineering

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TT: I saw a photo of a corset that you made from recycled computer monitors and I figured that was you using your engineering experience.

GJ: I really enjoy using unusual materials or using new manufacturing techniques. I used computer screens because the computer industry creates a lot of waste. It's a serious issue and I thought, well, "how can I solve it and give these discarded machines a new life?" Because of my engineering background, I was able to figure out how to make a glass corset that was very light and followed the curves of the female body very fluidly. The entire corset was made of recycled materials. I love using other odd materials, too. I made wearable lanterns out of bamboo, for instance. There are all sorts of untried possibilities out there, and ways to express what is unique about our culture.

TT: When you decided to switch careers, you went all the way to England to get a master's degree. Why did you choose to study there?

GJ: Before going to England, I actually studied for a little bit in New York City. While I was there, however, I discovered that design trends in the US tend to favor simple and practical items, like sportswear. That wasn't really what I was interested in. The English have a reputation for being conservative, but I think that they are actually quite forward thinking. They accept a lot of new ideas more readily and they have quite a lot of young, avant-garde designers. That was the road I wanted to travel, so when I got to England, I felt like a wish had finally been realized.

My time studying abroad and traveling through Europe really opened my eyes. It changed the way I looked at Asian culture and Western culture, and it inspired me to think of how I could meld the two together in my designs.

TT: You recently had a mixed-media exhibition called "Unbutton." Why did you pick buttons as your theme and what does "unbutton" mean to you?

GJ: Buttons are the most important embellishment you can put on a piece of clothing because you are in constant contact with them when you are getting dressed or undressed. As a designer, I'm always working with buttons and thinking of them. If you tweak the material and the size of the buttons on a jacket or dress or even a pair of pants, it completely changes the look.

Not only are they functional, but they also have a lot of meaning. When someone unbuttons an article of clothing, there are lots of different things that can be going through their mind. Or, when you button up again, your thoughts and feelings might be wandering in yet another direction.

TT: I hear you also like to collect Barbies.

GJ: Yes, that's one of my secret passions ... actually, I can't say that, everyone knows about it! But Barbies have really gorgeous dresses. It's amazing. When you look at the outfits that have been created for them, you can see a survey of 20th-century fashion history, modern designs, gowns from the Victorian era. There are even *qipaos* for Barbies. As a designer, I think they are not only a fun fashion reference but also a source of inspiration. A lot of designers look at books about fashion history or vintage magazines, but I look at my Barbies.

TT: Do you collect the outfit sets by Mattel or ones created by other collectors?

GJ: I like Mattel's vintage designs the most. At the start, they followed the high fashion of the time. For example, they made clothing inspired by the silhouettes of Christian Dior's New Look. They also made Barbie clothes inspired by Yves Saint Laurent. It makes me really happy to be able to see these designers' influences when I look at my Barbies. I'm partial to vintage Barbies from the 1950s and 1960s, starting with the first Barbie with the ponytail issued in 1959. The 1960s was a very important decade for many designers and a lot of us still draw inspiration from it. It was an era that transformed fashion.

TT: How many do you have?

GJ: I have 1,200 Barbies. Yes, it's pretty scary. I've spent quite a bit of money! (Laughs)



PHOTO COURTESY OF GUY ARI