

MULHERES E CRIMINALIDADE

Um estudo acerca do envolvimento de mulheres no plantio de *cannabis* no Vale do São Francisco, Brasil

WOMEN AND CRIMINALITY

A study into the involvement of women in *cannabis* plantations in the São Francisco Valley, Brazil

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Resumo: Neste artigo são apresentados os resultados de pesquisa que analisou a participação feminina nos plantios ilícitos de *cannabis* em cidades do Vale do Rio São Francisco, no nordeste brasileiro. Foram analisadas as histórias de vida de cinco mulheres que estiveram envolvidas nessa atividade, sob a perspectiva dos conceitos de “trajetórias biográficas” (Dubar, 1998) e de “caminhos” enquanto categoria analítica (Kokoreff, 2005). Entrevistas em profundidade foram utilizadas como método para investigar elementos objetivos e subjetivos das relações entre elas e as instituições e atores relacionados ou não a esse ilícito, revelando que, mesmo numa atividade predominantemente masculina, a participação feminina destaca-se influenciando no aumento da produtividade e rentabilidade; desempenhando atividades específicas; sem tensões para construção de carreira criminal, conferindo certa invisibilidade e, analogamente, proteção contra a repressão policial e violência.

Palavras-chave: Histórias de Vida, Gênero, Plantios Ilícitos, Repressão Policial.

Abstract: In this article, we present the results of an investigation which analyzes the participation of women in illicit *cannabis* cultivation in towns in the *São Francisco* River Valley, in the Brazilian northeast. We will present an analysis of the life histories of five women, who were involved in the trade, from the perspective of the concepts of “biographical trajectories” (Dubar, 1998) and “pathways” as analytical aspect (Kokoreff, 2005). In-depth interviews sought objective and subjective aspects of the relations between them and the institutions and actors related, or not, to this illicit trade. This showed that even in a predominately-masculine environment, female participation increases productivity and profitability. This participation implies the realization of specific activities and not the intention to constitute an on-going criminal career. This gives them a certain invisibility, protecting them from police repression and other forms of violence.

Keywords: Life Story, Gender, Illicit Cultivation, Police Repression.

Initial considerations: Involvement of women in illegal plantations and different approaches to female criminality

This article deals with a little explored theme in terms of drugs: the involvement of women in illegal cultivation in Brazil. The fact that Brazil is not viewed as an important producer of raw materials for the manufacturing of illegal psychoactive substances, hides important, determined social relations and interactions, which occur during *cannabis* cultivation in the region of the *São Francisco* River Valley. The region is characterized on one hand, by long periods of drought, which hamper cultivation via the family agriculture model and traditional agricultural production; and, on the other hand, by the use of modern cultivation techniques, which have lower water requirements, meaning that agribusiness flourishes.

Recognized as a country for the transportation of drugs produced in neighboring countries to other consumer centers of greater significance such as Europe, Brazil is also an important consumer of illegal drugs. Its retail market is considered extremely violent, being responsible for a significant increase in homicides of young men due to conflict between gangs and the intense and no less violent police repression (Fraga, 2013; Misse, 2007).

In the present article, we seek to determine that cultivation, specifically in terms of female participation, does not involve violent means for its realization. To the contrary, it seeks to differentiate the participation of women and recognize them as a specific case, with the singular characteristic of rarely leading to ongoing criminal careers for its participants. We also seek to recognize the particularities of the female condition and scientific production regarding the role of women in crime. Therefore, we continue the debate regarding the role of women in *cannabis* production.¹

Notably, the academic debate has treated crime and criminality as a masculine domain, a point of view backed up by official statistics, which for a long time have indicated male individuals as having a greater propensity than women to feature both as aggressors and victims in a wide variety of criminal acts (Herrington and Nee, 2005). This is the reason why, according to Walklate (2004), criminology for a long time suffered from “gender blindness”.

Despite this, Simpson (1989) underlines that not all criminological research ignored women, but, that frequently, especially during the period prior to the 1970's, research into delinquents and victims of crime was marked by an unconscious sexism, and in its more extreme form, misogyny. From this, many feminist criminologists formulated criticisms arguing that the majority of criminological theories generalized their conclusions, assuming that what is true about male delinquents, also applied in the case of women in conflict with the law.

In this sense, some feminist criticism suggested that criminology as with other social sciences, is androcentric, promoting a study of crime molded by male experiences and understandings regarding the social world (Chesney-Lind, 1989; Daly and Chesney-Lind, 1988).

Given this context, Sánchez (2004) also highlights the scarcity of systematic studies into the evolution of female delinquency in Latin America as being a consequence of the marginalization of criminological research about women, at times characterized as excessively particularized and inapplicable for the deviant population in general.

More recently, criminological studies of women have looked at the specifics of their condition, taking into consideration the positive and negative effects of the circumstances permeating their socialization. Such a premise represents an important advance in relation to discredited theories in the field of criminological analysis generally, such as those inspired by the biological determinism of Lombroso and Ferrero (1895), and the studies of Cowie, Cowie and Slater (1968), Dalton (1991) and Thomas (1897).

With the strengthening of the Feminist Movement starting from the 1960's-1970's, there have been numerous studies about women and crime in reaction to so called criminological androcentrism, questioning the sexist stereotypes that inform classical and positivist criminological theories based on a biological reductionism of female identity (Espinoza, 2002; Heidensohn, 2010; Klein, 1973; Simpson, 1989).

Since the pioneers Freda Adler (1975), Rita Simon (1976), Meda Chesney-Lind (1986) and Kathleen Daly and Chesney-Lind (1988), feminist theory selected as its object of study the social and historical circumstances affecting female law-breakers and women in general. Their studies make up a vast literature regarding the existence of qualitative differences between male and female crime. It investigates amongst other topics: how the social structure of gender restricts and molds female criminality at the same time that it stimulates male criminality; the vulnerability of women in the Penal Justice system in proximity to male violence, and the low rates of female incrimination, as well as specific forms of criminality (such as abortion and infanticide), moving these themes out of the shadows of academic marginality (Steffensmeier and Allan, 1996).

If initially, theories regarding women as a criminal subject proposed explanations for their lack of visibility in crime statistics, currently, their efforts are toward understanding growing female imprisonment. This is because, even with rates of incrimination and punishment, being greatly below that of men, numerous studies highlight the marked growth of the female prison population.

In Brazil, for example, though there continues to be a great difference between the absolute totals of imprisoned men and women, data available via the Brazilian Ministry of Justice, through the National Department of Prisons (Brasil, 2015) shows that, throughout the period between 2000 and 2014, the female prison population in the penitentiary system jumped from 5.601 to 37.380 detainees, revealing an increase of 567,4%, showing a growing trend in the mass incarceration of women. The growth trend for female imprisonment in Brazil, was also observed in studies by Soares and Ilgenfritz (2002), Frinhani (2004), Moki (2005) and Braunstein (2007).

In a bibliographical review of the subject, we can identify different explicative hypotheses for the growth in involvement of women in crime. With this growth having been related to diverse factors, which may or may not coexist, we highlight those that maintain greatest proximity with the theme of the present article, which are: 1) legislative changes, the more punitive criminal policies and a more efficient institutional response to crime; 2) female emancipation, which increased opportunities for the practice of crime; 3) the increase of economic marginalization of women that could represent a greater pressure to commit crimes; 4) increase of poverty and social disorganization in urban and rural communities leading to the weakening of social controls and to adaptive strategies that include criminality as a solution for daily problems; 5) the greater acceptance of women in certain criminal groups, be it owing to changes in the criminal underworld or due to the occupation of spaces left by the imprisonment of men, who are more targeted by police; 6) chemical dependency, which favors the increase of the entry of women into criminality; 7) the performance of subaltern functions in criminal organizations; and 8) the search for social recognition, inclusion and visibility through an affirmation of power via criminality (Guedes, 2006; Helpes, 2014; Schwartz and Steffensmeier, 2004; Soares and Ilgenfritz, 2002).

Though women imprisoned for drug trafficking generally fulfill subaltern roles, Souza (2009) underlines that this fact does not exclude the possibility, today, of a greater participation of women in leadership roles in the trafficking hierarchy. Therefore, Gómez (2012), for example, presents an interesting panorama of the transformation of pathways of entry and performance of women in drug trafficking activities in the region of Sinaloa in Mexico. Be it in cultivation, or in selling of drugs, women from this region profoundly experienced all the dimensions of the world of drug trafficking, from power, wealth and extreme violence, to the risks inherent in the activity such as prison and death, prior to arriving to the leadership of local cartels.

However, beyond the reasons for the growing imprisonment of women for involvement in drug trafficking, another relevant question is to uncover the determining factors for their entry and continuation in the illicit drug trade, as well as their roles and relations with the other actors involved.

For Souza (2009), the introduction of women into drug trafficking occurs through the influence of men with whom they have affective relations, via family relations or independently, for general economic motivations.

We underline that the male influence and that of gender relations, normally, is allied with situations of socioeconomic vulnerability when we analyze cases of women imprisoned for drug trafficking. In this manner, Moki (2005, p. 85) adds that “female unemployment, lower salaries when compared with those of men and an increase of women financially responsible for their families” drive them to undertaking illicit activities, both in drug trafficking, as well as in other criminal activities.

On the other hand, Guedes (2006, p. 568) who does not exclude the already mentioned factors, adds the search “for social recognition, inclusion and visibility”; the “affirmation of power via criminality”; the “sensation of earning easy money, from the ‘criminal’s authority’ with absolute control over the other”; a “non-subjugation to social rules”; and finally, the inclusion in the “ideal of consumption and access to material goods so prevalent within the neo-liberal model”.

Therefore, prisons around the world are full of young “mules”, “airplanes”, “ears”, “vapors” and “managers” of trafficking recruited from the lower, disadvantaged classes and, for this reason, more susceptible to criminalization (Malaguti Batista, 2001). According to D’élia Filho (2007, p. 26), “the only rational for the aggressive model of the war on illicit drugs resides in this point: punish the poor, segregating the ‘outsiders’ from the globalized world”, as one of the implicit motivations of the “war on drugs”.

Material and methods

This article is based on research funded by the Fundação de Amparo a Pesquisa de Minas Gerais (FAPEMIG)² and by the Conselho Nacional de Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico (CNPq).³ Its methodology sought to investigate the life histories of five women who were involved at some point or other in their lives in cannabis cultivation. Each one participated in five interviews across the course of the research. The interviews sought to understand aspects of their familial relations, work lives, and institutional and inter-relational questions, in terms of the activity of cannabis cultivation. To develop the scenario and practices of illicit

agriculture, three further male individuals with involvement in the cannabis trade, three police officers, and two individuals from the judiciary, were interviewed, each one giving two interviews. The anonymity of the people interviewed was maintained in accordance with the ethical commitments underpinning the realization of the study, seeking to assure the personal safety of all of the voluntarily participants who collaborated in the research with their statements. In this way, throughout the text the names used to identify informant's statements are fictitious.

Interviewees were approached through people known to the researchers, who worked for more than ten years in the region. The snowball technique was used. We sought information from people known to us about individuals with whom they were involved who they knew to cultivate or had worked in the cultivation of *cannabis*. As female individuals were presented to us with such characteristics, one would indicate the others in a cumulative manner.

We undertook an indepth exploration of the subjective and objective elements, presented in the interviews, regarding the relations established between the women and other institutions and actors present or not in the cultivation of cannabis that influenced their entry into the illicit trade. We work with the notion of biographical trajectory, which is understood as the way in which each person reconstructs and actualizes, based on a narrative, an understanding of themselves and their world (Dubar, 1998). The analysis considered as important to an understanding of these processes, both the institutional categories that determined objective situations and positions, and individual categories used by the actors in research and interview contexts (Dubar, 1998).

We use the notion of "pathways" as an analytical aspect of these trajectories. The notion is employed by Kokoreff (2005) in his studies into youths from the outskirts of French cities, to designate the pathways that led them to involvement with the illegal drug trade. We use this notion to comprehend the mobility of the women who at one moment are part of the cannabis production and distribution system and at another moment, in institutional and affective relationships separate from the illicit community. This mobility is a fundamental element of the "pathways" which they traverse in their encounters with diverse institutions legitimated or not by moral society. We also seek to characterize, the practice of cultivation in the context of influences and institutions not necessarily stemming from the illicit trade. These include the forced removal of rural families through the intervention of public power, for the construction of dams for hydroelectric plants, and the lack of a more consistent agricultural policy in the region that would support the primary producer who is going

through drought. In this manner, these trajectories are in relationships, which, in many cases, are outside the traditional sense of a criminal career. Cannabis cultivation is located on a continuum occurring in life trajectories that maintain their ties with traditional agriculture in familial agricultural production. It is through this channel that many women enter into the illicit trade without however, ceasing to participate in traditional agricultural practices.

Illicit *cannabis* plantations: compensation agriculture, division of labor, and gender relations

We wish to highlight how, just as with the illicit drug trade in urban areas, there is also a marked socio-economic vulnerability of actors involved in the cultivation of plants considered illicit in the rural areas under consideration. We also find the influence of gender structures and distinctions present both in urban and rural contexts. In this way, the participation of women in illicit cultivation frequently occurs as a strategy to increase the profits of the trade, through the fulfillment of subaltern roles. Leadership roles may also be possible, varying according to the gender relations established by the culture, tradition, and religion in question.

The types of crops in these plantations vary, as well as the form of involvement of the farmer with them. González (2014), when studying coca leaf crops in the Afro-Colombian communities of the Region of Caquetá, found changes in the sexual division of labor after the size of the plantations was reduced. This was notably a consequence of the Columbia Plan, when the so called “bonanza period” came to an end, which included the second half of the 1990’s and the beginning of the 2000’s, characterized as being high production years. Coca leaf harvesting, traditionally a male activity due to its being difficult and labor-intensive, was now undertaken by the women. Currently, it is notable that whole families become involved in cultivation in diverse ways, meaning that women and children also participate in harvesting. The reconfiguration of coca plantations transformed it into a crop of artisanal character of small proportions, meaning that women were involved throughout all steps of the production process and no longer only in food preparation for male workers, as had previously been the case. Prior to this, women who undertook duties at the harvesting stage were “poorly viewed” by the community. The community understood this phase to be a mainly masculine activity, and therefore as presenting conditions unsuitable for women to work in, there being viewed as a negation of their gender identity.

Recent studies into illicit *cannabis* cultivation in other countries show a significant number of farmers from different underdeveloped regions who

produce *cannabis* according to the family agriculture model. It is a compensatory culture, in regions dedicated to agricultural exportation, subjected to ecological degradation and a reduction of arable land. In this context, these illicit activities emerge as a source of employment, income, and improved living conditions in a setting of dwindling profitability from legal agricultural activity (Fraga and Iulianelli, 2011).

According to Perez and Laniel (2004), *cannabis* crops in African countries such as the Cameroons, Guinea, and Lesotho are a compensatory alternative to the decline of agricultural income resulting as much from ecological degradation as from economic difficulties. The high profitability of *cannabis*, resistant as it is to the market variability suffered by traditional products, and the relatively short cultivation cycle (between three to six months), drove the expansion of its cultivation between the 1980's and 1990's and promoted the inclusion of these countries in new markets.

Laniel (1999), in a study into illegal production activities, trafficking, and the use of prohibited substances in Lesotho, a small country located in South Africa, highlights the involvement of small landholders and farmers. He adds that the women work, undertaking hoeing and, occasionally, the application of fertilizer and irrigation, though other phases of production such as harvesting involve all members of the family. Additionally, in recent years, women in the *Qabane River Valley*, seeking to value add to the product, are rolling *cannabis* into cigarettes. Beyond this, many of them are also recruited into transporting the harvest.

In other research, in the *Rif* region, Afsahi (2015) underlines the importance of the inclusion of women in the strategies of alternative development. This includes influencing habits such as their inclusion in areas of illicit cultivation, and in some cases, the reduction of production costs thanks to the unremunerated participation of women and school age children. There are also consequences of this participation at the level of cultivation and in terms of the quantity of drug produced. According to Afsahi (2015) however, even when included by men during certain stages of *cannabis* production, women do not directly benefit from social recognition or an increase in income resultant from this activity. Their visibility varies according to the town in question and does not resemble that of the men.

São Francisco Valley Region and cannabis plantations: extensive illicit cultivation involving many farmers

Decades of *cannabis* cultivation in the *São Francisco Valley Region* created networks of relations between diverse actors both within and outside the region. During a determined period, criminal violence increased, particularly the homicide rate

(Fraga, 2006; Fraga and Iulianelli, 2011). Additionally, with the growth in production in emerging markets such as the Northeastern capitals, which began to demand more product, the Brazilian government, via the Federal Police, started, from the 1990's onward to plan and intensify eradication measures and campaigns. To this end, a police station was established in the city of *Salgueiro, Pernambuco*, whose main function was to coordinate initiatives aiming to combat the plantations and more specifically, economically debilitate farmers, seeking to implement repressive actions during harvest time.

The presence of marijuana in the region has been a long standing one, but cultivation intensified with the emergence of a Brazilian domestic market, connected to the counterculture of the 1970's (Misse, 2007). At the end of the 1980's and during the 1990's, *cannabis* production reached unprecedented levels, placing it amongst the highest in South America. The context of the long lasting presence of the plant in the *São Francisco* Valley and the growth of a domestic marijuana consumer market as well as the displacement of farmers for the construction of hydroelectric power plants on the famous river, led to an increase in illicit *cannabis* plantations in the region (Fraga, 2006; Fraga and Iulianelli, 2011). Other contributing factors were the growth of industrialized agriculture and, additionally, poor conditions for the development of traditional agricultural production, in a drought stricken region with low governmental investment for agricultural development.

Scott (2009) observed that in the construction of the *Itaparica* Hydroelectric Dam, tens of thousands of small farmers were directly and indirectly affected, when their lands were inundated for the formation of this large watery body. The losses for small-scale farmers, who produced according to the family agricultural model, were numerous, impacting technical aspects of agriculture, irrigated along the river banks, as well as urban inhabitants, suppliers and customers. In the absence of better options, the cultivation of *cannabis* emerged as a viable alternative, permitting substantial gains to producers.

In the eyes of many locals, the tropical fruit cultivation, which had already established itself near the main *cannabis* plantation areas in the *São Francisco* Valley Region in the 1970's, also contributed to the consolidation of illicit cultivation. This was because it mobilized a significant contingent of workers subjected to seasonal employment, who frequently did not come from a family agriculture tradition. As such, a portion of them formed a large contingent of the workers in *cannabis* cultivation (Iulianelli, 2000). Establishment of agribusiness in the region also allowed an increase in *cannabis* production due to improvements of roadways and other established infrastructure (Iulianelli, 2000).

Throughout the 1980's, there was an expansion of areas for cultivation and of the use of fertile soil from the islands of the *São Francisco* River, and an inclusion of a larger number of people in the diverse stages of this illicit trade, even expanding later on, to include youths from the first generation of resettled farmers and people in precarious working conditions from large scale agriculture (Fraga, 2006).

The 1970's and 1980's therefore, were characterized as periods of institutionalization of illicit cultivation in the municipalities of the Southern *São Francisco*. New relationships were established and new actors emerged who transformed the scenario of the *Caatinga*. The reports by numerous individuals who vividly lived through this whole period indicate that at this moment illicit networks were forming, which allowed the expansion and stabilization of the business model which would be intensified at the end of the 1980's, and, principally in the 1990's.

The expansion of the criminal network, which was established to make the business viable, took place due to two fundamentals, but distinct factors, which complemented one another. Firstly, there were changes to the struggles and efforts of determined families to control local political power, to dominate the illicit trade, which had started to generate income and wealth. Secondly, there was greater repression from departments responsible for the containment of illicit production activities and the commercialization of drugs. Knowledge of the region, the history of involvement of certain families in other illicit activities such as appropriation of land, political crimes, murders, corruption with public funds and other acts at the local level, were all important factors to establish criminal networks for the expansion of production.

The structural factors that led to the expansion of cannabis cultivation destined for marijuana production in the *São Francisco* Valley did not differ from characteristics common in other parts of the world that led populations to become involved with illicit cultivation. As the UNODC (2015) itself recognizes, illicit plantations around the world are driven by factors that include vulnerability and opportunity, "poverty, economic disadvantage and unemployment are some of the enabling factors of illicit crop cultivation and drug production" (UNODC, 2016, p. 75).

In these circumstances, illicit cultivation is particularly attractive, despite the risks consequent from its illegality, since it produces a durable product with a good final value and attractive market for sales. Generally, illicit crops create rapid gains through products, which can be stored for longer periods and in locations with poor infrastructure. In this manner, illicit cultivation permits the development of an underworld economy and the creation of institutionalized relations between local actors around this illegal economy (UNODC, 2014; 2015).

Despite common developmental factors for illicit plantations, across different international settings, cannabis plantations in the São Francisco Valley involve specific actors created through the intersubjective relations of the region's social groups. We encounter this in a context that lacks public agricultural investment, serious water problems, and an exclusionist economic development based on industrialized agriculture for fruit exportation, with low social flow on for the region.

In this manner, in Brazil, cannabis production is concentrated in one of the poorest regions, whose production developed to serve an expanding domestic market (Fraga, 2006). Therefore, different to the previously cited African countries, the production of the plant in the southern São Francisco region sought to supply a domestic market.

The plantation, its structure, and the role of women

The way farmers are involved in illegal cultivation can be diverse in nature. Generally, however, there is an invitation from someone already involved in the criminal cannabis production network and in the expansion of production. People in search of a role in cultivation frequently seek those already involved in some way in the network. Many farmers recognize that despite the danger for having placed themselves in a position of risk, cannabis cultivation will provide them with gains that no other agricultural activity will give them.

Over the decades, during which time the plantations grew significantly, the relationships between actors in the production process were being molded by repressive measures. If, up until the 1980's it was not difficult to encounter plantations nearby to the main transportation hubs or in plots of land which the cultivators were themselves the owners of, starting from the second half of the 1990's and in the 2000's, new search strategies for plantations were implemented (Fraga, 2015). In general, growers transferred crops to islands of earth that formed in the São Francisco River, notably in the municipalities of Orocó and Cabrobó in the sertão of Pernambuco, or to areas belonging to the Union, such as in the center of the caatinga where they established camps for cultivation. In these places, generally far from cities, farmers remained for four months, the period going from the start of planting to harvest time.

Each of the farmers is responsible for a portion of the land, where the seeds received from the individuals they refer to as boss, are cultivated. The boss is the one who finances the duration of the planting, including sowing and maintenance requirements during the stay at the camp. This can vary from between three to four

months. In this period, the farmer cannot leave the cultivation site, because the group working on the farm fears that he could be arrested and end up informing on the others involved, or even reconsidering his involvement in the enterprise.

However, they never get to know the boss personally. According to various reports, it is the middleman or “cowboy” who is responsible for all the negotiation with and contracting of workers. In this manner, the worker cares for a set quantity of marijuana plants and the investment of the boss is deducted from their earnings.

I produced three and a half kilos per planting. I took care of five hundred. One hundred died, four hundred survived. Of these four hundred, one hundred and sixty were removed, obtaining two hundred and thirty kilos. So you would get up to two kilos per planting, two kilos and thirty for each. Two kilos and thirty-three grams or three hundred grams for each plant, per planting. So I took care of five hundred plantings there. So every day, with the plantings at a distance of one hundred meters, I would go over a fair distance, because I would walk the whole day. Because it was what, four hundred trips for water? Every day, until two o'clock when I would finish. Even because after two o'clock you had to go, you had to tend the farm, right? You collect it so that the plant produces well, you have to have at the most two or three harvests, it produces a lot. And you have to take off the bottom part, because from the part below nothing is produced. It produces what is there (sic) (Farmer 1, 34 years old).

This is a predominately-masculine activity. It requires significant expenditure of physical effort, mainly in the carrying of buckets of water, to water the plantation in areas where there is no irrigation. It also requires an extended stay at the camp, which has little hygiene. Some farmers declare that women cannot bear this type of work, as we see in the following statement:

Because you have to spend the whole day carrying two twenty liter buckets full of water on your back to irrigate where there is no pump. The majority of the time you carry it fifty, one hundred meters distance, up to two hundred meters distance. You have to carry water, two buckets of twenty liters. And it's the whole day, there is only time to drink coffee and then go back again. In the middle of the day you go and get lunch, and go back again until night fall. It is the whole day, for five months. Until the guy goes through it, he goes in fat, but only leaves skinny (sic). (Farmer 2, 25 years old)

However, in some camps it is possible to observe a female presence. This is mainly when accompanied by a man, generally a husband or companion. In these cases, the women can take care of the plantings for which her companion is responsible or cook for the group or for members of the group, since the work requires great effort

and rapid production to achieve greater profit and avoid police measures destroying the plantation. In these cases, part of the payment is made per kilogram of marijuana processed.

There, there were many that were like this, right? There was a commission at the end, they worked on their farm, but they had to have the food ready in time, right at midday, you know? If not, the agreement was broken, right? At the end the guy said 'ah you didn't cook the whole day, you didn't fulfill the agreement (...) totally, one hundred percent' (...) it was just this. Then, for example they said, "you'll cook for me, because in the end I will give you ten kilos". Then they said the duties every day at the right time, seven o'clock with breakfast ready, midday with lunch ready and at dinnertime as well. They did their bit. When, it was all over she had that percentage of hers and it was all okay (sic). (Farmer 2, thirty years old)

According to reports by a policeman who had already worked a long time in the war against cannabis cultivation in the region, the increase in the combat against the illegal crop in recent years, coordinated through the use of technology such as satellites for the identification of farms, provoked the concentration of production on the islands of São Francisco River. This was mainly between the cities of Santa Maria da Boa Vista and Cabrobó, modifying the production on "mainland" islands. Currently, production has been broken up and in place of big plantations, there are smaller ones, in an attempt to hamper the location of the crop. This has changed the configuration of the networks created for production and its expansion.

Policeman — Today, we encounter few plantations on the mainland. So that's all basically. And another thing which is also interesting is that the farms shrank in size. They prefer to plant a small farm here, another small one there. It is difficult to find a plantation of forty thousand plants, which we previously thought of as being a big farm. This year we managed to find only big farms, more than forty thousand. You asked me how this calculation was made? What happens generally in each pit, we call it a pit, they plant 3 to 4 marijuana plants right? Previously, we made the following count, every three marijuana plants would produce 1 kilo of marijuana at that time. Today, each plant produces 700 grams. So the size of the plant increased a lot then. And why did the size of the plant increase a lot? Because they are using follicular stimulants, the fertilizers, right? So today from each pit we manage to take more or less three kilos of marijuana, two and a half to three kilos of marijuana (sic).

Interviewer — that is to say, increased the productivity, is that it?

Policeman — Exactly. So like this they reduced the quantity of plantations, but the productivity is either the same or maybe greater. So the count is more or less like this (sic). (Policeman, 35 years old)

A result that we can observe in the reports is that this strategy, as well as concentrating the production off the “mainland” increased the participation of poorer rural farmers or workers, also meaning that families, who planted smaller quantities, were included in the production process.

Policeman – Like this, we see how, everyday, more poor people are becoming involved with cultivation on marijuana farms.

Interviewer – Always more?

Policeman – Always more, right? We no longer have any big cultivators here in the region.

Interviewer – Sorry. Big cultivators you would call people who?

Policeman – It could be a gang, a family.

Interviewer – Who were the first to do this, is that it?

Policeman – Exactly.

Interviewer – The first to work with the plantations in the region.

Policeman – So in this way, today you will not find anymore gangs which are only and exclusively focused on producing marijuana. You don’t find huge farms. We have a photo here in the police station of a marijuana farm, where if there was a gunfight on one side of the farm and whoever was on the other side of the farm couldn’t hear the gunfire. Due to how big the farm was, right? Today, you don’t find this anymore. You don’t find it. Now, unfortunately, it also seems that the consumption has also increased (sic). (Policeman, 35 years old)

This intensification of production, fragmented into smaller areas off the “mainland”, meant that female participation increased in comparison to other periods, where it was possible to perceive women with duties on the plantation. This new participation however, was also linked to family production.

This is the case with Teresa, thirty-two years old. She is the daughter of a farmer affected by the *Itaparica* dam, in the *São Francisco* River. After being displaced from their land, her parents resided and worked on small land holdings, until they established themselves in a small agricultural village. Her father had a small subsistence farm, which hardly met her family’s needs. At 16 years of age, she went to live with another youth of 20 years of age, with whom she had two children. Throughout the relationship which lasted four years there were many fights, and at times her companion would beat her, even in front of the children. After separating, she had to move to the city and started working in a small local business. There she met a farmer with whom she got married. Through this farmer, she had her first contact with *cannabis* cultivation, since during this time of year she would camp out, working in this area in cities nearby to the one where they lived.

At the start, she feared her partner's trade and, according to her statement, almost separated from him. However, the trade provided them with a comfortable life, which in terms of their standards they would not have had if not for the illicit trade. She maintained her work in the union and took care of her children. After having to leave her job, owing to a misunderstanding with the manager of the establishment, she worked only attending to her domestic duties, caring for her children and the house. Some family difficulties however led her to accept the suggestion by her husband to help him cultivating *cannabis*.

Teresa affirmed that at the start, she only bought the groceries for the camp, buying those provisions necessary for the campers during their stay. Later, she began to stay at the camp, together with other women, who were also accompanying their husbands at the *cannabis* plantation. According to her statement, she worked in the trade for four years, but later on, she decided to leave, because she feared being imprisoned together with her husband and having to leave her children with her mother, who started living with the family after Teresa took on duties in the illicit plantation. When asked if she would return to work there, she responded that, if there was great need, she would return to *cannabis* cultivation. However, for now, she had managed to mount a small haberdashery business in her city with the money earned from the trade. Additionally, according to her statement, her husband also desisted from the trade and they were never arrested.

Cecília, thirty-six years of age, was born in *Santa Maria da Boavista* and from early on helped her father on the family farm. She cultivated cress, capsicum, onion, and cotton, as well as other products for their personal consumption. She sold the surplus to the local CEASA. She was the oldest girl of the five children of the couple. As an adolescent, she participated in the Catholic Church youth groups in the city and in social movements to improve living conditions for the small-scale farmers. Little by little she distanced herself from the social movements, owing to difficulties with conciliating her work duties, study, and domestic chores with the social movements. She finished high school and started to work in a local business.

Despite distancing herself from the social movements, Cecília participated in parties promoted by popular organizations. In one of these celebrations, she met a boy, with whom she would have a relationship and a child. They began to live together with the intention of raising the child. Her companion confessed to her that he worked on *cannabis* plantations at specific times of the year. Initially the news shocked Cecília, but, with time, she was convinced to take up a role in the business buying the provisions. Over time, she wanted to take over other responsibilities,

until they gained some abandoned plots of land where, together with her companion, she put together a small arrangement with water and other production elements and started subcontracting people to care for the small farms. She also negotiated with the “cowboy” or middle-man, who provided her with seeds. Cecília alleged that she worked for five years in this system, but that the heightened repressive measures led her to abandon the illicit trade. These days she has returned to participating in social movements and is putting herself through university. She says that she has no regrets for leaving, despite the resources derived from the illicit trade having provided a better financial situation, since she feels that today her life is calmer out of the trade.

Another way of entering into *cannabis* cultivation is as a family farmer. That is to say, when the whole family cares for a farm and later on sells the produce to the “cowboy”. In this case, the farmer receives the seeds from the intermediary who subsequently, at the time of buying the produce, discounts the value. Owing to its involving the whole family, the women have an important role to play. They are destined to take care of the most delicate tasks such as the separation of male and female plants, pruning during harvest time, as well as watering the pits at specific times of day. The heavier tasks not requiring as much care were generally reserved for the men, such as carrying the gallons of water to water the plantation. In the case of family agriculture, the men generally control the overall process. We observed no cases in which a woman managed the process.

We cite, for example, the story of Lúcia, 35 years old, the daughter of a farmer. Already, at the beginning of the 1980's she had planted *cannabis* on her father's land. In that period, she told us, there was not as much repression and illicit cultivation was located in an area very far from the main house of the site. When she was twelve years old, her father gave her some tasks on the plantation, such as taking care of some of the pits, watering, and separating the male and female plants. According to Lúcia, her father worked many years with cultivation, always with the participation of the family. Once an adult, she married a farmer with whom she had a small land holding. It was owing to the initiative of her husband that she began to plant *cannabis* on the family land. She taught her husband to care for the plantation and it was he who negotiated with the middleman. According to her report in the interview, with the increasing pressure from police repression in recent years, they feared being arrested and ceased to cultivate marijuana, but they remained in the trade for twelve more years.

From a young age, I dealt with marijuana. I've passed nights without sleep and had many dreams, bad dreams because of it. I dreamed that police had arrested me, arrested my husband, beat me, swore at me. But, my father survived and raised the

children using the marijuana plantation. I know that it isn't right, he knew and advised us not to deal with marijuana. He said that he did it because he did not want to see his children die of hunger. I, also, went through difficulties and it was because of the difficulties that I planted marijuana. I don't want to plant any longer, today I and my husband, we manage to survive, thank God, cultivating passion fruit. But I won't lie, it brought me agony, but it brought me good things too. But I don't want it any longer. Living in fear is no good (sic). (Lúcia, 35 years old)

Severina also became involved for many years with *cannabis* plantations in the city of *Belém do São Francisco*. She comes from the family of a pair of farmers who had eleven children and went through various financial troubles. On leaving her parents' house, she got married to the husband with whom she lived and had ten children. She read and wrote poorly, being possible to consider her functionally illiterate. At the time of the interview, she was 45 years old.

Her husband, who cultivated marijuana for many years, introduced her into the trade from about 15 years of age. The family owned a small parcel of land in the municipality, where they cultivated beans, cotton, corn, onions and other agricultural products for survival. Her husband had a connection with the constant ins and outs of the plantations of the illicit trade. When there was heightened repression, she opted to keep her distance, and on perceiving that there were more secure conditions for cultivation, she returned to the activity.

Over the years during which she dedicated herself to cultivation, Severina occupied herself with the task of manual irrigation at specific times, from the farm on the area nearby to her own land. At harvest time as well, she undertook the task of harvesting. All the produce collected from the plantation, which was negotiated with the cowboy, remained the responsibility of her husband. Beyond negotiating the production, her husband also had the responsibility of watering the plantation and at times participating in the harvest. Severina affirms that the *cannabis* plantation brought resources for her family that no other trade could have provided them, but described the monetary gain as "cursed". She lost a son, killed by the police according to her, for involvement in other activities of the drug trade in the city.

Interviewer – What is your role in the plantation? Did you plant or not, did you have to buy the provisions at the time, that is to say, buy the food and cook for the people who planted?

Severina – No, no, I never did the shopping. We did it, we even planted a few seedlings, just a few, more than the others. And then, that's what I ate, which took care of the shopping at home and I ate, I didn't get anyone to plant. Because for us to get someone to do the shopping like that to give these people who I get to work, then we

have to do the shopping, right? But are we able to do this? How am I going to do the shopping?

Interviewer – Did you and your husband plant?

Severina – So my husband would plant some seedlings and I would go and help. Because I didn't have anything else to do. To go by foot from here to there far away, so I kept planting there. I dug a hole and planted.

Interviewer – Did you work in the morning, how was it?

Severina – I would work in the morning to water, then I would leave it at that. Then in the afternoon, two waterings, watering twice a week,.... I watered twice, very early and in the afternoon.

Interviewer – how long was it until the harvest?

Severina – then there were how many months, six months to harvest.

Interviewer – six months?

Severina – six months.

Interviewer – So you didn't just stay there the whole time, right? You went to plant and then you stayed close by here?

Severina – No, I went very early to water and then came home. Then when it was the afternoon again, early afternoon, you'd have to go and water again, and then go home again to sleep. I would plant and leave it there on the farm, like any vegetable, but today I can't anymore (sic). (Severina, 45 years old)

Severina alleges that she left the trade behind over two years ago, since she had been reported, and the family no longer wished to run the risk. During her involvement in the trade, Severina had always managed to reconcile the life of a homemaker, a small-scale farmer of legal agricultural produce, and *cannabis* cultivation. She never directly received from the work and was never imprisoned.

Another unusual or uncommon way to cultivate *cannabis* in the *Sertão* is via the "consortium" system. In this system two or more people choose a piece of land that could be either public or abandoned. This land needs to be difficult to access to hamper repressive measures or the theft of the produce. After choosing the local, one acquires the seeds of the plant that are paid for immediately, or after harvesting. The provider of the seed has a monopoly on buying the produce. In this way, the group contracts people to work and after the harvest they are paid.

An example of the inclusion of women in this system is Joana, 34 years old. She was born into a family of small agriculturalists who always experienced many difficulties. Her mother died when she was fifteen, and being the older sister, she assumed the household duties. At nineteen, she went to work at the rural workers union in her city. There, she came to know some farmers who were involved with *cannabis* cultivation in the region. In conversation with some of them, despite the fear of involving herself in an illicit activity, she decided to participate in a "consortium" operation.

Joana – In the beginning I was very afraid, because everybody here knows of the federal police operations, which have many men and use helicopters and everything. But, when we find some land, plant the seed and put the people to work, the risk is less. I was in the trade a few times. I gained good money that I used to pay debts and improve my life.

Interviewer – Do you still work with this?

Joana – Today, no. I was afraid that someone would report me. It is “bad” money. It is good money, but it makes you afraid.

Interviewer – If you needed to again, would you enter into another partnership?

Joana – I hope that I won’t need to.

Interviewer – But, if you needed to?

Joana – I don’t know. It is very risky (sic). (Joana, 34 years old)

The trajectory of these five women who were involved with *cannabis* cultivation reflects some of the ways in which women end up playing a role in this illicit trade. There are not so many women involved with cultivation when compared to men, due to the difficulties of moving to live in camps for a period of three to five months, which is the main mode of production. Those who involved themselves however, did so differently in comparison with the men. It is still common for many women to involve themselves in the trade due to some male figure with whom they have some sort of affective relationship such as a husband, companion, brother, or father. However, as in Joana’s case, we notice women who start to have an active leadership role. This also reflects the greater participation of the women in many labor and leadership roles in the *Sertão de Pernambuco*, a region in which male domination is still present in day-to-day activities.

In interviews with the women involved in illicit cultivation, we notice that there is a difference for the men in terms of the investments that they make with the money gained from *cannabis*. Men, mainly the young, use the greater part of the resource in activities such as parties and festivals, to buy motorbikes and other goods that will give them distinction. Women on the other hand, use a good part of the resource to improve living conditions for their family, be it by investing in education for their children or by buying the goods that will give them a better quality of life, that is to say, according to their standards, more comfort.

The heightened repressive measures against illicit cultivation by the federal police, led in recent years, to a change of strategy for cultivators. They began to use chemical fertilizer in the plantations seeking to diminish the production cycle to two months, as well as using smaller plantations to avoid identification by satellite. Family agriculture also began to be used with greater frequency, that is, plantations by families of workers on their land or on abandoned land near to their own, avoiding

the seizure of their land in case they were caught practicing this illicit trade. If this tendency was fully realized there would surely be greater participation of women in cultivation, but it is still too soon to confirm this tendency, since the production in the family agricultural system leaves the producer more vulnerable.

Final considerations

The increase in the number of women imprisoned for drug trafficking in Brazil has called the attention of diverse specialists, highlighting a specific thread in the development of this criminality and, further, in strategies of repression on the part of public agents. In southern *São Francisco*, where research for this article was carried out, the situation is no different, since the number of women imprisoned for trafficking has also increased in recent years. However, if we specify the cases of imprisoned women by plantation, the reality changes significantly. It is rare to see cases, as we point out, against women who were reported or caught for trafficking in plantation.

The few existing cases, generally link the woman to a man. A consequence of this is the rare occurrence of women imprisoned for cultivation, which one does not find when we observe the number of women incarcerated for selling or transporting an illicit drug. Though they are much fewer than the number of cases against men, the number of cases against women imprisoned for drug trafficking in the region is more significant than that for cultivation. As we have mentioned, it presents in recent years a marked ascending curve, represented by an increase of 101% in the number of people imprisoned in *Pernambuco* between 2007 and 2014 (Brasil, 2015). On the other hand, the specifics of cultivation, at least in the forms in which it is organized, do not necessarily lead women to constitute an ongoing criminal career (Becker, 2008; Fraga, 2015).

As we have observed throughout this article, the work of women, even though important and present at diverse moments of cultivation, is characteristically invisible. This invisibility, in its turn, seems to protect them, at least until now, from greater police repression and other forms of violence when there is some type of confrontation. There is, also, on the part of the men involved in illicit cultivation, greater care in relation to the women, mainly in cases in which they are involved in the cultivation of *cannabis* within the family agriculture model.

The formation of a criminal career is also not evident. The roles that women play in cultivation do not put them in contact with the most important actors of the criminal trade, even in cases in which they more proactively develop the trade as in the “consortium” model.

The trajectories of women, the target of our original research, show a history of economic difficulties throughout their lives. The resources obtained however, are destined toward the improvement of the lives of their families and, notably, the lives of their children through investment in education.

The routes taken by them traverse diverse trajectories, having, however, two aspects in common: the constant comings and goings in the illicit trade according to necessity, starting owing to difficulties encountered, or the improvement of life conditions, and the investment in activities, which benefit their children and families.

As Kokoreff (2005) clearly states, in relation to actors he observed connected to consumption and trafficking, variable production cannot be disregarded due to the significant differences that are observed in the behavior and habits of people over time. In relation to the women involved in cultivation, there are still significant differences regarding the destiny of the resources obtained in the trade. In comparison to men, the use of part of the resources to reinvest in themselves is evident amongst younger women, be it in aesthetic terms for their appearance or even in their own education, factors not so present in the life histories of older women.

Notes

- 1 A first and insipient attempt at analysis is in Fraga (2015).
- 2 Foundation for Research Assistance of the state of Minas Gerais.
- 3 National Council of Scientific and Technological Development.

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Acknowledgements

This article is dedicated to the memory of Jorge Atilio Silva Iulianelli, a pioneer in studies on illicit plantations in Brazil.

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