

Soraya

LA REINA DEL SUR IN NICARAGUA

Dennis Rodgers

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Seated on a slightly tatty, overstuffed sofa, I watch as Soraya¹ meticulously manicures Wanda's fingernails. Her face a picture of tense concentration, she begins by carefully tracing red and white stripes along the distal bands of four out of five fingers on each hand, before then delicately dotting small flowers on each ring finger.

"I can come back to do our interview later," I say to Wanda.

"No, no, it's fine, Dennis," she replies. "Soraya's almost finished, and in any case, she's *de confianza*, so why don't we just get started? It's not as if she doesn't know about [my husband] Bismarck and his drug dealing. . . . But you know what? If you want a female perspective on drugs, you should actually interview her, not me—I'm just the wife of an ex-drug dealer, but she's *la Reina del Sur!*"

"The Queen of the South?" I ask, throwing Soraya a querying glance. Looking up from her manicuring labors, she smirks sardonically before saying, "You know, Dennis, like in the *telenovela*, about that Mexican woman who becomes a *narcotraficante* [drug dealer]."

"Yes, I get that, I know the series, but she became a powerful drug dealer, and from what I know, you're not a big-time *narco*, are you?"

"Nah, I was just a *mulera* [street dealer], but people call me 'la Reina del Sur,' because I'm strong-willed and independent, just like the real Reina."

Chuckling, I reply, "You do know the Reina isn't real, yes?" before then asking her more earnestly, "but would you be willing to do an interview with me, though?"

"What would you ask me about?" Soraya queries.

"About your life, your family, how you got into drug dealing, manicuring,

your hopes and dreams for the future, that kind of thing. But it would all be confidential and anonymous, and you would only have to talk about what you wanted to talk about. Would that be okay?"

Soraya ponders my request for a few seconds before replying brusquely, "*Dale*, but not today, I've got an errand to run. I'll meet you here at the same time tomorrow." Without waiting for an answer, Soraya then dots a final petal on Wanda's left index nail, packs up her files and polish, and leaves Wanda and me to our interview about her troubles and travails as a drug dealer's wife . . .

Drugs and Gender in Latin America

The drug trade has become a hot academic topic in Latin America over the past two decades. This is arguably especially true in relation to contemporary Central America. On the one hand, as the geographical bridge between drug-producing South America and drug-consuming North America, the region has always been a major transit point for drugs. On the other hand, the particular socioeconomic and political dynamics linked to the drug trade have become so endemic in Central America that many of its constituent countries are considered to be "narco-states," systemically bringing together the authorities, local elites, and criminal actors into forms of co-governance that revolve around, or are profoundly shaped by, drugs. The nature of the drug trade under such conditions has been shown to vary significantly from context to context and from time period to time period. Many excellent studies have traced drug trafficking routes, how local drug markets are collaterally and contingently created, the way that the actors involved can change over time, how control of the trade can be both diffuse and concentrated, and the profound impact that international law enforcement activities can have on its evolution, as well as the way that drugs can significantly shape local social, cultural, and economic life in both positive and negative ways.

One thing that most studies of the drug trade in Latin America—and elsewhere—tend to agree on, however, is that it is predominantly a male enterprise. Such gendered representations are clearly overly simplistic, though. Women are not only obviously often directly impacted by but also involved in the drug trade in a variety of ways. Certainly, my interviews with Wanda in Nicaragua over the years have starkly highlighted how her husband Bismarck's drug-dealing activities have fundamentally conditioned her life, and the existence of female dealers such as Soraya was apparent right from the beginning of the two and a half decades of longitudinal ethnographic

research on gang dynamics that I have been carrying out in barrio Luis Fanor Hernández, a poor neighborhood in Managua, the country's capital city. They are, however, clearly less common than male dealers, and until I interviewed Soraya in February 2020, I had not actively engaged with any during the course of my research. This was largely because the particular—and gendered—nature of my connections into the local drug trade in barrio Luis Fanor Hernández had been through gang members, and for the majority of the duration of my research in the neighborhood, local gang members have always been male.

I had, however, known Soraya for thirteen years when we had the above exchange. I first met her in 2007, as a recent addition to the Gómez household with whom I stay whenever I visit barrio Luis Fanor Hernández. My first stay with them lasted a year in 1996–1997; I subsequently returned for extended periods of time in 2002, 2003, 2007, 2009, 2012, 2014, 2016, and 2020. Soraya became Elvis Gómez's partner in 2003, and although they separated in 2015, she has remained part of (some of) the Gómez family social circle, including Wanda Gómez and her husband Bismarck's in particular, so I have seen and talked to Soraya frequently over the years. Several other members of the Gómez family had mentioned to me at various points in time that Soraya was involved in the drug trade, but it was difficult to know to what extent this was just malicious gossip prompted by her family connections with known local drug dealers, on the one hand, or the often-fraught nature of her relationship with Elvis, on the other. The opportunity to ask her about this directly did not present itself until Wanda openly connected her with drug dealing in her presence, and Soraya admitted to being “la Reina del Sur.”

I was immediately intrigued by Soraya's justification for her nickname, that she was “strong-willed and independent.” Women involved in the drug trade generally tend to be seen through the prism of one of two tropes, either as victims who (collaterally) suffer forms of direct and indirect violence and exploitation as a result of being the mothers, wives, or girlfriends of drug dealers, or else as empowered individuals challenging gendered structures of power and inequality. In both cases, however, drug dealing is seen as something of an exceptional sphere of economic activity, one that is socially autonomous and responds to its own internal dynamics, and the negative and positive gendering inherent in the above tropes are considered to derive from drug dealing itself. My interviews with Wanda over the years had already brought home to me how the trope of the long-suffering drug dealer's wife was very much a caricature, one that divested her of agency and also obscured the way that her life was critically conditioned by other factors

that had little to do with her husband's involvement in the drug trade. An obvious question was whether this was perhaps not also true of the trope of the empowered female drug dealer.

This question is particularly relevant in relation to a broader Nicaraguan context that—like much of Latin America—is profoundly marked by patriarchy, and where the once-famous progressive social gains of the left-wing Sandinista Revolution that held sway in Nicaragua between 1979 and 1990 have been unraveling continuously since the post-Cold War regime change. Certainly, there has been a steady erosion of women's rights in Nicaragua over the past quarter century, perhaps most visible in the total interdiction of abortion introduced in 2006, but also evident in the watering down of laws against gender-based violence in ways that reinforce hegemonic beliefs that enable and normalize patriarchal rule. Such beliefs are embodied more generally in the pervasive notion of “machismo” that Roger Lancaster, in his classic study of the phenomenon, *Life Is Hard* (1992), has defined as a “system of manliness” that draws together ideas about masculinity and femininity into an ideological system that provides templates for accepted and acceptable social behavior patterns on the part of both men and women. Over the years of my visiting Nicaragua, I have been able to observe how deep, enduring, and pervasive these templates are, and I wondered whether female involvement in drug dealing really challenged them.

“Let Me Tell You . . .”

I meet Soraya the following day as agreed, in front of Wanda and Bismarck's house. “Let's go to my place to talk,” she says as soon as she turns up. “The walls have ears here.”

“Sure, no problem,” I answer, getting up from the steps I had been sitting on. “I thought you were friends with Wanda and Bismarck, though?”

“I am, but you can never be too careful,” Soraya replies, before adding, “and I prefer to be in my own space if we're going to talk about me.”

“No problem,” I repeat. “Where do you live?”

“Not very far, on the east side of the barrio.”

We walk down the potholed central avenue of the neighborhood, turning right at the end and then walking another 300 meters until reaching a ramshackle wooden house surrounded by a makeshift fence of barbed wire and corrugated zinc sheets. On the left side of the house is a cracked *lavandero* (sink and washboard), and there is an outhouse on the right. When I first arrived in barrio Luis Fanor Hernández in 1996, most of the neighborhood's

houses had been similar, uniformly displaying a certain infrastructural shabbiness, but over the course of the past two and a half decades, almost half of the neighborhood's building park has been rebuilt, with cement blocks replacing wood, dirt floors being tiled, and toilets and washing facilities moved indoors. One of the major drivers of this infrastructural mutation in barrio Luis Fanor Hernández was the drug trade. Bismarck and Wanda's house, for example, had been completely transformed as a result of his almost decade-long involvement in dealing, from a rickety wooden shack to a sleekly painted concrete construction that boasted crystal chandeliers inside, while other dealers had even gone so far as to add second stories to their houses, something that is extremely rare in Managua's poor urban neighborhoods. When I mention (half-)jokingly to Soraya as we settle down on the porch to talk that her house does not look like a drug dealer's house, she gives me a dirty look, and says, "I've only moved here recently, and I don't deal anymore."

"But you did, no?" I query.

"Yes, but not everybody who deals gets rich, Dennis, let me tell you . . ."

Portrait of a Female Drug Dealer

Soraya Méndez García was born in barrio Luis Fanor Hernández in 1987. Her mother, Gladys, was from a neighborhood *familia fundadora* (founding family), while her father, Jorge, was from Villa Cuba, another neighborhood in the northeast of Managua. They had an on-and-off relationship for the first decade of Soraya's life, meaning that she moved several times between her father's home in Villa Cuba and the Méndez household in barrio Luis Fanor Hernández, which also included Soraya's grandmother, her aunt Tina, Tina's husband, and their daughter. When Soraya was eleven, she "had a problem with my aunt's husband, and my mother and I moved out to live with my father." Soraya and Gladys stayed with him for two years, "but he drank a lot, and would often hit my mother. One day I tried to stop him, and he started beating me with his belt. He beat me really hard, he was like a madman, hitting my face with the buckle, over and over again . . . There was blood everywhere, and he wouldn't stop, until my mother stabbed him in the back with a kitchen knife . . . We then quickly gathered all our things and left, and I never saw him again."

Tina had split with her husband in the intervening period, so Soraya and Gladys were able to move back into the Méndez family home in barrio Luis Fanor Hernández. Soraya's grandmother had died, and her cousin had

married Ricardo, better known as Pac-man (due to his voracious appetite). According to Soraya, Pac-man was at the time the right-hand man of the main drug dealer in barrio Luis Fanor Hernández, a person known as “el Indio Viejo,” and it was through him that she was first drawn into the drug trade. As she explained: “My mother and I moved back in with my aunt after we left my father. There were five of us in the house—me, my mother, my aunt, my cousin, and my cousin’s husband. You know him, Dennis, he’s the one they call Pac-man, so you know he’s a *narcotraficante*. My aunt and my cousin would help him from time to time with his *bisnes*, but this was when the drug trade was increasing, and he had lots to do, and they started asking me to ‘do them a favor,’ to help them. At first it was small things, you know, moving drugs or money from one place to another, or helping them ‘cook’ cocaine into crack, but after a while, I started selling for him as a *mulera*, in the streets.”

“How old were you then?” I asked.

“I was fourteen or fifteen at the time.”

“That’s young to start in that line of work!”

“I wasn’t doing it so much for the money, it was because they were family, you know, they would ask me to help, and I would say, *dale pues*, of course I’ll help you. ‘Take this for me,’ they would say, or ‘Come with me,’ and I’d accompany them when they went to make deliveries, because the police would be less suspicious of me, as a young girl, you know.”

Soraya rapidly graduated to street selling, and even if she claimed “not to be doing it for the money,” she established herself as a successful *mulera*, making around US\$100 a week, a contextually significant sum of money compared to the average (non-drug-dealing) household income of around US\$120 a month at the time. The way she became involved in the drug trade highlights well how the dynamics of the latter often respond to logics that not only entangle both personal and instrumental motivations but are also extremely gendered. On the one hand, her status as a young woman made her instrumentally useful for carrying out certain drug-dealing operations without attracting suspicion, while on the other hand, her familial connection made it difficult for her to refuse to help Pac-man. At the same time, however, kinship relations also led to Soraya subsequently reducing her involvement in the drug trade: “When I had my son, Ramses, in 2007, I stopped selling regularly. When my aunt or cousin needed me, I’d still help, but I no longer did it all the time, just sometimes; when I needed money, I’d sell a few *catos* [packets] here and there.”

Such part-time involvement in drug dealing is by no means unusual. As Gabriel Kessler (2004) has highlighted in his book *Sociología del delito*



Fig. 1.2. Doses of crack cocaine prepared for sale.

amateur, (especially youth) delinquency often occurs in an “amateur” manner, that is, as a response to contingent individual consumerist desires or by taking advantage of spur-of-the-moment opportunities, rather than on the basis of carefully planned out, professional practices. The point at which Soraya decided to stop dealing drugs on a regular basis coincided more generally with a professionalization of the drug trade in barrio Luis Fanor Hernández, and the sidelining of the first generation of “amateurish” *muleros* and *muleras* by a more professional emergent *cartelito*, or “little cartel,” that was still run by el Indio Viejo, but no longer drew on

local youth to sell drugs, except for a few trusted individuals, and mainly involved outsiders. It was at this point that Pac-man actually became el Indio Viejo’s right-hand man, helping him discipline local youth in barrio Luis Fanor Hernández who might have previously sought to sell drugs. He did so through a mixture of carrot-and-stick tactics: for example, on the one hand sponsoring the neighborhood soccer team while on the other hand hiring a couple of experienced former gang members to intimidate any youth not associated with the *cartelito* who tried to sell drugs or who made trouble for *cartelito* drug dealers. Soraya’s direct connection to Pac-man is likely what allowed her to continue selling on a part-time basis during this period.

According to Soraya, she stopped dealing drugs altogether in 2012. This was a time when “the police started coming round a lot to [my aunt’s] house. Although we didn’t keep drugs in the house, and they’d never find anything, my aunt and my cousin were *fichados* [known], and so they kept on coming round. *Me daba nervios* [It made me nervous], and one time, in 2012, I got so annoyed with the police. They were searching my room and breaking my things, and I shouted at them, and they took me, they took my aunt, my cousin, and her husband, and we were put in the district police station jail for three days. It’s horrible there, I tell you, there’s no beds, nothing, only metal frames, no mattresses, and the women who are already there are treacherous, they either tell you to sit or lie down next to them or ask you to give them

whatever you have, and the bathroom has no doors, no walls, it was dirty, and women would follow you in to watch . . . We'd sleep together for security, but it was a terrible *zancudero* [mosquito breeding ground], so you couldn't sleep . . . I cried the whole time, but I was not crying because I was jailed, I was crying for my son, for Ramses, thinking 'What will he think?' 'Who will take care of him?' I was crying because I thought I would never see him again, and that he would know that I'd been imprisoned . . . On the third day, though, the *guardias* [police] came and called my name and I was able to leave. My cousin and her husband [Pac-man] were also released, but not my aunt Tina; she was condemned to five years in prison. It made me think even more, 'What if it had been me?' 'What would happen to my son?' . . . *Eso no es vida andar cayendo preso* [Being imprisoned is no life], and so I decided there and then that I would stop dealing, for my son."

"What about your cousin's husband, did he continue after being released?"

"He continued, which is also why I decided to stop living with them. He still put pressure on me to continue working for him, but I don't do so like before . . . I don't sell for him anymore, at most I just accompany him while he's working, or when he goes and makes deliveries. I just can't continue, for my son."

Bargaining with Patriarchy

There is a revealing bias in Soraya's narrative about her involvement in drug dealing that concerns her aunt Tina, who was in fact dealing drugs long before Pac-man. Indeed, the latter became involved in the business through Tina, rather than the other way round. Tina had been one of three local marijuana sellers in barrio Luis Fanor Hernández in the mid-1990s, along with el Indio Viejo and his brother, and when el Indio Viejo "graduated" to dealing cocaine at the turn of the century, she was one of the first people to whom he "outsourced" the new commodity (also likely partly because they had been lovers in the early 1990s). Tina thus became a *púsher*, buying cocaine regularly (and exclusively) from el Indio Viejo, and then "cooking" it into crack, which she would then sell through a group of *muleros*, or street dealers, among whom was Pac-man. Pac-man took over from Tina as a *púsher* when she was first imprisoned in 2003, and they then worked together when she was released in 2008, until she was reimprisoned in 2012, at which point Tina decided to "retire" for good. Pac-man then continued to deal drugs until he was arrested and sentenced to five years in prison in 2016.

It was Tina, not Pac-man, who recruited Soraya into drug dealing around

2001–2002, although she ended up working mainly for the latter, since the former was imprisoned in 2003. Soraya's narrative, however, suggests that it was Pac-man rather than her aunt who was responsible, clearly because drug dealing is an activity imbued with significant moral ambiguity. Indeed, as Soraya herself complained during our interview, it is often difficult for individuals who choose to leave the drug trade to shake off the negative connotations associated with it, and many dealers who have turned a new leaf often actively try to conceal their drug past altogether. While Soraya did not try to deny her aunt Tina's involvement in the drug trade, her narrative made her involvement less central and dependent on Pac-man (rather than the other way round). This implicitly framed Tina's involvement as a function of machismo, effectively portraying her as a woman who was unwittingly dragged into drug dealing at the insistence of a wayward male relative. As such, Soraya's narrative can be seen as an inverse instance of what Deniz Kandiyoti famously called "bargaining with patriarchy" in an eponymous article published in the journal *Gender and Society* in 1988. Soraya drew on gendered tropes in order to minimize her aunt Tina's involvement in the drug trade and thereby protect her reputation. Such a shifting of the blame is obviously reductive of Tina's agency, but it also highlights how more general patriarchal dynamics condition the lives of female drug dealers. Certainly, my broader research on the drug trade in barrio Luis Fanor Hernández has revealed that there is a critical difference in the way that female and male dealers become involved in the drug trade, with the latter mostly drawn in as a result of having been gang members, while the former come to the business principally through familial and affective connections. This means that women's involvement in drug dealing is fundamentally enmeshed in a range of other social relations and processes, arguably making it more difficult for them to refuse to be involved.

Soraya's involvement in the drug trade over the years has also been complicated in a number of other ways by its entanglement with her relationship with Elvis Gómez. Even their initial encounter was intimately linked to drugs, as she explained: "I first met Elvis in 2001, when he would come and buy drugs from my aunt Tina. He told me that I'd immediately caught his eye, and he would flirt with me [*me venía tirando el cuento*], telling me how beautiful I was, how he couldn't stop thinking about me. I didn't know what to think, I was just fourteen, he was twenty-one, and he had his wife Yulissa and a daughter, but he said he wanted to get to know me, and so he would come and wait for me after school, and we'd go and sit in the park together and talk. I told him that he was too old for me, and that I didn't want any problems with his wife, but you know what men are like, he kept on telling

me that I was beautiful, that I was special, that he loved me, that it was over with his wife and that they were going to separate . . . Eventually I said to him that if he wanted something with me, he had to do it properly and talk to my mother, as I didn't want to have to hide. He agreed, and so I went to talk to my mother to prepare things. I told her who he was, and how he was no longer with his wife, and so on. Then Elvis came to talk to my mom, and she gave him permission to visit me at home, saying that she didn't want problems, so it had to be in the house, not in the streets, and she didn't want his ex-wife to turn up. It was like an official *noviazgo* [engagement]: Elvis would come and see me every day, around 7:00–8:00 p.m., and he would stay until 10:00–11:00 p.m.”

According to Soraya, Yulissa did not realize that this courtship process was going on “for a whole year,” but when she found out, she left Elvis immediately, “although not before burning all of his clothes,” as Soraya told me, rather amused.² Soraya then “began to spend nights with Elvis at his house, although I was still telling my mother that I was staying with a school friend to study together,” and shortly after her sixteenth birthday in 2003, she officially moved in with him. They stayed in the Gómez household for two years, until the end of 2005, before renting a house elsewhere in the neighborhood once Elvis secured a stable job as a taxi driver, but after two years there, “the owner wanted the house back, and we had to move back in with the Gómezes” in 2007, according to Soraya. They then stayed there until 2010, in Elvis's case, and 2012, in Soraya's case.

Soraya did not provide me with much more in the way of details about the first part of this period of her life, except in two respects. Firstly, she said that one year after moving in with Elvis, she realized that he was still seeing Yulissa, and so “I told him ‘I'm leaving,’ and I went to stay with a cousin in another neighborhood. Elvis came to find me, he was calling me, crying, saying that he had made a mistake, that he would never see her again, that he loved me, and he asked me to come back. He came to see me every day for six days, and on the seventh day, I went back with him.” She said that it was this episode that prompted them to start trying to have a child, at Elvis's insistence, and that she tragically suffered two miscarriages in the years prior to their son Ramses's birth, “which made us so happy.” Secondly—and perhaps not unrelatedly—she told me that Elvis had enthusiastically embraced her drug dealing, partly because it ensured that he had continuous access to drugs, but also because of the money that it brought in, and after she moved in with him, they rapidly began to operate “as a team.”

Doña Yolanda, the matriarch of the Gómez family and Elvis's grandmother, put a different spin on things. According to her, Soraya was a noto-

rious crack addict who “corrupted” and “entrapped” Elvis. She had not been happy when they moved in together into the Gómez household, as she underscored angrily during a conversation in February 2020.

“Pah! You could smell them smoking all the time; it was horrible, disgusting. I always lived in fear that the police would come and arrest everybody in the house . . . That woman was a corruption.”

“Come on, Doña Yolanda,” I replied. “Elvis smoked before he met Soraya. And she was only fourteen when they got together, and he was twenty-one. Don’t you think that if anybody corrupted anybody, it was he who corrupted her?”

“No, it was her,” she answered categorically. “Age doesn’t have anything to do with it; she was a drug dealer, everybody knew that, and she involved him in her *bisnes*. Every evening, after she moved in, I could hear them preparing packets of drugs—scratch, scratch [of the taping], whisper, whisper—and then she would leave the house in the middle of the night with a backpack to go and deliver them somewhere. After a while, I couldn’t take it anymore, so I threw them out.”

The fact that Doña Yolanda blames Soraya rather than her grandson Elvis for their involvement in drug dealing is not necessarily surprising (although it is likely also linked to the fact that Elvis has since emigrated to the United States and is a source of occasional remittances for her). But while it is probable that Soraya was the senior partner in the pair’s involvement in drugs due to her kinship relation to her aunt Tina and Pac-man, considering the age gap between Soraya and Elvis at the time, as well as the latter’s quasi-grooming of the former, there are significant grounds to suspect that other, more gendered dynamics were probably at play between them that owed little to drug dealing. Certainly, Elvis’s public demeanor in his relationship with Soraya at the time generally corresponded very much to that of a (stereo) typical macho Nicaraguan man, dominating her verbally and generally acting possessively and “in charge,” and one could speculate that such behavior very likely extended to Soraya’s drug-dealing activities.

There is also another disjuncture between Soraya’s and Doña Yolanda’s narratives. The latter claimed that the reason Elvis and Soraya had to move back into the Gómez home in 2007 was because Soraya stole C\$20,000—approximately US\$1,100 at the time—from Pac-man, and when he came to claim it, she forced Elvis to sell his taxi. As a result, they could no longer afford to pay rent, so they had to return to live in the Gómez home. However, I learned from a drug dealer who was Pac-man’s confidant at the time that he had in fact given Soraya the money to keep, as part of a strategy to spread money and drugs around trusted collaborators rather than risk keeping it all

in one place, and Elvis had helped himself liberally behind Soraya's back to "loans" from this money to feed his drug habit. When Pac-man found out, he took Elvis's taxi as compensation. Soraya was apparently absolutely livid with Elvis about this, something that would tally with the palpable tension that I noted between them when I first met Soraya in July 2007 (but which I had attributed to her being in the last stages of her pregnancy), not just due to the breach of trust but also because it was as a result of this episode—rather than her motherhood—that Soraya (unwittingly) became a part-time drug dealer, as Pac-man no longer trusted her to be one of his primary street dealers.

Double Crosses and Double Standards

The tension that I observed between Elvis and Soraya in 2007 had dissipated by my 2009 visit to Nicaragua, however. Elvis had stopped smoking crack and had found another job as a courier, Soraya seemed to be a contented homemaker, and their son Ramses was a happy, bubbly, cheerful child. Many of the conversations I had with them at the time revolved around Elvis's impending emigration to the United States, sponsored by his mother, who had emigrated there in the early 1990s. Soraya later explained to me that Elvis had said that it was better if he went alone first, to establish himself and then start the administrative procedures to bring her and Ramses over under family reunification rules. Elvis ended up leaving in 2010. He lived with his mother in Miami but had rapidly taken on multiple formal and informal jobs, including working in a Taco Bell, cleaning office buildings at night, and working informally as a motorcycle mechanic and odd jobs man in his local neighborhood. Soraya described how during this period "he would send me money every month," and that on discovering that family reunification required that they be formally married, had come back to Nicaragua in 2011 to do so. He had, however, been able to initiate the procedure to bring their son Ramses over straightaway, and the latter went to live with Elvis in Miami in late 2012.

Shortly after Ramses left to join Elvis in the United States, Soraya "decided to leave the Gómez household and move back in with my mother and cousin at my aunt's, because the Señora [Doña Yolanda] began fighting with me." She said that Elvis continued sending her money, including "extra sums to improve my living space in my aunt's home, expanding it and putting *cerámica* [tiles] in the bathroom, because he would stay with me instead of with the Gómezes whenever he came back to Nicaragua." I stopped in Miami on my way to Nicaragua in February 2014, and met up with Elvis

there. He talked excitedly about being able to bring Soraya over very soon and gave me a laptop computer to deliver to her (although pointedly did not have anything for me to take to other members of the Gómez family). A few months later, however, Soraya said that out of the blue, Elvis “accused me of being unfaithful to him. He said somebody had told him that they’d seen me with a man. I told him it wasn’t true, but he became completely obsessive, he even sent me a photo of the guy who was supposed to be my lover, and would call me at any time, day or night, to check on me, and he would send people to look for me and keep an eye on me.”

“Were you being unfaithful to him?” I queried.

“No,” Soraya replied categorically. “I won’t say I hadn’t thought about it, it’s not easy being alone, and you know what I’m like, I like to party and go out . . . I also discovered that he hadn’t cut things off with Yulissa like he’d told me he had, because when he took Ramses to Miami, he also took his daughter with her with him, which he never told me about . . . But no, I wasn’t being unfaithful. He didn’t want to hear it, though, and he became like crazy, insulting me, telling me that I was a *puta*, and I got so sick and tired of it, I decided ‘fuck it, I’m an independent woman, if he’s going to give me all this shit for nothing, I might as well get together with a guy to give him something to really complain about.”

“That seems a bit . . . impulsive? What happened afterward? I’m guessing that he found out? Did somebody tell him?”

“Yes, but would you believe it, it was Ramses, the little *hijueputa*! Elvis sent him over to see me by himself, and when he went back, he told his father that another man was sleeping in his bed!”

“Ah . . . and then what happened?”

“Then Elvis stopped talking to me, and he also stopped me from communicating with Ramses.”

“I’m sorry to hear that—it must have been really hard for you.”

“*Sí*, I was going crazy, texting him every day, telling him to let me talk to my son, and telling him to bring him back to Nicaragua, that I wanted him to live with me. It wasn’t until Elvis came back to Nicaragua a year later that we talked again. He came to see me with divorce papers, telling me that it was over between us, and that unless I signed the divorce papers and gave him custody, I’d never see Ramses again. He said that if I signed the papers, he’d allow me to communicate regularly with my son, and that he’d bring him back to Nicaragua every two to three years so that I could see him, but otherwise he was going to bring him up in Miami, and that I should be happy that he was allowing me that much contact after what I’d done to him. There was nothing I could do, so I signed the papers, and we were divorced in 2016.”

"I'm sorry about that, Soraya . . . You must miss Ramses so much."

"*Claro*, of course I miss him . . . Even if we talk every few days on WhatsApp, it's not the same. *Idiay*, I gave birth to him, he's my son. Even if, as they say, I didn't give birth to him with strength [*no lo parí, como dicen, con fuerza*], I still carried him for nine months, so of course it hurts me . . . But I say to myself that it's a sacrifice that I'm making for him. It's better for my son to stay over there, because over there he has opportunities, he won't be spending his time in the streets like he would here, he's getting a good education . . . That way he'll become somebody in life, and not just a nobody here. I'm thinking about his future, not mine, although perhaps one day he'll bring me over to join him in Miami . . . He's a US citizen now, so perhaps he'll be able to sponsor me to come and live with him."

At this point in our conversation Soraya fell silent, before then adding bitterly, "And you know what's even worse? All this had nothing to do with my betrayal, but his! Within less than a year of divorcing me, Elvis remarried Yulissa, so that he could start the papers to bring her over there . . . That was the real reason he wanted to divorce . . . I don't think he ever stopped seeing her."

I have no idea who accused Soraya of being unfaithful initially, although she is persuaded that it was a member of the Gómez family, "who were jealous that he sent me money and things, and they never received anything." This would not surprise me, as Gómez family members often made snide remarks about Soraya and complained how "unfair" it was that Elvis was helping her but not them during my 2014 visit to barrio Luis Fanor Hernández. More importantly than who made the accusation, however, the Gómez family's behavior vis-à-vis Soraya contrasted strongly with that displayed in relation to another family member, Winston Gómez, whose partner Nedesca had emigrated to Spain. She regularly sent him money, which he mostly spent carousing around bars with women, something that was universally hidden from Nedesca, despite the fact that, unlike Soraya, she personally got on very well with everybody in the Gómez family. This difference starkly highlights the gendered double standards that Soraya faced. Though by no means surprising in view of the pervasive machismo that permeates Nicaraguan society, the fact that Elvis was able to browbeat Soraya, first into sharing her drug dealing, and then into divorcing him and giving up custody of Ramses, underscores how the empowerment that is often assumed to be inherent in female drug dealing is not only by no means necessarily manifest but is more often than not trumped by broader forms of gender inequality.

Beautician Blues

At first glance, it might seem surprising that Soraya has not returned to drug dealing in the aftermath of her separation from Elvis, as she is clearly struggling economically, and drug dealing—for those who have the connections to get involved, which Soraya does—remains one of the most attractive ways of making money quickly in a poor neighborhood such as barrio Luis Fanor Hernández (despite the obvious risks that it can entail). She has instead set herself up as a beautician, and I asked her about this at the end of our interview.

“When did you start your beauty business?” I queried.

“After the divorce,” she replied. “Elvis was no longer sending me money, so I had to earn a living. I decided to study *belleza* [beauty]. I learned how to do nails, toes, and so on, manicuring, you know, and then I started going around to people’s places.”

“And how is business?”

“*Ahí voy* . . . It’s growing, by word of mouth.”

“You haven’t considered working in a salon?”

“No, I prefer to be *independiente* [independent]. If you work in a salon, you only earn 30 córdobas [about US\$1] on the 200 córdobas [US\$7] that customers pay, while I do home service for 150 córdobas [US\$5] and get to keep it all.”

“Why don’t you set up your own *salón de belleza* in your home, like [a common acquaintance called] Spencer has done for his barbering business, for example? Wouldn’t it be easier than going around all the time?”

“It’s too expensive. Spencer gets help from his mother in the United States, that’s why he was able to set up his barber shop, buying a chair, and all the razors, and so on. I was barely able to buy my beauty tools . . . And in any case, I like going around to people’s places, it’s more interesting!”

Several drug dealers in barrio Luis Fanor Hernández have suggested to me in interviews that Soraya’s home-visiting manicure business provides her with a convenient cover for drug dealing, especially in the present period of increased police patrolling and repression following the failed April 2018 popular uprising against the current Nicaraguan government that has made street dealing more difficult. The fact that Soraya seems to make, according to her, no more than US\$15–\$20 a week from her manicure business, yet is the sole breadwinner in a household made up of herself and her mother, and that she pays US\$120 a month in rent, would certainly seem to support this contention. I, however, believe Soraya when she says that she is no longer dealing. She is clearly an extremely resourceful and resilient person, and

frequently engages in a variety of odd jobs to make ends meet, including some that she would almost certainly not take on if she were still dealing drugs due to their low-paid and socially demeaning nature, such as temporarily working as a maid for Wanda and Bismarck for the two weeks that they put up a research collaborator who came to visit barrio Luis Fanor Hernández with me in February 2020. Soraya is very aware that there continue to be a lot of rumors about her, but she was adamant in our exchanges that she no longer sold drugs:

“So, you haven’t gone back to dealing drugs, even part-time?” I probed.

“No. I’d tell you if I had, but those days are really behind me, I’ve retired,” she replied firmly.

“Then why did Wanda call you ‘la Reina del Sur’ the other day?”

“Pues, people call me that because everybody knows that I used to sell, they started calling me that many years ago, and the name has stuck, even though I’ve stopped dealing . . . But you know what, although I’ve retired from that kind of *bisnes*, I still like the name and being associated with the real Reina in the *telenovela*, even if my life is nothing like hers . . . She’s *tuani* [cool],” Soraya said a little wistfully.

“Did you see the second season [of the TV show]?” I asked her.

“No, why?”

“Well, in that one she’s retired, but then her daughter is kidnapped, and she becomes a *narcotraficante* again to get her back . . .”

“Por siempre la Reina!!!”

Soraya’s story clearly suggests that the putative trope of the empowered female drug dealer is more complicated than is frequently assumed. On the one hand, this is because drug dealing is unquestionably a highly gendered activity, but on the other hand, it is also due to the fact that it is gendered in a way that intersects with other gendered processes and practices that have little to do with drug dealing itself. This is because drug dealing is a fundamentally embedded economic activity that is inevitably conditioned by broader social structures and practices such as patriarchy and machismo. Just as Javier Auyero and María Fernanda Berti (2015) highlight in their book *In Harm’s Way* how different forms of violence that are typically considered discrete and analytically distinct phenomena in fact “concatenate” together systemically across different social spheres and activities, the same is also true of gender inequalities. Ultimately, then, what Soraya’s story reveals is

that rather than empowering her, drug dealing more often than not traps her in a web of powerful patriarchal constraints, compounding these in ways that fundamentally limit her life possibilities and aspirations.

At the same time, however, to view Soraya solely as “trapped” is not correct either. Her life is clearly marked by constant struggle and endurance in the face of different forms of domination and oppression, but she also frequently and persistently seeks to confront and challenge her predicament. Certainly, this was evident in the WhatsApp exchange I had with Soraya on March 8, 2021, after my phone alerted me that she had updated her status. She had uploaded a picture of herself drinking at a nightclub, overlaying it with the following text: “Today is international women’s day, and we celebrate the power of independent and autonomous women! We are beautiful, we are strong, and we can do whatever we want!” Such behavior on Soraya’s part was by no means unusual. She frequently uploads photos of herself engaging in hedonistic activities via her WhatsApp status, often accompanied by messages celebrating her “independence” and “power.” But that day’s upload contrasted especially starkly with those of other women in barrio Luis Fanor Hernández with whom I am in WhatsApp contact, whose status updates all associated International Women’s Day with “love,” “being taken care of,” or “a celebration of femininity,” and whose photos showed them being kissed, hugged, or pampered by their husbands, boyfriends, or children . . . I immediately wrote to Soraya to wish her a good day, saying that I hoped that she would have fun, and also to tell her that I’d started to write this chapter “about when she was ‘la Reina del Sur.’” A few minutes later she replied: “*Por siempre La Reina!!!*” (“Forever the Queen!!!”).

Notes

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1. This name is a pseudonym, as are all the names of people and places mentioned in this chapter.
2. In retrospect, it seems improbable that Yulissa did not at the very least harbor suspicions, especially as Elvis’s involvement with Soraya was frequently alluded to by other Gómez family members in rather unsubtle ways, for example, nicknaming him “el Árabe” (apparently drawing inspiration from an Egyptian *telenovela* about a sheikh and his harem being shown on Nicaraguan television at the time). Yulissa was, however, supposedly conducting an affair with another

member of the Gómez household at the time, which might explain why things did not come to a head immediately.

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