

# The appeal of ‘dangerous’ men. On the role of women in organized crime

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**Abstract** Women living at the edge of poverty often find themselves attracted to ‘dangerous’ men. Many of these women find themselves uncontrollably drawn to men who have made a career in crime. Curaçao women living with men involved in the drug economy in the Netherlands or on the island of Curaçao are no exception to this rule. The fact that these women are attracted to this kind of man often leads to an environment where boys are raised to become ‘dangerous’ sons. Once grown up, these boys will in turn attract female contemporaries who exist at the margins of society. This article attempts to explain how this vicious circle can be broken.

**Keywords** Curacao women · Organized crime · Education

## Introduction

In recent years, a number of biographies have been published of women who shared the lives of men involved in organized crime (Carpenter 1992; Dubro 1988; Durante 1998; Edmonds 1993; Giovino and Brozek 2004; Milito 2003; etc.). What most of these stories have in common is that the central characters are attracted to men who can offer them a better life than they had before. Without exception they are women who grew up in less than fortunate circumstances. They often come from large families with parents who had to struggle to make ends meet, and for most of them the future seemed to have little in store. Virginia Hill, mistress to the notorious gangster Bugsy Siegel, was described in the press in the 1940s as ‘the most successful woman in America’, but it was unknown to most people at the time that she had managed to escape a childhood of grinding poverty. Her family was so poor that she had never worn shoes until she was 17 years old. During her relationship

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with Siegel, Virginia Hill became a superstar whose glamorous lifestyle served as a model for many young women.

The girlfriends, mistresses and wives of men involved in organized crime have more in common than just their humble origins: they were all women who loved life in the fast lane, with its fancy cars, trendy restaurants, dazzling jewellery and pricey designer clothes. But apart from the financial benefits that came with these relationships there were other reasons why these women were attracted to men who had made a career in the underworld. Arlyne Brickman, who was romantically involved with several members of the New York mafia, told the author of her biography that she had been attracted to ‘dangerous’ men from an early age. In a book about her life at the side of several well-known mafiosi, Georgia Durante described the sensation she felt when she was standing next to a man who could inspire terror in other people. Virginia Hill found herself uncontrollably drawn to Bugsy Siegel. According to the author of a book on her life and death, she suffered from a character flaw common to most women who are attracted to mafiosi, namely that she equated violence with passion. Siegel was probably the most violent man Virginia Hill had ever met in her life, but to her he was also the most passionate man she had ever known (Edmonds 1993: 109).

### **Curaçao women and their connections to crime on Curaçao and in the Netherlands**

The life stories of the partners of famous gangsters show many similarities to the stories of Curaçao women whose partners operate in the drug economy on Curaçao and in the Netherlands. These women are also drawn to ‘dangerous’ men and although the majority of Curaçao men involved in the world of drugs will never rise to the upper echelons of the criminal hierarchy, the principle of the attraction they exert on women is the same. These men too tend to alternate between violence and passion and this seems to make them irresistible to many of the women around them.

The atrocities perpetrated by the mafia are obviously of a different order of magnitude than the crimes committed by Antillean drug dealers, but this does not mean that there are no similarities between these two groups of criminals. The Italians who ended up in a life of crime after moving from the poorer regions of Italy to the United States share a background of chronic deprivation with many of the Curaçao men who migrated from the Antilles to the Netherlands. In addition, both groups retained close ties with their country of origin, which allowed for the development of transnational criminality. Another resemblance between the two groups is the role played by women, particularly in regard to their involvement in the crimes perpetrated by their partners.

Not much has been written about the role of women in encouraging their partners to commit crimes. The existing literature usually assumes that women have an interest in keeping their men out of trouble and it has indeed been shown that there is no better remedy against a career in crime than ‘a decent girlfriend’ (Bovenkerk 2003: 267). It is also often assumed that women, if at all, only turn to crime under the influence of the men in their lives. But the reverse question as to whether or not women can sometimes encourage their partners to engage in crime also deserves

attention. The current literature tells us little about this type of relationship. This leaves a gap in our knowledge, given that the way in which women view the crimes of their partners can probably tell us a great deal about the criminal tendencies of their offspring.

This article seeks to explain why it is that a significant number of women who are attracted to ‘dangerous’ men sooner or later find themselves involved in criminal activities. In the following sections, I will first give an overview of the methodological framework of my research and then compare the wives and mistresses of mafiosi with Curaçao women whose partners are active in the drug trade. I will then discuss the family situations and examine the influence of Curaçao mothers on their children. Women who are attracted to ‘dangerous’ men often create an environment in which boys are raised to become ‘dangerous’ sons, who will in turn be attractive to young women. The present article examines the background of this development.

## Methodology

The empirical material used in this article is derived from ethnographic research on Curaçao families in the Netherlands whose members are active in the drug economy. The research was carried out over three time periods (1993–1997, 2004–2006, and 2006–2008) and focused on families with one or more members operating in the drug trade in the Netherlands or in transatlantic drug smuggling between the Netherlands Antilles and the Netherlands.

Given the difficulty of gaining access to these types of families as an outsider, I established my first contacts through prisons and young offenders’ institutions in the Netherlands. This is where I formed connections with Curaçao men imprisoned at the time, who subsequently introduced me to other members of their families. As I got to know more people, it became easier to get in touch with other families. I associated intensively with these families throughout the field work periods, spent many hours at their homes, and tried to become part of their lives as much as I could. On Curaçao, I also paid regular visits to families involved in the drug trade. In this way, I was able to gain insight into the transnational ties between families in the Netherlands and families on Curaçao, which appeared to be growing in importance and intensity, especially with the spread of the internet. In addition, I carried out ethnographic research on the streets, which allowed me to build up an accurate picture of the street trade in the Netherlands. The latter type of research mainly focused on men, but since I was also a frequent visitor to the women’s homes—and have been for over a period of more than 15 years—I began to notice the increasingly important role played by women within the drug economy.

I have tried to study criminal Curaçao families as much as possible ‘from within’ (i.e. from an emic perspective). Descriptions from the perspective of the informants themselves can offer a wealth of information, lead to a better understanding of social phenomena, and dispel misconceptions resulting from prejudice or lack of information (’t Hart et al. 2001). The present research was based on a three-pronged approach. Firstly, interviews were conducted with family members. All interviews were recorded on tape and subsequently written down verbatim. As the

interviews progressed, it became evident that I was getting an incomplete picture of the lives of my informants. The fact that I was a female researcher probably affected the results of the interviews and I soon realized that my informants often gave socially desirable answers. Some informants even kept apologizing to me ('maybe I made a mistake' or 'this is how we think on Curaçao, but perhaps we're wrong'). Secondly, given the fact that people often say one thing and do another, the interviews were complemented by participant observation, which allowed me to compare verbal statements with actual behaviour. My observations were recorded in a diary. Thirdly, a large number of my informants allowed me access to their police records when I interviewed them in prison. Some had no previous criminal record and some were small-time offenders, but others had extensive police records which enabled me to reconstruct a large part of their life in the Netherlands. These records also proved to be a useful tool for verifying the life stories told by my informants. As it turned out, some offenders chose to keep silent about certain offences (especially when their victim was a female), but on the whole, most of them presented me with a more or less accurate account of their life which largely corresponded to the entries in their criminal record.

Most of the approximately 100 detainees I interviewed introduced me to one or more of their relatives, but I was unable to gain access to all the families I approached. Some families regarded me as a confidential advisor and immediately allowed me into their homes, but others were more suspicious and as a result I spent a great deal of time and effort trying to win the trust of these families. In some cases I was successful, but other families never let me into their lives no matter what I tried. Still other families refused all cooperation from the start. These were usually families in which almost all members were involved in criminality, as I learned from informal conversations with individual family members. Unsurprisingly, these families preferred to go about their business without the prying eyes of a criminologist. My initial design had been to stay in contact for an extended period of time with all the families with whom I had made a connection, but this proved to be unrealistic. I was able to forge long-term relationships with at least 15 families, but many other families made little effort to maintain their relationship with me.

Given the fact that my presence as a female researcher inevitably influenced my informants' behaviour and responses, I tried to spend as much time as possible with the various members of the families. Multiple 'snapshots of daily life' allowed me to see through my informants' presentation of self and to develop an understanding of the realities of their situation. In the course of my fieldwork I was frequently faced with ethical dilemmas, as I was often better informed about the delinquent behaviour of their children than the mothers themselves. Some of the women who saw me as a confidential advisor expected me to tell them everything I knew about their children, while others tried to use me to put pressure on them. Since these youngsters had given me their trust, I was ethically bound not to tell 'third parties', including their parents, about certain subjects and conversations that were supposed to remain confidential. This was not always easy, as I had become friends with their mothers and I often found it uncomfortable not to be able to share certain information with them. In situations such as these, I was forced to perform a balancing act between my roles as researcher, confidential advisor, and friend of the family.

Qualitative research has often been criticized in regard to the so-called ‘front stage/backstage dilemma’, which is based on the notion that, regardless of the researcher’s understanding of the discrepancy between what is said and what is done, some things will always remain hidden. This touches on a crucial aspect of qualitative research, i.e. the reliability of the empirical data. As a guide to maximizing the validity and reliability of data obtained from participant observation, Bruyn (1966) identified six indices of ‘subjective adequacy’: time, place, social circumstances, language, intimacy, and consensus. In my fieldwork, I have tried to enhance the reliability of my findings by adhering to Bruyn’s criteria. This was firstly achieved by spending as much time as possible in the field (time). Direct and personal contacts with my informants were made and maintained in their everyday environment (place). The fieldwork was carried out in a variety of settings (in homes, on the streets, at parties, in bars, in prisons and young offenders’ institutions, etc.) (social circumstances). In the course of my fieldwork, I became more proficient in the native language of my informants, which enabled me to overcome language and communication barriers (language). By developing personal relationships with my informants, I was able to participate in their activities and conversations and became involved in problems usually considered private matters within the Curaçao community (intimacy). Finally, my findings and interpretations were often confirmed by my informants, both directly (by repeat conversations on the same subject) and indirectly (by observation of behaviour) (consensus).

### **Women as unknowing partners in crime**

In the early literature on organized crime it was assumed that women were only vaguely aware of their husbands’ activities. Especially within the Cosa Nostra, the Sicilian mafia, women were kept in the dark about business matters as much as possible. Confiding in one’s spouse amounted to a betrayal of the oath of loyalty to the Cosa Nostra. But in practice, it was not always easy to keep business and family life separate, as the Italian mafia expert Pino Arlacchi has shown in his books. After all, the women who married mafiosi often came from mafia families themselves. They had imbibed Cosa Nostra from childhood and were therefore well acquainted with the social world of their husbands (Arlacchi and Calderone 1992). In spite of all this, the wives of mafiosi were usually portrayed in the literature as homemakers, in charge of raising the children and ready to serve their husbands at all times.

One of the reasons why, for such a long time, credence was given to the idea that the wives of mafiosi were not, or only vaguely, aware of their husbands’ activities, has a lot to do with the fact that much of the research was based on statements made by men involved in the underworld. These men told the ‘mafia experts’ (who were also mostly men) that women were formally and practically excluded from membership in the organisation. Indeed, one of the initiation rituals a candidate had to undergo in order to become a ‘man of honour’ entailed an oath concerning the role of women: they were not to be told about the affairs of the organisation. According to Renate Siebert, who has written extensively on the role of women in the mafia, the rare observations made by mafiosi on the role of women all point in the same direction. Women are invariably described as icons of male fantasy: as

exemplary mothers wholly dedicated to their families or as obedient wives who are completely unaware of the violence perpetrated by their husbands (Siebert 2001: 10). Safely tucked away behind a veil of ignorance, these women are supposedly nothing more than passive witnesses to their husbands' business affairs (Longrigg 2004: vii). As wives, daughters, sisters, and mothers, these women also provide credibility to the shady activities of the male members of the family, especially when their dealings are hidden behind a façade of respectability (Siebert 1996: 110).

Within the Curaçao criminal groups I have studied, there is no degree of organisation comparable to that of the Cosa Nostra; there are no initiation rituals and there is no oath regarding the role of women. But on the face of it, it would seem that the women in these groups are also kept out of their partners' affairs. The question is whether or not this assumption is valid. The fact that both communities are reluctant to acknowledge the role of women in criminal activities has a lot to do with the way in which women are generally regarded. Traditionally, both communities place a high value on motherhood as the defining characteristic of women (Ingrasci 2004: 9). Both Curaçao and Italian women from the lower classes are, first of all, viewed as mothers, whose principal task is not to engage in criminal activities, but to raise children. Women do not go out into the streets where it all happens, but instead occupy themselves with domestic affairs and will do whatever is necessary to keep the family's head above water. Assumptions such as these have contributed to the idea that women in criminal environments know little or nothing about their partners' activities (Dino 2004).

Over the years, this idea has been eroded by the growing realization that the separation between the 'home front' and the crimes perpetrated by the male members of mafia families is not as strict as previously assumed. Subsequent studies have shown that the wives of mafiosi have gradually become more fully aware of their husbands' activities. It has since become more widely accepted to question the role of women as unknowing partners at the side of their husbands and the need was acknowledged to reconsider the image of women within organized crime (see e.g. Graziosi 2001). Questions were raised as to whether or not these women were really as unknowing and innocent as was originally thought. Were they not the ones who perpetuated the ideology of honour by reminding the men of their duty to respond with violence when the occasion called for it? (Bovenkerk 2003: 270). And were they not also responsible for passing on the culture of the mafia to their sons? (Siebert 1996) Were the mothers as primary educators not in fact the ones who instilled the values of the criminal world into their children? There was obviously a need to revise the existing literature, predicated as it was on the assumption of negligible involvement by women in the crimes of their husbands.

### **Women in crime: from a supportive to an active role**

As I enter Marisa's garden, I notice her boyfriend's clothes hanging on the clothesline. He has told me that the clothes have been soaked in cocaine the night before and are now drying for him to take with him when he returns to

the Netherlands tomorrow. Carefully, I try to find out why Marisa is suddenly willing to assist in her friend's smuggling operation, because she has always refused to do so until now. Apparently desperate, she tells me that she goes to church every Sunday, where they tell her that smuggling drugs is wrong, and that she hasn't done it for a while for that very reason. But she is poor, she can barely pay her bills, and she's getting tired of being poor. That's why she is helping her partner. He would do it anyway and she can't stop him. When he gets to the Netherlands, he will send her some of the money. (...) She has several women friends who smuggle drugs and none of them have ever been caught, and that's why she started doing it too. With God's help—she always takes devotional pictures with her on the plane—she has several times managed to smuggle drugs into the Netherlands in her suitcase.

Apart from the prevailing image of women as being largely oblivious to their partners' criminal activities, it was also long thought that women themselves were rarely if ever involved in crimes. In his historical study on organized crime in 1920s New York, Alan Block (1979) was one of the first to demonstrate that women were actively involved in criminal enterprises as madams, loan sharks, thieves, and fences, who used the proceeds of their operations to invest in real estate or in the sex industry in the seedier parts of the city. Block criticised the existing literature for generally portraying women engaged in criminality as the helpless victims of ruthless men. In a similar vein, Edmonds has shown in his biography of Virginia Hill that she was involved in all sorts of underworld activities long before she ever met Bugsy Siegel. Dubro and Rowland (1987) described the life and works of Rocco Perri, also known as the Canadian Al Capone, who forged a smuggling empire stretching from Canada to the United States. He accomplished all this with the help of his two wives, who actively participated in his illegal activities, apparently without the slightest compunction. A number of other authors have also pointed to the role of women assisting major crime bosses in the United States (see e.g. Calder 1995).

My own research on Curaçao women whose partners are active in the drug economy seemed at first to indicate that these women were rarely involved in their partners' drug dealings. In recent years, however, it has become apparent that a growing number of women are beginning to play an increasingly important role in the drug business. Some of them have been able to establish a position in collaboration with their partners, while others were successful in setting up a business of their own.

In the early years of my fieldwork, I almost never came across Curaçao women engaged in the drug trade. Most women preferred to stay away from it, with the exception of those who had been accustomed to drugs from an early age. At the end of the 1990s, when the opportunity for large-scale drug smuggling from the Netherlands Antilles to the Netherlands presented itself, the situation changed. For women trapped in desperate economic circumstances, the drug economy provided a welcome source of income. Initially, the women mainly acted as facilitators of their partners' activities by stashing drugs or weapons or keeping a look-out for the police. Sometimes they ran little errands when their partners were unavoidably detained. This usually involved the sale of small amounts of cocaine and other odd jobs.

The next stage saw Curaçao women being used as drug smugglers, unlikely to be stopped by customs officers, especially not when accompanied by small children. As airport screening procedures were increasingly tightened, Curaçao women began to enter other fields of drug-related criminality. More and more women were recruited to launder money, to make travel arrangements and provide accommodation for drug smugglers, to look after the business when their partners were in prison, and to open their homes to fugitive accomplices of their partners. There were also women who managed to set up their own drug operations. These were usually women who learned the ropes through their partner's involvement in the drug trade. After a separation or a break-up in the relationship these women found it relatively easy to set up their own drug-dealing enterprises, given that they had already acquired the necessary contacts and skills needed to survive in the drug trade, plus the fact that women do not figure prominently on the police radar.

Latifa and her partner were arrested for running an organization providing shelter to drug smugglers working between the Antilles and the Netherlands. Several times, she has smuggled drugs herself, but is now engaged in organizing smuggling operations and laundering money. They were arrested together and her friend is in jail too. 'I was there when they went to pick up someone from the airport and the officer said I was an accomplice', she tells me. At first, it was only her friend who was involved in smuggling drugs, but when Latifa's financial situation became more and more difficult (she got fired from her job), she decided to try it for herself. When her friend is in jail, she looks after his business.

The fieldwork also revealed that many women not only facilitated the crimes of their partners, but also influenced their criminal careers by never putting the slightest obstacle in their way. This was in itself not surprising since the women benefited from the money earned by their partners, but it also became apparent that some men were pressured by their women to persist in their delinquent behaviour. Most of these Curaçao men have children with different women without forming lasting relationships. They have no place to stay of their own and they move in with one woman for a day or two before moving on to another partner. The women consciously try to preserve this situation, because it would not be in their interest for their partner to set up an independent life. Instead, they make sure that he remains dependent on them by giving him a place to sleep, by cooking for him, by doing his laundry and by satisfying his physical needs. As soon as the men are no longer dependent on them, these women will not only lose their partner's love and affection, but also a major source of income. To a woman who cannot afford any luxuries unless her criminal partner slips her some cash, it is important to perpetuate the precarious position he is in. In this way, the men are under constant pressure from the women to support them financially. Men who have fathered children are expected to provide for their family and most men strive to fulfil these obligations as best they can, but this also means that the men have no option but to continue their criminal activities. Not only are they expected to support their children, but they will also be looked down upon if they are unable to shower their women with luxury gifts and make sure that they look 'well taken care of'. As I discovered, there are

various ways of capitalizing on a partner's business success. Some women refused to cook for their partner in times when business was good, but instead expected him to go to a takeaway-restaurant and bring home food for the whole family. Other women asked their man to hire an expensive car to drive the children to and from school. These women have every reason to encourage their partner to stick to a life of crime rather than mending his ways, because they have a pecuniary as well as a social interest in the continuation of his criminal activities.

Maricela gave birth to her third child at the age of 22. Her partner Raymond has been involved in the drug trade since he was a teenager. Maricela does everything she can to support his drug activities. Sometimes she keeps watch for the police, while her mother stashes the money made in the drug trade and offers Raymond a safe place when the police are looking for him. Maricela was arrested once, when, together with Raymond, she carried drugs from the Antilles to the Netherlands. After receiving a community service sentence, she never smuggled drugs again, because her first priority is taking care of her children. She is still partly responsible for keeping Raymond's business going, because she benefits from it.

It has been shown that women living at the margin of society are often driven by self-preservation to support, facilitate, and thereby perpetuate the criminal behaviour of their partners (Fiandaca 2007). In other words, the picture that is emerging suggests that women are not only often aware of their partners' criminal activities, but also frequently play an assisting role, or are themselves involved in various forms of criminality. One reason why women are nowadays more often recognized as active players in the underworld has to do with the diverse social changes responsible for the growing participation of women in all manner of crime since the 1980s. Crime continuously adapts itself to changing economic and legal circumstances and this may explain why women have taken on a more prominent role in the wide spectrum of criminal offences (Longrigg 1998: 134).

When analyzing the participation of women in crimes committed by the mafia, it is important to distinguish between different levels of involvement. Women can play a variety of roles within the criminal enterprise and their involvement depends to a large extent on whether or not they were born and raised in a mafia family (Siebert 2001: 11). It goes without saying that women who grew up within the clan feel a strong sense of loyalty towards family members and are therefore more readily inclined to participate in their criminal activities. The same dynamic is at work when it comes to Curaçao women who are active in the drug economy. Their willingness to participate in drug deals is largely dependent on whether or not they come from a family whose members engage in the drug trade and where these practices are considered acceptable (Van San 2003). In addition to those born and raised in a culture of crime, there are also women who have little or no prior experience with the drug trade, but are slowly dragged into it by the men they love. Finally, there is an army of women standing by, ready to be deployed in criminal operations. There are numerous examples of Sicilian women being recruited to smuggle drugs into the United States. In recent years, a growing number of women on Curaçao have similarly been enlisted to assist in transatlantic drug smuggling operations between

the Antilles and the Netherlands. Against a background of structural unemployment on the island of Curaçao, the illegal drug sector was able to offer these women new and lucrative economic prospects. By the end of the 1990s, the drug economy was flourishing and it provided a large number of women with an alternative way to earn money by smuggling drugs as so-called *mulas* (mules). In this way, the role of women in organized crime has gained in importance in Italy, the United States, and other countries, as well as in the transatlantic drug trade between the Antilles and the Netherlands (Bovenkerk 2003: 270; Longrigg 1998: xvii).

It should be noted that, traditionally, most mafia women have always been involved in criminality, if only from within the household. For instance, the women in the Neapolitan Camorra have long been part of a support system where the domestic sphere functioned as an extension of the family's criminal activities. The women were responsible for the smooth running of the support network, for creating the conditions encouraging their sons to become 'good *camorristi*', and for selling contraband and receiving stolen goods (Siebert 1996: 169). When the Neapolitan Camorra was transformed into an efficient, modern, moneymaking machine with a flexible structure, the role of women within the organisation also changed. The women's traditional supportive role has now shifted to a more prominent one, and some women have become actively involved in the decision-making process, especially when their husbands are temporarily out of the picture. Generally speaking, the changing role of women in the Camorra can be regarded as a reflection of broader changes in society as a whole. Women in Neapolitan society have become progressively more emancipated, as can be seen in the growing number of women employed in the public sector (Allum 2007: 10).

In recent years, Curaçao women have also become increasingly involved in criminality from within the domestic sphere and they too have come to the fore but, in contrast to the women in the Neapolitan mafia, their growing prominence in the drug trade cannot be attributed to a process of emancipation. The labour force participation of Curaçao women without much formal education has hardly increased over the years. The fact that these women have become more involved in criminality has little to do with their social advancement, but rather more with the criminal opportunity structure that emerged at the end of the 1990s, which allowed these women to earn considerable sums of money by smuggling drugs (Van San 2006). The women engaged in these operations are for the most part marginalised women who are unable to resist the temptations of the drug economy. It is their economic vulnerability that has led to their increased participation in criminal activities rather than a process of emancipation.

### **Raising boys to become 'dangerous' sons**

There is another important aspect to the role played by women both within the mafia and within the Curaçao drugs scene that must be mentioned. As the primary educators within the family, women are responsible for instilling a particular set of values into their sons to ensure that they grow into 'dangerous' sons.

Much of the existing literature on the mafia shows that the mother's role as educator is vital to the continuation of the organisation. In *La Grande Madre Mafia*

by Silvia Di Lorenzo (1996) the mafia wife is described as ‘she who poisons the minds of her children, she who underlies Mafia psychology and the maternal-symbiotic culture of Mafia society; the woman who transmits the culture of vendetta, the woman who educates her children to Mafia disvalues, the wicked, revengeful woman who embodies the substratum of Mafiosità, the Mafia way of being’ (Siebert 2001: 12). Several other studies (Graziosi 2001; Siebert 2007; Ingrasci 2007; Longrigg 2007) on the mafia in Italy and the United States have also pointed to the traditional role of mafia wives as mothers and child-rearers who are responsible for teaching the children ‘mafia values’ and for socializing them into a culture of crime. To characterize this type of upbringing, the verb *inculcare* (to inculcate, to implant) is used, which aptly describes how values are being ‘imprinted’ in order to prepare the children for life in a criminal environment (Ingrasci 2007: 51). If women had not taken on this role, there would have been no ‘mafia dynasties’ spanning multiple generations. These women provide the fertile soil their sons need to grow into capable gangsters (Longrigg 1998; Di Maria and Lo Verso 2007). A number of years ago, I described the process of *inculcare* in the case of Curaçao mothers living at the margin of society. Among other things, I described how they teach their sons at an early age to defend themselves against possible attackers, with violence if need be (Van San 1998). Most of these mothers have gone through the same process when they were young and they consider it their duty to pass on their experience to the children as part of their education.

While discussing her son’s violent behaviour, Patricia (Angelo’s mother) tells me with visible pride that this a trait Angelo inherited from her: ‘I used to be pretty bad myself, I used to fight. As a girl, I would also carry a knife, but it was one of those little ones. But nowadays the youths carry those big ones. You stab someone in the belly and it comes out through his back. (...) Nobody messes with my son Angelo, just like nobody ever messed with me. His girlfriend said to him: ‘If you hit me one more time, I am going to ask my uncle to shoot you’. I said: ‘Okay, you shoot Angelo. But if you do, I am going to come after you and kill you, your mother, your grandmother and your whole family’. I have got clothes and money from the insurance put aside for the funeral if they shoot Angelo. But I can tell you, if you shoot my son, I will kill you and your whole family’ (Angelo’s mother).

The vast majority of criminological studies show that parental criminality is a strong predictor of children developing delinquent behaviour later in life, a phenomenon known as intergenerational transference. Certain families appear to contribute significantly in fostering criminal behaviour in the children within the household (Loeber and Dishion 1982; West 1969, 1982; West and Farrington 1973, 1977). Families traditionally involved in crime tend to pass on criminal behaviour from generation to generation (Cloninger and Guze 1970; Glueck and Glueck 1974; Robins et al. 1975). The existing literature further points to educational traditions conducive to perpetuating values supportive of criminal behaviour. Criminal behaviour can also be taught by example (Adams 1973; Elliott and Voss 1974; Poole and Regoli 1979; Rutter and Giller 1983; Sutherland and Cressey 1978; West and Farrington 1973), even though some parents will go to great lengths to hide their criminal behaviour from their children (Hirschi 1969; Sykes and Matza 1957; West

1982; West and Farrington 1973). In short, exposure to criminality during childhood appears to be a crucial factor in explaining intergenerational transference of criminal behaviour.

My own research suggests that in many Curaçao families living at the margin of society, the parents pass on values conducive to criminality or, at best, do little or nothing to dissuade their children from entering a life of crime. There is no doubt that the serious involvement in criminality by many Curaçao youngsters has a lot to do with their socio-economic position and their lack of opportunity to participate in society, but it is also true that their criminal behaviour can be attributed to a large extent to their parents' generally favourable view of delinquent behaviour and to what they were taught on the subject of crime during their formative years.

When Juni killed a boy with a knife at the age of 17, his mother refused to classify his actions as a crime. According to her, it was the victim who had provoked the fight: 'That guy came looking for a fight with Juni, and that guy is big', she said. 'He is a kickboxer. Juni didn't start the fight because Juni is a nice quiet boy. (...) It is also impossible that the boy died from the stab wound, because it was only a small cut. That boy simply died from a brain haemorrhage, a week later' (Juni's mother).

As mentioned earlier, women who are drawn to 'dangerous' men, frequently raise their boys to become 'dangerous' sons. To Curaçao women living at the edge of poverty, the benefit of having 'dangerous' sons lies, firstly, in the fact that these boys are able to contribute to the family income at an early age. Women in the drugs scene who are charged with bringing up children are often left to their own devices, both emotionally and financially, since most men—no matter how deeply they are involved in the drug trade—are unable to support their families on a regular basis. Apart from the fact that the majority of these men will never move up through the drug trade hierarchy, most of them are responsible for supporting not one, but several households. As far as financial security is concerned, the women are largely left to fend for themselves. From their perspective, every contribution to the family income is welcome, even if it is derived from criminal acts committed by their sons. This is not to say that a mother will consciously encourage her children to engage in criminality, but she may well turn a blind eye to her son's criminal behaviour if he contributes to the family income.

Another motive for raising 'dangerous' sons lies in their ability to act as guardians and defenders of the family. Women who spend most of their lives in proximity to the drug trade, can benefit from having sons who are able to hold their own in a fight. Since the fathers are generally absent, the boys must take on the responsibility of protecting their mothers and younger brothers and sisters. At an early age, they are trained in the necessary skills by their mother and are taught to watch over her and the rest of the household.

It's never too soon to learn about standing up for yourself. Maria, Lorenzo's mother, explains to me that she has taught her son to defend himself from an early age: 'Every time he came home from school, he said 'Mama, so-and-so hit me'. I said: You didn't hit back?' 'No, mama'. Then I said: 'If you come home one more time and you tell me that so-and-so hit you and you didn't hit

back, I will beat you'. Really, when you're a boy, and they hit you, you hit back, that's what I say!' (Lorenzo's mother).

A final reason why it is important to raise 'dangerous' sons is that this type of young man is highly attractive to young women. It is a known fact that among the lower classes on Curaçao, men derive their status from the number of children they father by different women. While the mothers are often critical of the fathers of their children, they seem to be unaware of the fact that they are encouraging the same type of behaviour in their own sons, who are being turned into carbon copies of their fathers, wandering the streets looking for girls to have sexual affairs with. From their part, the mothers have no illusions about their sons' affairs ever developing into stable and long-term relationships.

Families such as these are caught in a vicious circle. Curaçao women who are part of the drug world, often loathe the fathers of their children for failing to assume their parental duties, and yet, for the reasons mentioned at the beginning of this article, they still find themselves attracted to this type of man. As it turns out, most of these women unwittingly pass on to their sons the behaviour they disapprove of in their partners. After all, in this social environment a man is considered to be attractive when he has a casual attitude toward sexual fidelity, has fathered multiple children by multiple women, and exudes an aura of dangerousness.

### **Mothers as a hidden force**

I have shown the extent to which women influence the criminal careers of their partners and, by extension, the criminal behaviour of their children. In many cases, women are, as it were, co-responsible for the crime problems caused by their children. The question is whether they can also be part of the solution, especially since we know that mothers have the greatest influence on their children's upbringing.

Over the last 15 years, a range of experiments were carried out with all sorts of programmes focused on families. In the United States, researchers from various disciplines (Yoshikawa 1994; Tremble and Craig 1995; Hawkins et al. 1995; Crowell and Burgess 1996; Kumpfer et al. 1996) independently reached a number of conclusions on the overall effectiveness of family interventions. Their research findings were compiled in Sherman et al.'s overview (1998) of crime prevention programmes. What emerges from the research is that the more risk factors within the family are addressed simultaneously, the better the results of the intervention. Another recurring theme is that the earlier family-based crime prevention starts in life, the better the results. The most promising results, however, are achieved with programmes involving long-term assistance to parents (including parental support during house calls, as well as helping the parents to gain access to education and work) combined with pre-school activities (during which children are taught various social and other skills at a preschool age, with the participation of their parents).

The problem with these supposedly effective intervention schemes is that, despite all claims to the contrary, they yield only marginally significant results, as can be measured by their modest reduction in recidivism rates. None of these programmes

have produced any marked effect. This has to do with the fact that the relevant factors to be considered in addressing the issues mentioned above are mostly socio-economic in nature. This is why it is vitally important to set up a robust social programme for Curaçao families living at the margin, both in the Netherlands and on Curaçao, which involves the coaching and monitoring of Curaçao mothers under strict supervision over a number of years. The problems that are prevalent in this particular segment of society simply cannot be solved by short-term projects.

In the above, I have argued that there are three main incentives for destitute Curaçao mothers to raise their male children into becoming ‘dangerous’ sons. The introduction of intervention programmes that are effective in removing these incentives would constitute a major step forward in tackling the problems at hand. What we have seen, first of all, is that some mothers condone their sons’ criminal behaviour because it contributes to the family income. Robust social programmes involving long-term supervision of these women in the areas of education and work experience would enable them to generate sufficient income to support their families by themselves, thereby removing the necessity for their sons to provide additional sources of income. The emphasis should therefore be on the schooling of Curaçao mothers by means of programmes focused on education and integration into the labour market, with the ultimate goal of diminishing the appeal of the drug economy.

As soon as these women are able to earn a decent living by themselves, their families will be much less dependent on the prevailing drug circuits, which will make the need for protection provided by their ‘dangerous’ sons, the second issue mentioned above, much less urgent. It is also important that efforts be made to help Curaçao youngsters move away from the street culture. Several authors have tackled the question of how the school environment can be made more attractive to young people from disadvantaged neighbourhoods. When teenagers are more involved in their schools, they are likely to perform better, to attend more regularly and to spend less time with other youths hanging around in the neighbourhood. In addition, a range of programmes have been developed involving pre-school and after-school education, all of which have met with varying degrees of success. One of my research projects on school dropout rates among Antillean teenagers revealed that a major reason why these youngsters are failing at school and why their teachers find it so difficult to remedy this situation, has to do with the fact that their mothers are barely, if at all, involved in their children’s school career (Van San et al. 2010). They often turn a blind eye to truancy; problem behaviour by their children is explained away; and it is not unusual for Curaçao mothers to side with their sons or daughters against the school authorities when their children are facing disciplinary measures. All of this highlights the importance of long-term and strict supervision of these mothers with a view to increasing their involvement in the school career of their sons and daughters, for instance through organising activities for mothers at their children’s schools.

Another issue is the need felt by Curaçao boys to procreate at an early age and to father a sizable number of children by different women over the course of their lives. The status associated with fatherhood makes them men to be reckoned with, even though they are living at the margins of society. Curaçao girls experience similar pressures to have children at a young age, because motherhood also conveys social status. The robust social programme needed to help these families to elevate

themselves should therefore also be geared towards offering parenting support to Curaçao mothers. It is obviously vitally important that these mothers are taught the necessary skills to instruct their daughters on how to resist ‘dangerous’ men and to help them postpone getting pregnant.

Additional measures should also be taken. There is no escaping the fact that there will always be teenage pregnancies, regardless of efforts to prevent them. This is why it is important for government agencies to ensure access to education for young mothers and to give them every opportunity to build a better future for themselves. One way to accomplish this is to supervise these young mothers’ school careers, to collaborate with schools in developing alternative forms of learning and to provide adequate day care facilities. When the girls are given the chance to develop their talents, they will no longer need a child to gain social status and they should also be able to manage without a ‘dangerous’ man in their life. To achieve this goal it is of the utmost importance to focus every effort on the education of these young women.

Social intervention programmes designed to reduce criminality among Curaçao youngsters on Curaçao and in the Netherlands have no chance of succeeding unless they acknowledge the role of women as part of the solution to the crime problem. As the primary educators of their children, Curaçao mothers are in a position to prevent their sons from turning into ‘dangerous’ men, and it is also in their hands to instruct their daughters on how to resist the attraction of the ‘dangerous’ men who will sooner or later come into their lives. In other words, mothers as a hidden force are the only ones who can turn the tide when it comes to combating criminality within the Curaçao community.

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