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## **drug mules: women in the international cocaine trade**

Jennifer Fleetwood, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, Hampshire and New York, 2014, 208 pp., ISBN: 978-1-1372-7189-1, £58.00 (Hbk)

Jennifer Fleetwood's book *Drug Mules: Women in the International Cocaine Trade*, published by Palgrave Macmillan, has just been announced as joint winner of the British Society of Criminology's book prize for 2015. Based on research carried out for her doctorate, the book offers 'a feminist critique of drug trafficking research' that is informed by ethnographic fieldwork conducted over five years inside the prison system of Ecuador. Fleetwood spent much of her time within prison befriending, winning the trust of and eventually interviewing both men and women who had been imprisoned as a direct result of their involvement in the movement of drugs over international borders. That this research was possible is a remarkable achievement in itself and it must have taken great reserves of strength and courage to sustain the research over the lengthy time period in which it took place. The resulting analysis is based on the narratives presented by sixteen women and seven men who hail from very different backgrounds and who were resident in the global north as well as the global south before their eventual imprisonment by the Ecuadorian authorities. Fleetwood's chosen analytical approach is that of the symbolic interactionist and her account is correspondingly rich and 'thick' with description, situating the decisions made by the research subjects/collaborators that culminated in their involvement in the 'trafficking' of drugs within their everyday worlds and choices.

Fleetwood focuses on the decision making of her research collaborators in order to dismantle existing discourses that place male 'traffickers' at the violent and powerful centre of the drug trade while their female counterparts are portrayed as passive, peripheral and victimised subjects. Fleetwood's female collaborators, however, are active, engaged and knowing. While firmly entrenched in gendered worlds that constrain and shape their choices, some do what they do for love, for the thrill, for a better lifestyle, placing them in a very different relationship to the drug trade than those who have been coerced, threatened or deceived into their involvement. In this vein Fleetwood's work contributes to recent additions to the existing literature that engage with female choice, in this respect their decisions to break the law. Fleetwood's female collaborators do not fall into easy stereotypes of either victim or offender; their lives are more messy, more complicated, their decisions influenced by an array of concerns and motivations. They are not the two-dimensional women represented by much mainstream criminology as ideal victims, nor are they the 'bad girls' of media obsessions. They are fully rounded, three-dimensional beings who reflect on their choices in life, both good and bad.

Another strength of Fleetwood's work is that her chosen methodology has allowed her access to international players in what is a truly globalised market—the trade in cocaine. As recent contributions to feminist criminology provided by Carrington (2015) and Barbaret (2014), among

others, have argued, consideration of the ways in which the lives and choices of women and girls are structured in different regions of the world is necessary to disrupt Western-centred sources of knowledge and the metropolitan perspectives that have dominated and therefore distorted our ways of understanding and responding to women who stay inside or stray outside of the law. In opening up the field to differing experiences, the limits of current thinking can be transgressed. Fleetwood's rich ethnographic material can help the reader to plug gaps in our knowledge and to understand the world of drug trafficking, but also the gendered nature of experience across the globe, a little better.

*Drug Mules* has its limitations. It can be frustrating in its tendency to stick with the collaborators' narrative even when this strays from the main subject of the chapter, so at times it can feel that key areas could have been further developed and different, further insights brought to bear. Furthermore, for a book whose subjects span such a vast area of the globe, it might have developed its considerations of the intersectionality of structured oppression globally and as it is played out in the lives of the individuals who offered their narratives for discussion. The collaborators are considered fully as gendered subjects but their place in the wider context of global inequality, oppression and marginality is left underexplored, although this is crucial to any understanding of the drug trade and to fully comprehending the nature of the choices available to the research collaborators and others with similar experiences. Fleetwood certainly offers us another piece of a complex jigsaw, however, and brings a wealth of intimate, rich and often unsettling knowledge to criminological literature. While Fleetwood's chosen research method would not be the choice of many, her work can be used as an example of the type of widely informed research that steps out of the narrow comfort zones of Western criminology and feminist contributions to the field that are increasingly necessary if we are to push our understanding and knowledge boundaries further forward.

## references

- Barbarett, R.**, 2014. *Women, Crime and Criminal Justice. A Global Enquiry*. London: Routledge.  
**Carrington, K.**, 2015. *Feminism and Global Justice*. London: Routledge.

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