Factors contributing to women being used as drug mules: A phenomenological study of female offenders incarcerated at the Johannesburg and Kgoši Mampuru II Correctional Centres in South Africa

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Abstract: Women and gender minorities are disadvantaged by systemic inequalities relating to the lack of access to finances/income, resources to land as well as social and educational resources. This article provides a nuanced understanding of factors contributing to women being used as drug mules. Data were collected in 2019 through in-depth interviews with 20 offenders who were convicted for narcotics crimes, specifically drug trafficking, and were serving an imprisonment sentence at the Kgoši Mampuru II and Johannesburg Female Correctional Centres in Gauteng, South Africa. The participants were from 12 countries, namely, South Africa, Congo, Brazil, Venezuela, Nigeria, Zambia, Paraguay, Angola, Mozambique, Cabo Verde, and Malawi. This research found that women are primarily recruited as mules due to their vulnerable economic position. The findings of this research will assist in developing recommendations on how to deter and prevent the use of women as drug mules in drug trafficking syndicates, which will be impactful to the Criminal Justice System (CJS), governments and the general public.

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT
This article provides an in-depth presentation of the factors that contribute to women being forced or volunteering to be drug mules. The reasons mainly concern their lack of economic opportunities to make a living to support themselves and their families in a vastly unequal society. While some drug mules have materialistic aspirations, others are driven by poverty and the wish to provide their children with a better life than they had. Because this research study was conducted with drug mules who were caught, tried and incarcerated for their crimes, it shows the public that, in the end, “crime does not pay”. The authors hope that it will assist in the creation of early detection, education and awareness programmes that will deter others from taking the same route.
Subjects: Education - Social Sciences; Gender Studies - Soc Sci; Sociology & Social Policy; Criminology and Criminal Justice

Keywords: drug mule; drug smuggling; drug trafficking; female; illicit drugs; women

1. Introduction and background

Organised crime, particularly drug trafficking, poses a global security risk. This phenomenon, according to experts, is linked to the global economic and political context (Haëfele, 2001). The process of trafficking drugs includes the production and distribution of substances that affect the mind. These psychoactive substances have been declared illegal by global legislative governments due to their impact on administrations, the wellbeing of various individuals and crime (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2017). Methamphetamine, heroin, cocaine, marijuana, ecstasy, Lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD), as well as an expanding quantity of chemical drugs are among these substances (Kan, 2016). Since the early 1990s, the availability of the abovementioned drugs has been increasing slowly but steadily (Parry, 1997). As per Kumar (2015), illicit narcotics were first imported to South Africa from Europe but South Africa is prevalent for the transportation of cocaine (from South America) and heroin (from Afghanistan and East Asia; Van Heerden & Minnaar, 2016). Van Heerden and Minnaar (2016) further assert that the majority of these illegal substances are targeted at European and southern African markets. South Africa is among the most advanced countries on the African continent and has challenges of substance addiction and trafficking. As a result, South Africa’s developing economic status makes it an appealing market for transnational organised crime syndicates (Kibble, 1998; Parry, 1997).

Even though there are cases of women taking part in drug smuggling for almost 100 years, Venezuelan criminologist, Rosa del Olmo, first highlighted the involvement of women in the drug trade in 1986 (Fleetwood, 2017). Campbell (2008) adds that women have taken part in drug trafficking since the 1990s. Because of the secretive nature of the illegal drug trade, it is difficult to know the extent of the use of women as mules as the realities of this criminal activity are complex (Fleetwood, 2014). The smuggling of drugs by women is growing even though the United Nations (UN) states that the number of female drug mules “has not expanded disproportionately compared to men” (United Nations Office against Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2011). Because sexual orientation is not always documented when drugs are seized, it becomes difficult to undertake a detailed analysis of the role of women in this crime (Fleetwood & Haas, 2011). According to The European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, 2012, p. 8), the use of drug mules, including South Africans, has become a popular way for drug trafficking syndicates to move drugs over borders (Tsotetsi, 2012).

Surprisingly, new recruits are not deterred by the experiences of other drug mules that include imprisonment or death, the publicised experiences of South African women who are imprisoned do not seem to deter them. There is also limited scientific research explaining the latter. As a result, the objectives of this study were to explore factors contributing to women’s involvement in organised drug smuggling, from the findings the authors, therefore, recommend a few ways in which the use of women as drug mules can be prevented.

Even though the women who took part in this research are from 12 different countries (refer to Table), they were all detained and incarcerated in South Africa.

The findings section firstly provides a background of the participants who took part in this study followed by factors contributing to the smuggling of drugs by women which are sub-divided into economic needs, unemployment and poverty, involvement by deception or coercion, and financial status.
2. Factors contributing to women being used in drug smuggling: existing research
A study was conducted in the United Kingdom (UK) by Barlow and Weare (2019) on women’s reasons for offending, their pathways into crime and their roles as co-offenders. Despite the study’s limitations with regards to the representation of the sample, sexuality, socio-economic backgrounds, size, geographic area and ethnicity, significant patterns and themes arose. The findings revealed that women are motivated by economic challenges and significant life events that lead them to carry out criminal activities.

- Economic Circumstances: The participants’ own economic goals and those of their families influenced their participation in illegal activities (Barlow & Weare, 2019).
- Significant Life Events: Significant life events, such as psychological issues, sexual assault, and the inability to take care of their children are all considered to be key life events that might lead to female offending. These events can have a profound impact on the lives of such women, as well as their subsequent actions and choices (Barlow & Weare, 2019).

The Esmee Fairbairn Foundation (2003) undertook a study in England revealing that people with low socio-economic status, especially individuals exposed to abuse or exploitation as children or adolescents and who seek to improve their self-esteem, as well as those who display anti-social behaviour or are criminally inclined, are prone to partake in drug smuggling. According to the World Drug Report by the (UNODC, 2017), women who smuggle drugs or commit any other acts during drug trafficking operations, do so in association with their male partners’ involvement or take responsibility for a crime committed by their significant other, which can lead to the imprisonment of these women.

Research conducted by Fleetwood (2014) for the Organisation of American States and the Inter-American Commission on Women, outlines cases in which women are coerced or intimidated into becoming drug mules, are unknowingly deceived into smuggling drugs, or are obliged to support their family or friends. Although both men and women become willingly involved in drug trafficking, this may be influenced by economic motives in instances where other employment opportunities and financial alternatives are minimal (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2018). According to South African scholars, such as Artz et al. (2012), the modification in welfare provisions have reduced the options of legal possibilities by which women can access financial resources. Some women, therefore, see motherhood as a reason to commit crimes in order to improve the lives of their children.

Bailey (2013) conducted research at Her Majesty’s Female Correctional Centre in Barbados and revealed factors which linked to women’s involvement in illegal drug smuggling. Some of these factors, discussed below, include childhood experiences, past victimisation, or abuse; empowerment/status; and poverty and unemployment. Additionally, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the involvement of women in the labour force and the implications of this on the future participation of women in drug trafficking is discussed in this article.

2.1. Childhood experiences, past victimisation and abuse
According to Geiger (2006), a number of female drug traffickers disclosed a childhood of sexual, physical, and/or emotional abuse and link their illegal activities to overcoming the negative life-long repercussions of this abuse. “From childhood to maturity, both women from inside and outside of correctional facilities undergo various forms of psychological, physical, and sexual abuse and are condemned to deal with the consequences and ramifications of these violations” (Arzt et al., 2012, p. 121). Childhood victimisation of women ranges from physical violence, sexual assault, neglect, substance abuse/addiction, sexualised surroundings, and an unstable upbringing (Arzt et al., 2012). Even though the connection between female offending and past sexual victimisation is amongst the prominent findings where women’s pathways to criminality are concerned, this is not the case for all female offenders (McCartan & Gunnison, 2010).
2.2. Empowerment/status

According to Fleetwood (2010, p. 9), some women who engage in drug trafficking gain empowerment, status and benefits including free vacations, excitement, and international travel.

2.3. Poverty and unemployment

Davies (2003, p. 2) explains that women “are driven into committing criminal acts to escape from hardships filled with abusive relationships, disadvantaged backgrounds and poverty”. Sumter et al. (2017) notes that financial difficulty leads to more opportunities for illegal activities than for lawful work, which is why women participate in drug trafficking as drug mules, despite being paid a pittance in comparison to the revenues gathered by drug dealers.

Based on the World Employment and Social Outlook: Trends for Women 2018 report, 48.5% of the global workforce are women (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2018). Moreover, in 2018, the unemployment rate for women globally was 6% which is approximately 0.8% higher than that of men (ILO, 2018). In addition, “women are still disadvantaged in seeking employment in comparison to men however, those who do are also less likely to secure a job” (ILO, 2018, p. 7). Artz et al. (2012) stipulate that, for a variety of reasons, women in South Africa are vulnerable to structural poverty, including a higher percentage of unemployment, a scarcity of basic requirements, such as adequate shelter and food, and lower academic achievement. The higher the ratio of female-headed households, the more likely women are to engage in criminal activity (Artz et al., 2012).

The exacerbated inequality gap between genders and between the poor and the rich builds onto the gendered poverty experienced by women in South Africa. The 2018 World Bank report indicates that 30 million South Africans, which accounts for half of the population, survive on R992 per month per family which is below the poverty line. South Africa has been rated as the world’s most unjust nation, with the highest disparities between the affluent and underprivileged. The Gini-coefficient is a measure of inequality, where 1.00 represents absolute inequality and 0.00 indicates absolute equality (Van Dalsen & Simkins, 2019). The table below shows the Gini-coefficients of the countries from which participants in this study originated.

The gini-coefficient for South Africa is 0.63, making it among the highest since 1994 and the most unjust country in comparison to the other countries represented in this study (World Population Review, 2021). Furthermore, the table above demonstrates similarities between South Africa and the countries included in this study with reference to the large inequality gap between affluent and poor, as well as gender inequality.

2.4. Impact of Covid-19 on the participation of women in the labour force

Covid-19 has further exacerbated the unemployment rate for women globally. Governments around the world have “shut down” their countries to prevent the spread of the virus, which affected the economy and in turn, negatively affected the labour market and changed the way people worked during lockdown (Statistics South Africa [StatsSA], 2021). According to the United Nations (2020), the conditions are worse in emerging economies, such as those discussed in this study, where the employment of women in the informal economic sector amounts to 70%, with minimal security against paid sick leave, dismissal and limited access to social safety. In addition, COVID-19 is raising the level of gender inequality (Alon et al., 2020) because social distancing measures and lockdown regulations are also implemented in sectors in which female workers and entrepreneurs are economically active (Alon et al., 2020). These include the production of necessary goods, the sale of food as well as medical and social care. Women are more vulnerable to economic recessions due to wage and educational disparities, societal limitations, restricted access to finances, and a higher number of women in informal employment (World Trade Organisation, 2020). Workers rely on social interactions and public locations to make a living, which have been constrained due to COVID-19. Women’s poverty has therefore been exacerbated by the COVID-19 recession (Coffman et al., 2020). This results in a sustained...
drop in women’s earnings and their participation in labour, with exacerbated consequences for women who are already poor. Furthermore, work in the informal sector is low-skilled and does not pay a minimum wage, leaving women with few resources to manage the economic downturn.

3. Methods

3.1. Research approach
In order to compile first-hand information regarding drug mules incarcerated at Gauteng Female Correctional Centres (Kgoši Mampuru II and Johannesburg), a qualitative research approach was used. The sentiments, perspectives, and experiences of each female participant’s involvement in drug smuggling were explored through interviews in this study.

3.2. Design
A case study design with a phenomenological focus was adopted in this study. The goal of phenomenology is to explain and interpret an individual’s experiences (phenomena; Holloway, 2005). The purpose of the study was to better understand and explore the subject of female drug mules hence the phenomenological approach was deemed appropriate.

3.3. Sampling
To select the research sample, non-probability sampling, specifically purposive and snowball sampling, was used because the feasibility of all individuals from the female correctional centres being selected was low since the population was unknown (Strydom, 2011).

Once the list of female drug offenders incarcerated in Kgoši Mampuru II and Johannesburg Female Correctional Centres was provided by the Department of Correctional Services (DCS), the researcher, assisted by a correctional services official, went through the list to purposively identify suitable candidates to take part in the study. These were women who had been convicted of being drug mules after being caught smuggling drugs into the country. Once the first few participants were selected, they were requested to refer other offenders in their centre who were convicted for the same crime. In this way, snowballing was utilised.

3.4. Data collection
The findings presented in this article were drawn from in-depth qualitative interviews carried out in 2019 with 20 female drug mules incarcerated at Kgoši Mampuru II and Johannesburg Female Correctional Centres in the Gauteng Province of South Africa. A guide that included open-ended questions was used for all interviews that were conducted face-to-face with participants. This alleviated the problem of miscommunication. To prevent research bias, reflexivity and bracketing were applied where all preconceived ideas about the participants were recognised. The DCS ethics board and the College of Law at the University of South Africa (UNISA) granted ethical approval prior to approaching potential participants.

3.5. Data analysis
Data collected through the in-depth interviews of the female offenders were analysed through thematic analysis. According to Lapadat (2010), large amounts of data are managed and minimised through thematic analysis without compromising the data’s authenticity. Thematic analysis classifies and explains data thoroughly (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The following steps were followed: (1) recording of the data and preparing memos; (2) labelling and archiving of the data; (3) reviewing of the research objectives; (4) careful reading through of the data and coding; (5) interpretation of findings, assessing contributions and making summaries; (6) identification of summaries of themes; (7) making conclusions and recommendations and preparing a draft report; and (8) communication of findings (Lennie et al., 2011).
4. Theoretical framework

The critical criminology theory underpinned this study, specifically, feminist theories. Accordingly, feminist theories were more relevant for the study since the primary unit of analysis was women. Additionally, Walsh (2012) notes that feminist theories argue the applicability of conventional male-centred theories of crime to these women.

4.1. Critical criminology

Critical criminology is an area of thought within criminology that is varied and multifaceted. Traditional criminology is challenged by research on deviance, crime and law. Critical approaches assume the belief that inequalities influence the rate of crime. Working-class crime, according to critical criminology, is negligible when contrasted to crimes committed by the “powerful”, such as environmental pollution or white-collar crimes, which mostly go unpunished because they have powerful and influential acquaintances who can argue decisions on their behalf or pay lawyers and accountants to protect them (Vold et al., 1998, p. 177). Burke (2003) believes that crime in critical criminology is based on the concept that minority groups, mainly women, suffer oppressive social relations, are socially isolated, belong to the working class (in poorer areas of society) and are mostly affected by racism, division of social class and sexism. In addition, gender oppression, structural oppression, gender differences and gender inequality can all be analysed through the use of a feminist theoretical based framework (Van Gundy, 2014).

4.2. Feminist theories

Criminology, as a discipline, was designed to explain why men and boys break the law. Women who offend were, in the past, not seen as a significant phenomenon to study. The prominent involvement of men in criminal acts, particularly severe offences, and the overwhelming maleness of the incarcerated population contributed to the neglect of females (Cullen & Agnew, 2006). White et al. (2017) add that women are structurally disadvantaged, according to feminist ideas, and crimes involving women or against them are seen as a result of economic dependency on men or the government (social grants) as well as social oppression. Van Gundy (2014) further asserts that there is a sanctimony of authority and power in respect to gender in the criminal justice system. In many instances, women and men are treated differently, based on gender stereotypes. As a result, women in the criminal justice system often face unequal treatment. According to White et al. (2017), women should be given the opportunity to challenge the restrictive and negative nature of male dominance and to be socially, politically and economically equal. White et al. (2017) further notes that it is imperative that women are socially empowered to avert crimes perpetrated by or against them. According to Hunnicutt and Broidy (2004), male regard for women has decreased, resulting in increasing rates of out-of-wedlock births and divorces. Reckdenwald and Parker (2008) explain that these factors have led to female-headed households and the “feminisation of poverty”. As a result, women are more inclined to commit crimes, such as shoplifting, prostitution and drug sales, to maintain themselves.

4.3. Liberal feminism

In liberal feminism, there are two ideologies: classical liberals and welfare liberals (Enywe & Miherete, 2018). Classic liberals argue that the government’s role should be to provide the freedom to participate in the free market, provide equal opportunities for all citizens, and protect civil rights. Welfare liberals, on the other hand, insist that the government should provide basic needs such as low-cost housing, food vouchers, legal services and school loans for the poor (Enywe & Miherete, 2018). Based on the abovementioned, liberal feminism recommends gradually reducing prejudices, stereotypes as well as customary and other practices that foster gender discrimination to achieve gender equality (Enywe & Miherete, 2018).

4.4. Marxist feminism

White et al. (2017) assert that the premise of Marxist theory is to illustrate how inequities in a class-based society, such as poverty, low salaries, and health care, affect the criminalisation system. Laws are designed by the powerful in their best interests and with the ability to defend themselves if they breach the law (Akers & Sellers, 2013). The patriarchal framework and gender dynamics within that
structure are recognised by Marxist feminism that underlines the reality that economic production is controlled and owned by men, which explains their supremacy. As a result, women in economically vulnerable positions are regularly exploited (Cote, 2002). The socially disadvantaged, for example, women, are driven to commit crimes as a result of financial need and social alienation, making them targets of the law and the criminal justice system (White et al., 2017).

4.5. Radical feminism
Radical feminists view women’s subjection to men and gender inequality as a systemic patriarchal concern (Cote, 2002). In numerous societies, the economy, family structure, politics, and other facets of society are dominated by men (Tibbetts & Hemmens, 2015). Samkange (2015) asserts that patriarchy can be questioned and transformed, even though it is regarded as normative by society.

5. Results and discussion
An analysis of female drug mules revealed a key theme regarding factors contributing to women’s involvement in the smuggling of drugs. This theme is examined further below, with key points highlighted using verbatim extracts from participant interviews (with pseudonyms).

6. Participants’ background information
Table 1, Table 2 depicts the background information of the participants in terms of their nationality or country of origin.

6.1. Educational background
Out of the 20 interviewees, 17 received secondary education or higher and three participants did not have secondary education. Two received university degrees (a bachelor in physiotherapy and a diploma in administration), eight completed Grade 12 and nine received some secondary education. Six cited a lack of finances for not completing Grade 12 and one fell pregnant. Because women are often compelled to be caregivers, thereby taking responsibility for family obligations and economic needs, poverty will affect if and how they will receive education (Bailey, 2013). When asked why they left school, the main reason provided was because of a lack of finances. Participant 018 reported, “I didn’t make it too far because money at home started to be a problem, I had to leave in Grade 4.” Participant 08 said, “I left school in Grade 7; I didn’t finish. I had to go look for work to help my mother” and Participant 10 added, “I went to school, but I didn’t finish; I had to get a job after my mother died. School was not important, because we need to eat, we had to live. I left school”.

| Country                | Gini-coefficient |
|------------------------|------------------|
| South Africa           | 0.63             |
| Mozambique             | 0.54             |
| Brazil                 | 0.53,9           |
| Angola                 | 0.51,3           |
| Republic of the Congo  | 0.48,9           |
| Paraguay               | 0.46,2           |
| Carbo Verde            | 0.46             |
| Malawi                 | 0.44,7           |
| Zimbabwe               | 0.44,3           |
| Venezuela              | 0.39             |
| Thailand               | 0.36,4           |
| Nigeria                | 0.35,1           |
6.2. Employment history prior to incarceration

Most of the women who participated in the study (n = 13) were employed at the time of their arrest. Among them were an administrator (participant 06), a masseuse (participant 02), a waitress (participant 04), a security guard (participant 14), a light technician (participant 11), a restaurant assistant manager (research participant 10), a cashier (participant 12), a seamstress (research participant 18) and a bartender (participant 13). Two were saleswomen (participants 01 and 17) and two were domestic workers/nannies (research participants 05 and 08). Two interviewees were self-employed (participants 15 and 19) and one (research participant 19) stated that she was a qualified physiotherapist and worked at a hospital but also owned two hair salons. Five of the research participants (n = 5) were unemployed at the time of arrest (research participants 03, 07, 09, 16 and 20). According to Dorado (2005), women who are in desperate economic circumstances are easy prey for drug traffickers.

7. Factors contributing to smuggling of drugs by women

7.1. Economic needs, unemployment and poverty

The respondents indicated they became involved in drug smuggling as a result of financial need, deception and coercion. The majority of the participants in this study (n = 18/20) conceded that the key reason for them to act as drug mules was the need for money to maintain their children and families. Eight out of 20 of the participants reported to being misled and were unaware that they were inadvertently smuggling drugs. Furthermore, it was primarily the need for financial security that led them to accept the opportunity provided to them.

The Marxist theory illustrates how economic conditions, including poverty and low wages (which are factors cited by female mules in this study), contribute to criminalisation. Feminist criminology
recognises that women’s criminal behaviour is rooted in economic desperation (Hunnicutt & Broidy, 2004). These factors have further been examined in studies by Bailey (2013) and Fleetwood (2014), as discussed in the literature above.

The participants also cited poverty and unemployment as reasons for smuggling drugs. Almost half of the participants in the study (n = 8) indicated that they grew up in challenging socio-economic environments with a lack of possibilities to improve their lives. Some participants (n = 4) grew up in middle class homes in stable family environments, however experienced financial difficulties when they became adults.

I grew up in Congo with my mother and sister, I never knew my father. My mother did not have a stable job so some days we would be hungry. Growing up was not easy because I even had to leave school. I’ve struggled all my life, but I kept trying. [Participant 01: Congolese]

Life was not good. There was no one to help my mother. She was a domestic worker and she struggled to take care of all of us when she didn’t have half jobs (temporary work or “piece jobs”). We didn’t have money and some days we won’t eat. [Participant 08: Zimbabwean]

My life is hectic. Growing up poor is not games. Till now, I’m still poor, my family is still struggling. I don’t know who my father is, he didn’t raise me, only my mother but she tried to work, and I was raised by my grandmother when my mother was working but money came hard. We would live on my grandmother’s grant [government social grant] and there was a lot of us. We would struggle and jobs was scarce. [Participant 09: South African]

It was never easy. Like I said, I didn’t have parents, my aunt was there, and she took care of all of us, but it was not easy. Sometimes we had to ask from neighbours for food and clothes. [Participant 15: Mozambican]

In relation to social and power dynamics, women have historically been marginalised and considered as unequal to their male counterparts. The female drug mules in this study come from poor and high-poverty environments exacerbated by inequality and unemployment. The Marxist feminist framework explains crime as the outcome of a disordered structure, characterised by an unequal society in which women are economically disadvantaged and easy targets for exploitation (Cote, 2002). As a result, the majority of participants in this study were disadvantaged in the labour market and in the economy. The participants in this study were characterised by limited access to health-care resources, sub-standard housing conditions, low educational standards and limited career prospects, and also came from disadvantaged residential neighbourhoods. The lack of these basic needs may have influenced individuals’ decisions to engage in drug smuggling. Furthermore, poverty continues to be a significant contributor to gender disparity, particularly among women in rural areas. The latter thus confirms the assertion by radical feminists that family structure, politics, and other facets of society continue to be dominated by men (Tibbetts & Hemmens, 2015). According to Burke (2003), critical criminology recognises that the disadvantaged of society, particularly women who are socially isolated and single parents, are more prone to oppression and exploitation (as revealed by the results of this study). Moreover, feminist theories share the viewpoints of critical criminology on the structural disadvantages of women. Liberal feminist theory points out the transforming positions of women in society as well as their rights. According to some of the participants in this study, societal discrimination and financial dependency on men, as well as the lack of social subsidies provided by the state (government), can lead women to commit crimes.

The historical position of women is that they are marginalised and viewed as inferior to men. Consequently, this inequality has given rise to many social, cultural and economic anomalies due to the social and power relations between men and women. Furthermore, it is still disproportionately likely that women and girls from historically disadvantaged groups will suffer from poverty today. Men still earn almost twice what women earn; even though the ratio of women in the
labour market is improving, transformation is slow. As per the South African Human Rights Commission (South African Human Rights Commission [SAHRC], 2017), women are underrepresented in the workplace and have no access to alternative income options as a result of a lack of representation. Additionally, gender equality can be defined as: “formal” and “substantive.” Formal gender equality appears gender-neutral as it consists of laws and practices that treat everyone equally, but which may reinforce existing gender inequalities by failing to acknowledge the uneven status quo (SAHRC, 2017). Female drug mules from female-headed households were reliant on the state’s assistance (grants) for their children or their parents’ pensions due to a lack of economic options (SAHRC, 2017). In comparison with households headed by men, female-headed households have severe poverty measures (StatsSA, 2021). As a result, those who live in female-headed families have less access to educational opportunities and essential services. The notion that women engage in drug trafficking and economic associated crimes due to the ‘feminisation of poverty’ and female-headed households, is further supported by the feminist theory (Reckdenwald & Parker, 2008). Furthermore, social empowerment that provides economic opportunities and access to quality education, as advocated by the feminist theory, needs to be accessible for women to provide equality (Nienaber & Moraka, 2016; White et al., 2017).

The link between drug smuggling and poverty reveals the absence of basic human essentials, income avenues and instability in the lives of people who live in regions that are poverty-stricken (Montilla, 2019). However, poverty, in itself, does not cause crime, but the impact of poverty on crime involves a complex interrelationship between several variables on individual and community levels.

Women do not only make choices, such as to become drug mules, solely for the money but also because it gives them a sense of self (Fleetwood, 2014) in relation to other people in their families and in their social structures. They do things because of what they have been through in their lives, their personal narratives, which teaches them how they see themselves and how they are as parents, daughters, sisters, wives and friends. Their culture tells them how they should behave and what they should do. This is depicted below in a verbatim response by one of the participants:

My father passed away when I was a small girl and I grew up poor then I got married young and my husband died so I’ve been struggling by myself and I never wanted my children to grow up like me. So that’s why I ended up doing what I did. I thought about my children and their lives because the money from my job was not enough for all my children. [Participant 05: Venezuelan]

The narrative theory therefore reflects how women’s offending is in response to both economic and ideological inequalities.

7.2. Involvement by deception or coercion
Involvement by deception, which contributed to their smuggling, was reported by eight of the 20 participants in this study. This corroborates Fleetwood’s (2010) assertion that deception is a contributing factor for female drug mule involvement. This means that these women are deceived, set up or unaware that they are being lured into committing a criminal act. However, because it is nearly impossible to prove in a legal sense, claims of being “set up” are frequently viewed with scepticism (Fleetwood, 2014).

I thought I was going overseas to work on business with the lady that was helping me. I did not know it would put me here. [Participant 01: Congolese]

I was going to start a new job. I needed better income and I didn’t mind going for a year because I knew my family will be supported. It was very disappointing to know that it wasn’t going to be like that. He lied to me. I was very sad and angry at the same time. [Participant 02: Thai]
Not at all. And that's what makes me so angry. I am here for something I didn't know; I didn't wake up saying I'm going to do this. I didn't have the choice. It's not fair. [Participant 06: Nigerian]

No. I only knew when I got to the other city. I thought I was going for air hostess job, you know. [Participant 10: Paraguayan]

I thought I was getting a job in Brazil; I didn't know about the drugs until I got there. [Participant 12: Angolan]

No, the environment was so friendly and welcoming. I didn't suspect anything until the last day I was there. [Participant 14: South African]

They said I will go get the material from Nigeria and Brazil from the supplier. The drugs? I really didn't know. I was so stupid. I didn't suspect a thing. [Participant 18: Cabo Verden]

I didn't know I was smuggling drugs. I saw the business [selling clothes] as a way to make money for when I couldn't find domestic work. [Participant 08: Zimbabwean]

Participant 07 responded that she was intimidated by the drug dealer and felt obligated to smuggle drugs when the researcher asked about her reasons for smuggling drugs.

So, this is what happened … I had a friend who was with her boyfriend so she could support her drug habits. Her boyfriend is a drug dealer but that didn't bother me because I don't use drugs, I only smoke cigarettes. So now, what happened was, my friend eventually had to pay for all the free drugs, so she became a drug smuggler, that's what she told me. Then she went to Brazil and was supposed to bring back the drugs to South Africa but instead she didn't come back and her boyfriend couldn't find her. I think that made him angry because he spent a lot of money to make sure that she has a safe trip home without being arrested and stuff. Her boyfriend kept on calling me to ask me where she is and when I told him I didn't know he would say that I was lying because she's my friend. After a few days, he calls me again and says that I have to make the same trip as my friend for the business he lost and, if I didn't, my family would be harmed … [Participant 07: South African]

The above verbatim responses reveal that women are, in certain instances forced to become drug mules due to intimidation, in an attempt to support their families or because they were coerced into inadvertently trafficking drugs. This statement agrees with the finding in this study, as seen through Participant 13's verbatim response, that the fear of consequences led her to smuggle drugs for her recruiters. Involvement by deception was a recurring theme among the participants, as also found by Fleetwood (2010).

This study found that the participants were led by financial circumstances and important life events, such as losing custody of their children, which contributed to their involvement. These findings were contrary to those of (UNODC, 2018), Esme Fairbairn Foundation (2003), and Geiger (2006) which revealed that women partook in smuggling drugs because they were abused as children and their male partners were involved in drugs.

7.3. Financial status

Montilla (2019) explains that individuals who live in low-income households frequently experience numerous types of challenges in comparison to those who live in favourable financial conditions. Eight participants indicated that they were raised in poor households and underprivileged backgrounds, while four reported that they grew up in safe and stable households where all essential needs were available. The researcher asked Participant 13 from South Africa why she smuggled drugs, and she stated;

For travelling. I like nice things, I did, and my boyfriend knew that because we would buy things together. I went out of the country once before with my boyfriend and I wanted the experience, and to get money from my boyfriend when I travel.
Although some participants had various occupations at the time of their arrest, they stated that they did not make enough money to maintain themselves and their families. As per Campbell (2008), involvement in drug smuggling is also influenced by empowerment and status. Furthermore, Campbell (2008) reports that, even though status and empowerment is temporary, significant amounts of money can be generated in a successful trafficking operation, which further boosts a person’s self-esteem or provides a sense of power. Four participants revealed that they voluntarily smuggled drugs for money as they knew the drug dealers/recruiters personally.

I had a friend that lived in the city that I would always hang out with. She was married to a Nigerian man. One day, I was at her house and I overheard her and her husband talking about drugs, the business how the guy that was supposed to smuggle the drugs wasn’t available. Then, the next day, I had a conversation with my friend about what I heard. She told me that the guy who was supposed to smuggle the drugs for them from Brazil can’t do the drop and that’s when I asked how it’s done and I told her I could do that after she told me the process. [Participant 03: South African]

I asked my friend how she was making money because she didn’t have a real job, but she seemed to be doing fine in her life. When I asked her, she told me the truth, she was smuggling drugs as well. I ended up telling her that I was willing to do the same in order to get money to support me and my children. [Participant 04: Brazilian]

I had a boyfriend and I liked things. I liked to go out and buy nice things when he gave me money and I think he knew that. So, he offered me a travelling opportunity and I took it. He said I must just go get something for him and I could buy some stuff for myself when I am there. I knew that he was a drug dealer. [Participant 13: South African]

A man I knew from my salon, he would sometimes supply hair and hair products, asked me to recruit some ladies who needed money to smuggle the drugs and he would give me $1000 for getting those ladies. It seemed like easy money because the ladies that smuggled the drugs would get more than $1000 so then I asked if I could also do it for more money. [Participant 19: Brazilian]

The quotes above show that, contrary to popular belief, Participants 03, 04, 13 and 19 knew that they were committing a crime by smuggling drugs and were not forced to do so. They were therefore not victims who were forced into taking part in criminal activities but were complicit in the commission of drug trafficking across borders for an improved status or financial rewards.

In addition, capital to establish a business or invest in one they already had was another reason stated by some respondents to smuggle drugs as explained below:

I also wanted my own business. I was selling clothes and I was making money, so I quit my job at the shop. [Participant 01: Congolese]

I wanted money for my business and to make a better life for me and my children so I can support them because they were taken away from me. [Participant 14: South African]

To be honest, my job was good. I was working at the hospital and my two salons, but I wanted more money so that I can use it to invest in my businesses so that I can quit my hospital job. So, when I realised that the jobs the other girls were doing was easy and it was quick money, I asked that guy if I can do it too. [Participant 019: Brazilian]

Some women are aware of their culpability as they make independent decisions regarding involvement in criminal activities. According to Marxist theory, in some circumstances, “powerless” individuals may indicate antisocial behaviour linked to various forms of socio-cultural
exclusion. Participant 17, from Mozambique, explained that, even though money was her primary motive, the social pressures to live a "good life" including providing her children with items they desired or living in a beautiful home influenced her decision to smuggle drugs. She further explained:

I was feeling like my life was going nowhere. I had too many problems and not enough money to live. Also, the people around me were living a nice life and I also wanted to have that.

The Marxist theory is based around capitalism and states that a person remains in his/her social bracket. The theory is that, for wealthy people to thrive, they require underprivileged people. Drug trafficking syndicates that make huge amounts of money are, in this case, regarded as the rich and the drug mules as the lower class. In this case, it can be assumed that the poor (drug mules) will remain financially disadvantaged as many of the participants in this study did not receive any incentives for smuggling drugs. The Marxist theory believes that inequality, or disparities in wealth and income distribution are the primary sources of poverty and the liberal feminist theory states that the government needs to focus on providing all citizens with equal opportunities (Enywe & Miherete, 2018).

8. Study limitations
Even though participants who took part in this study come from different countries, 20 is a small sample to generalise the findings to the wider global population of female drug mules.

9. Recommendations
Gender disparity is prevalent in the 12 countries from where the 20 offenders in this study originated. On a broad, structural society level, as well as in circumstances of direct discrimination, the substantial disparity is apparent. Women and gender minorities are disadvantaged by systemic inequality linked to a lack of financial and social access to resources, land and sexual division of labour. Although the women in this study stemmed from diverse backgrounds, they all described similar difficulties they encountered daily prior to incarceration. This indicates that women of all backgrounds are affected by the challenges of gender and social inequality (and the negative effects thereof), especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. To combat gender inequality in all areas of the economy and society, a holistic approach is required. Women need to be empowered and there must be meaningful government action to eliminate gender inequality—particularly for those who are socially disadvantaged, so their full capabilities can be realised.

10. Conclusion
This research explored the factors which contributed to female drug mules being incarcerated at the Kgosi Mampuru II and Johannesburg Correctional Centres. The 20 participants in this research represented a wide range of backgrounds, racial groups, ethnicities and ages, allowing for a diverse sample. Even though participants came from diverse backgrounds and countries, what was common amongst them was their unfavourable financial condition which drove most of them to smuggle drugs. What was further found in this research, which is not a recurrent theme in existing literature, was that some participants reported that they became drug mules out of free will and that they exercised their own agency. Nonetheless, their choice was influenced by economic factors where employment and alternatives of earning an income were limited. Therefore, a recurring factor that motivated the participants in this research was money and socio-economic circumstances. It is for this reason that authors recommend that programmes that focus on the eradication of systemic inequalities resulting from the gendered division of labour, lack of financial and social resources as well as the prioritisation of education opportunities for girls and women as some of the ways of preventing the use of women as drug mules.

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Notes

(1) Even though the female is linked to sex, and woman is connected with gender, the two terms are used interchangeably throughout this paper.

(2) Gender for the purpose of this paper refers to gender binary.

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