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## Cultural stigmatization and police corruption: cannabis, gender, and legalization in Mexico

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### ABSTRACT

Mexico may well be the largest country in the world to legalize cannabis. Nevertheless, it is culturally conservative and a certain discrepancy exists between liberalization reforms and popular opinion regarding cannabis. Based on qualitative interviews with 100 cannabis users in Mexico City, we describe the gendered differences in perceptions and experiences of cannabis use. While the young women in the study stated that they used cannabis to deal with family issues, to be less shy with friends, and to feel more attractive, the young men emphasized pressure from school or work, aggressiveness, and integration into their peer group when accounting for their use. Furthermore, men reported police corruption and legal issues as the main problems associated with their use of cannabis, while women's use was strongly conditioned by a fear of becoming less respectable in their families' eyes and the stigma of being seen as a 'lost' or 'bad' woman. We argue that the consequences of cannabis decriminalization in Mexico are likely to be highly gendered: While men who use cannabis may experience fewer legal problems and encounters with the police, women who use cannabis are likely to continue to be culturally and socially stigmatized.

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### Introduction

Over the last two decades, Mexico has initiated considerable legislative changes in constitutional, criminal, civil, and family law (Carpizo, 2011; Lang, 2003; Shirk, 2016; Torres Falcón, 2009). These changes are relatively progressive within a society that remains culturally conservative, for example regarding family life and drug use (López, 2018). One of these legislative changes is the liberalization (permitting recreational use) and decriminalization (halting the policing of users) of cannabis. Should the laws be approved, Mexico will become the biggest country in the world to legalize cannabis, simultaneously creating the largest legal cannabis market. Legal changes in Mexico have often been at the forefront of normative developments, and have contributed to changes in mentality, relations, and practices. Such was the case with the new abortion and gender violence legislation (Agoff, 2012), and it is likely to also apply to the legalization and decriminalization of cannabis.

Culture is a combination of language, customs, beliefs, rules, arts, knowledge and collective identities, and memories developed by social groups to create meaning in their surroundings (ASA, 2021). It functions on various levels: on a national or regional cultural level, for example, gendered identities, such as 'marianismo' and 'machismo' (Kulis, Marsiglia, Castillo, et al., 2008) are important in Mexico, and

drug use will emerge from, be embedded in, and be interpreted within such already established gender identities. On another level, culture is narrower and limited to certain groups within a population, for example, subcultures associated with particular drugs. In early cannabis studies (Goode, 1970; Johnson, 1973) the idea of drug cultures was closely associated with the understanding of subcultures as 'groups of people' (Gelder, 2005, p. 1; see also Golub, 2005). Following criticism from the post-subcultural approach (Bennett & Kahn-Harris, 2004; Muggleton & Weinzierl, 2003), subsequent approaches have described cannabis subcultures as collections 'of rituals, stories and symbols' that are, to a greater or lesser degree, used, internalized, and embodied by users (Sandberg, 2013, p. 68; Sandberg, 2012). We apply this more dynamic and fluid approach to culture in this study. However, although cannabis can be used to enact alternative gender roles, as with other drugs, cannabis use tends to reproduce dominant gender norms and stereotypes (Dahl & Sandberg, 2015; Haines et al., 2009).

We start with a review of the general literature on gender, drug use, and culture, before turning to how this is expressed specifically within the Latin-American context of our study. We then present a brief history of, and important background information to cannabis legislation and drug liberalization in Mexico. The main focus of this paper is the

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gendered use of cannabis and the gendered impact of cannabis liberalization. Based on qualitative interviews with cannabis users, we explore the differences between young women and men in terms of how they describe their cannabis use, as well as how it is interpreted and sanctioned by society. We discuss possible gendered cultural stigma and the legal implications of the current cannabis legalization process in Mexico. Our argument rests on the assumption that drug decriminalization, as other policy changes, is not gender-neutral, and affects men and women differently.

### **Gender, drug use, and culture**

It was not until the early 1980s that the study of drug use began to incorporate a gender perspective. Earlier drug research had been conducted by men, as were most drug users under study. Consequently, women's drug use was typically viewed 'through a male lens' (Anderson, 2001). This gradually changed during the 1980s and beyond, but a male bias in drug research still persists, partly reflecting the higher prevalence of drug use among men, but also gendered structures in research that change more gradually. Gendered behavior indicates and reproduces gendered social hierarchies. People can, for example, be held accountable for what they do, as men or as women, and this can be used to legitimate or discredit them (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Illegal drug use is a highly gendered practice. The way it is gendered, however, is both multi-dimensional and complex and cannot be seen through a simple binary gender model (Budgeon, 2014). Gender is often wrongly ascribed to sex (female and male bodies), but gender-related factors are entwined in everything from roles, norms, and gender identities, to gendered rules and regulations embedded in institutions (Greaves & Hemsing, 2020).

In studies of drug use and gender, Measham (2002) distinguishes between the oppression/victimization perspective, the liberation/emancipation perspective, and the 'doing gender' perspective (West & Zimmerman, 1987). These different perspectives are, however, increasingly combined, making studies of gender and drug use more complex. A frequent finding in research on gender and substance use is that women's illicit drug use is subject to more social control than that of men (Dahl & Sandberg, 2015). Self-control, social control, and dependency are key features in the gendering of both legal and illicit drug use (Measham, 2002; Sheard, 2011). Excessive drug use can, for example, be seen as a way of accomplishing masculinity, whilst it jeopardizes performances of femininity (Measham, 2002).

In sum, research on gender and drug use illustrate that substance use 'tends to be perceived as more socially acceptable for men than women' (Hemsing & Greaves, 2020, p. 16). Campbell and Herzberg (2017) argue that the gender perspective has often been missing in drug research: 'Gender, in dynamic relationship to race, class, and sexuality, is integral to virtually every aspect of drug crisis including (but not limited to) the relationship between drug policy and the development of mass incarceration' (p. 252). For example,

gendered assumptions and stereotypes have supported punitive drug policies (Campbell, 2000).

Gender issues have not been prioritized on the cannabis research agenda. In a recent review of more than 5000 studies, Hemsing and Greaves (2020) found only 21 studies that address gender norms and cannabis use. These show that while there are many similarities with alcohol use (Warner et al., 1999), gendering may sometimes be even more complex in the case of cannabis use. Following traditional gender norms, habitual use was typically described as inappropriate or inauthentic when practiced by girls, while boys who smoked were cast as cool and macho (Haines et al., 2009). However, cannabis use could also be an opportunity for women to engage in other femininities and even do masculinity (Dahl & Sandberg, 2015; Haines et al., 2009). Selling cannabis was still very much the domain of men, providing them with a great deal of power in cannabis networks (Hemsing & Greaves, 2020; Warner et al., 1999).

In comparison with other drug cultures which are highly masculine (e.g. crack cocaine use, Boyd & Mieczkowski, 1990), cannabis culture is accompanied by a somewhat different and complex gendering. On the one hand, it carries some of the traditional associations of drug cultures and protest and street masculinities, seen in studies of cannabis street dealers (Bucerius, 2014; Sandberg, 2008). It is considered to be rebellious and tough, associated with masculinity. On the other hand, cannabis culture also contains certain androgynous values and may be viewed as a different, and 'softer' way of doing masculinity (Haines et al., 2009). This can be traced back to its emergence in hippie culture in the 1970s and may be seen in widespread rituals of sharing, and stories of being a 'natural' and introvert drug associated with creativity and peaceful pleasure (Sandberg, 2013). When using cannabis, traditional masculinities and femininities are thus both at play, and cannabis culture challenges such simple distinctions between masculinity and femininity.

### **Gender and drug use in Mexico: machismo and marianismo**

In the relatively traditional Mexican society, established gender roles may be more crucial for drug cultures and sanctions, than in comparable European, US, and Canadian studies (Hemsing & Greaves, 2020). Familism or *familismo* is a fundamental value in Mexican culture (Ingoldsby, 1991; Smith et al., 2013). The concept refers to a strong identification and attachment to an immediate and extended family where the importance of cooperation, loyalty, and interdependence with family members is emphasized (Galanti, 2003; Yu et al., 2008). Youth who identify with familism tend to place particular importance on what their parents consider acceptable behaviors and in turn, receive support and security from their family (Germán et al., 2009; Marsiglia et al., 2009). This has been identified as a cultural factor that may potentially protect against alcohol, tobacco, and marijuana consumption (Kam et al., 2009). Such family relationships may function as a type of supervisory network that limits youth consumption of both legal and illegal substances (Strunin, Díaz-Martínez,

Díaz-Martínez, Kuranz, et al., 2015). However, recent research has found that this supervision is highly gendered and that the limits set for women are much stricter than those established for men (Strunin, Díaz-Martínez, Díaz-Martínez, Heeren, et al., 2015; Strunin et al., 2017). Mexico's latest National Survey on Drug, Alcohol and Tobacco Use (ENA, 2017) for example, found that 31.2% of men, but only 21.21% of women reported ever using marijuana and that the gender differences for a lifetime and frequent use were even higher.<sup>1</sup>

Familism is a gendered family value that may intensify levels of supervision and tolerance of substance use in accordance with traditional gender norms and roles. In Mexico, the traditional role expected of men, often described as *machismo*, is that of family provider and projecting independence, strength, and success (Marsiglia et al., 2009). Role expectations of women, on the other hand, are deeply influenced by the ideal of *marianismo* (Bartra, 1987; Fuller, 1992), where women are supposed to engage in caretaking (children, home, partner, elderly, sick, etc.), and demonstrate a submissive, selfless, and dependent attitude; 'an object of reverence,' or 'elevated motherhood' (Ruiz & Ransford, 2012, p. 56).

These gender expectations continue to be promoted in Mexican culture (Luna et al., 2004) and are largely endorsed by the population (Ariza & Oliveira, 2001; Reyes-Luna et al., 2004; Rocha-Sánchez & Díaz-Loving, 2005). In a study of substance use among youth in Mexico, Kulis, Marsiglia, Lingard, et al. (2008) discussed these two gender roles, and further distinguished between four different masculinities and femininities. They found that what they describe as aggressive masculinity (a tendency to control and seek domination in relationships) was associated with a higher risk of drug use, while affective femininity (empathy, emotional expression, nurturing) was associated with lower risk (Kulis, Marsiglia, Castillo, et al., 2008, see also Kulis et al., 2012).

Culture and gender roles are not stable and determined. Many individuals deviate from expected gender norms, and globalization, migration, and even economic crises influence traditional norms and behaviors. This may create new types of gender role syncretism that challenge preconceived ideas of gender identity (Kulis, Marsiglia, Lingard, et al., 2008). Transformations, such as increased female participation in the labor market, or a decrease in the number of children per family, etc. may challenge traditional familism and associated gender norms and roles. These changes also influence attitudes and behaviors towards substance use (Marsiglia et al., 2009). In sum, while substance use and associated behaviors are clearly gendered according to traditional gender patterns in Mexico, there are also indications that 'new' masculinities and femininities, and new gendered patterns of substance use are becoming increasingly prevalent.

### **Cannabis legislation and drug liberalization in Mexico**

On 10 March 2021, the Mexican Chamber of Deputies approved a law that decriminalized marijuana in Mexico for recreational, scientific, medical, and industrial use. If implemented, the law will create the largest cannabis market in

the world and will require important changes in the General Health Law, the Federal Criminal Code, and the Federal Law against Organized Crime, etc. The legislation is still to return to the Senate for final review and approval, but this is expected to occur in the near future. In June 2021, the Supreme Court authorized the decriminalization of recreational use of marijuana, but not its commercialization.<sup>2</sup> This occurred despite a recent nationwide survey showing that 58% of the population disapprove of the legalization of cannabis (El Financiero, 2020). These legislative changes have come two years after Mexico's Supreme Court declared the prohibition of recreational marijuana in the country to be unconstitutional as it violated the right to free development of personality, and three years after medical cannabis was legalized.<sup>3</sup>

The current drug liberalization and decriminalization efforts seek to turn the page on a century of prohibitions and regulations (controlled authorization of certain uses and quantities) that began in 1920 with the first prohibition on the production, sale, and recreational use of cannabis, followed shortly thereafter, in 1927, with the prohibition of its exportation. In 1948, Mexico initiated the first national campaign for the eradication of illicit crops and in 1961, it participated in UN meetings where the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs was proposed and approved. Despite Mexico's collaboration in drug prohibition, throughout the 1960s tension existed between the US and Mexican governments over the export of cannabis (among other drugs) from Mexico to the US. Mainly as a consequence of the War on Drugs, cannabis cultivation, which had traditionally been carried out by peasants, fell under the control of Mexican cartels. Despite increasing prohibitions and penalties, marijuana production in Mexico increased by 190% from 7400 metric tons in 2001 to 21,500 tons in 2008 (Guajardo et al., 2011).

Paradoxically, the slow road towards the regularization of cannabis began in Mexico in parallel with the militarization of the US-led War on Drugs. In 2009 possession of cannabis for personal use was decriminalized (police could no longer detain people carrying marijuana up to a certain quantity), and later, in 2017, the medicinal (to treat certain illnesses) and scientific use of cannabis was approved. The new 'General Law for the Regulation of Cannabis' grants the State the authority to issue five types of licenses to control any act related to the cultivation, transformation, sale, research, and export or import of marijuana. It also specifies that only persons over 18 may cultivate, carry, and consume marijuana and its derivatives, and allows up to 28 g of possession. If someone is found in possession of between 28 and 200 g of marijuana without authorization, fines can be imposed, while possession of more than 200 g carries criminal penalties. The new laws also allow individuals and businesses to sell cannabis to adults in authorized establishments.

Hemings and Greaves (2020) highlight that the way gender is expressed through cannabis use (and drugs in general, we would argue) is 'complex, culturally specific, multi-faceted, and ever-evolving' and 'situated in the social, cultural and political context' (p. 20). They argue that further research is needed to explore gender norms, roles, and relations of cannabis use. In this paper, we respond to this call. Based on



interviews with Mexican cannabis users, we explore the reasons for use of the drug, the problems experienced while using it, and the origin of the stigma of the drug for respectively women and men. These data are used to discuss the possible gendered consequences of drug liberalization in Latin America and beyond.

## Materials and methods

The data for this study consist of 100 semi-structured, qualitative interviews with 32 female and 68 male cannabis users in Mexico City. To our knowledge, there was little discrepancy between sex and gender in the sample, with participants identifying with their biological sex, although the expressions of their femininities and masculinities varied. Interviews were conducted from August to October 2019. The main characteristics of the participants in the sample are summarized in Table 1.

Participants were recruited in a public area known for frequent cannabis use among young people. It is a predominantly lower-middle-class neighborhood in Mexico City. Contact with potential participants was established through a recruiter, a young man who was a cannabis user himself, and a friend of many of the young people in the community. He worked as a gatekeeper and was effective in recruiting cannabis users to participate in the study. Many of the interviewees only agreed to participate if they were invited by

someone they trusted. The interviewer was a woman with extensive experience in ethnographic fieldwork with marginalized populations. Participants were paid 400 pesos (ca. 20 dollars) for the interviews.

The interviews were conducted in an office located in an uncrowded space of a local restaurant. Each interview lasted two hours. A semi-structured and flexible research design allowed participants to emphasize the topics that were most important to them (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Family relations was one such topic for the women, and the involvement of police or other authorities was highlighted by the men. We were able to obtain extensive data on gendered perceptions of cannabis consumption, drug-using peers, social reputation, police corruption, and reasons for desistance from cannabis use. Thematic analysis (Silverman, 2015) was used to identify analytic themes, and interviews were broadly coded for a variety of themes, including: 'reasons to consume,' 'problems triggered by cannabis consumption,' and 'reasons to stop consuming.' These were initially straight-forward categories that included all references in the transcripts to cannabis consumption and its consequences. Compared to the men, women spoke more extensively about their families in relation to drug use. This tendency might have been reinforced by the gender dynamic of the interviews. All the interviews were done by a woman and it is possible that family relations might have been a more 'natural' emphasis in conversations between two women than in interviews between a man and a woman. Nevertheless, we believe that it reflects a culture of familism that is particularly salient for women in Mexico.

**Table 1. Sample characteristics.**

	Women (32)	Men (68)
Age (years)		
18	8	19
19	12	7
20	2	19
21	10	23
Age at initiation of use (years)		
8–11	1	0
12–15	14	37
16–17	10	20
18–20	7	11
Consumption per week <sup>a</sup> (units)		
1–5	12	20
6–10	6	12
11–20	5	10
21–30	5	9
31–50	3	4
+51	1	13
Considered reducing consumption		
Yes	21	45
No	10	18
Undecided	1	5
Occupation		
High school student <sup>b</sup>	7	8
Student of higher secondary education <sup>c</sup>	7	16
Student of professions <sup>d</sup>	1	3
Working and studying	5	11
Working <sup>e</sup>	9	22
Not studying or working	1	8
Housewife	2	0

<sup>a</sup>Pipe, cigar, joint, vaporizer, chocolate, brownie and cookies. Each of these are considered one 'unit.' Using cannabis in pipes, cigars and joints dominated.

<sup>b</sup>High school, vocational school, technical school.

<sup>c</sup>E.g. architecture, administration, graphic design, psychology, communication, pharmaceutical chemistry, tourism and philosophy.

<sup>d</sup>E.g. barber, nursing.

<sup>e</sup>E.g. merchant, call center, warehouse worker, chauffeur, independent business, customer service, bakery, marble worker.

## Results

Campbell and Herzberg (2017) emphasize that gender 'matters at every level from the intimate and highly personalized to the broad cultural and political forces' (p. 251). Oftentimes, and as will be demonstrated, these two levels are connected. Below we describe the difference between women and men regarding the reasons they gave for using cannabis and the problems they described having as a consequence of their use. We argue that these gender differences may lead to gendered consequences of drug liberalization.

### Women: family problems, shyness, and feel attractive

The women in this study point to three main reasons for their cannabis consumption: to deal with family problems, to be less shy with friends, and to feel more attractive. Most of the women stated that cannabis helped them to deal with family problems that derived from cohabitation or poor communication. Violeta (19) was raised by an uncle and an aunt and lived with them and a cousin. She explained that: 'Cannabis relaxes me and makes me forget the problems I have. I forget that I don't have good communication with my family, that I'm not okay with them.' Sara (18) was abandoned by her parents and raised by her grandmother. She attributed her cannabis use to the lack of love from her mother: 'From the first moment I learned that my mother did

not love us (...) They told me that with all my problems I was going to be forgotten.' Similarly, Clara (18) also talked about a difficult childhood and a complex family life. She explained that 'among the most important reasons why you use cannabis, is because it helps you feel less alone.' Cannabis was used to heal wounds created by problematic family relations. It was a way to forget such difficulties, replace them with more positive experiences, and create a new social network. Among women, cannabis was often used to solve what Johnson (1973) describes as 'everyday problems' and this use reflects a culture often associated with alcohol and prescription pills.

Some women cannabis users, who had less problematic family relations, explained that cannabis helped them to feel less shy and inhibited among their peers. Laura (21), a university student, said that:

I feel that I am more spontaneous, more uninhibited, I start to talk more, or I start to express myself totally. Sometimes I have a filter of 'this I will not say' but when I've already smoked, I am already another. Well, I'm not someone else, but more outgoing.

Vero (18) still attended high school. Even though she had no problems at school or with her family, she said that she smoked cannabis because 'it's easy to get, it helps me feel good, and I feel less bored.' The story points to the importance of cannabis as a way of coping with relatively widespread and often age-related identity development issues. Young women seemed to experience these problems more frequently or at least reported them more often as reasons for their cannabis use.

Similarly, the women participants also explained their use of cannabis as a consequence of their lack of self-confidence, especially associated with their appearance. Gabriela (18) pointed out that when using cannabis, she felt 'more attractive, sometimes a little thinner, with less fat cheeks, and a little straighter hair.' Ines (20) combined the issues of shyness and physical attraction and said that:

I feel attractive when I smoke, I feel more comfortable when I talk to people. It's a little difficult for me to talk to people because I'm not very trusting, but when I smoke, it kind of goes away and I start talking to people and I'm a little more sociable.

All three reasons for using cannabis (to deal with family problems, to be less shy with friends, and to feel more attractive) are gender-informed. In a culture still influenced by *marianismo* identities (Ruiz & Ransford, 2012), where the ideal woman is family-oriented, shy, and concerned about her appearance, these reasons for cannabis use tend to be experienced more by women than by men. They may also be more culturally legitimate reasoning for cannabis consumption and are therefore emphasized more when women are asked about their motivations for using.

While the more traditional gender pattern was dominant in the interviews, a small group of women emphasized the pleasure they experienced from cannabis use. Tere (21), lived a relatively liberated and modern life, worked in a gym and spoke openly about the pleasure of cannabis use. She was opposed to justifying cannabis use by pointing to problems. When asked about why she used she said: 'I don't say "because I have problems or because I want to forget things"

no (...) I just like marijuana, it relaxes you.' Similarly, Vero (18) said that she had started using cannabis out of curiosity and had immediately liked the substance. 'Right from the beginning people like it' she emphasized, also explaining why it could be dangerous.

Although only a few of the women attributed their use to pleasure alone, this openness indicates a transition towards more equal gender identities and highlights how cannabis use not only reproduced traditional gender roles but may also be a way for women to 'do masculinity' (Dahl & Sandberg, 2015). In Mexico, it is neither frequent nor socially acceptable for women to discuss physical pleasure, or to use this to justify their substance use or engagement in certain activities, and women rarely publicly express pleasurable emotions associated with their bodies or their senses without shame (Amuchástegui & Rivas, 2004; Szasz & Lerner, 1998). This may be a generational issue and indicates an important change in Mexican gender norms: younger women speak about their own pleasure more easily, expressed, for example, through cannabis use.

### **Men: reduce stress, aggression, and integrate with friends**

Family issues, inhibitions, or attractiveness did not appear to represent the same source of stress for the male participants as they did for the women. This may be because the men's conception of masculinity either does not consider these as problems or fails to accept them as such, or a combination of both. The reasons men gave for using cannabis-focused instead on school or work, aggressiveness, and integration into their peer group. Men tended to argue that they used cannabis to cope with stress from work or school. Pedro (19), for instance, studied in a vocational school and had a stable family life, but pointed out: 'the problems I have now are stress from work problems, school problems. Cannabis helps me to remove the stress that I have, and if I found another way, I would stop it.'

Another prominent element in the men's stories was that cannabis reduced aggression. Juan (21) said that cannabis made him 'not get angry, to be calm.' Tito (18) claimed that it made him 'happy all the time and I don't get aggressive' and José (21) added that it helped him 'so I don't get angry or feel less angry.' The emphasis on both work and aggression can be linked to *machismo* identities (Melhuus & Kristi, 1996; Gutmann, 1996), although these stories also indicate a softer form of masculinity (Haines et al., 2009) emphasizing avoiding aggression and violence. The fact that the men related their use of cannabis to work, school and aggression illustrates the gendered frame of reference of substance use for men. The notion that cannabis reduces aggression is an important narrative in cannabis culture (Sandberg, 2013), and demonstrates how Mexican users relate to both the global cannabis culture as well as to local gender identities, often combining the various elements of the different subcultures and national cultures in creative ways.

Among men, it was also common to refer to peer integration to explain their use. Manuel (20) said that he wanted to

quit using cannabis ‘the plan is to decrease until it’s finally zero,’ but concluded that it could be difficult: ‘I use it more socially (...) because I belong to this circle of friends.’ Roberto (18) said that ‘the most important reasons I use marijuana is because I can have fun and am with my friends who use.’ In contrast to the women, whose friends often discouraged their use, spending time with friends was an important reason for men to use cannabis. The pleasures of use were also stated much more often and more explicitly by the male interviewees. Men were also more explicit about and closer to the rhetoric of the global cannabis culture (Sandberg, 2012), highlighting the many pleasures, joys, and benefits of use. These are often associated with what Young (1971) describes as subterranean values. Francisco (18) said that ‘smoking relaxes you and everything comes out better,’ Tito (18) stated that ‘every time I smoke, I relax more and pay more attention to the things I do’ and according to Felipe (18), ‘I use marijuana because it gives me pleasure, because I feel interesting things.’

The latter two quotes also point towards other important elements of drug subcultures, namely secret knowledge and a feeling of ‘being in the know’ (Thornton, 1996). These distinguish subcultures from the mainstream and account for some of their attraction and stories of increased creativity under the influence of the drug (Goode, 1970). This subcultural discourse regarding the characteristics of cannabis appeared to be more prominent among men than women. While both drug cultures that Johnson (1973) identifies were present in the data, men seemed to be drawn towards the subcultural cannabis discourse while women were drawn towards a discourse of self-medication and problem solving when explaining their use in the interviews. This reflects fundamentally gendered cultural differences in drug use, as well as gender differences in Mexican society more generally.

### **Women: cultural stigmatization and concern about family**

The gender differences in reasons for using cannabis resonated in the participants descriptions of their problems following use. For the women users in the study, these were often of a relational nature and involved people close to them. The female users were attentive and concerned about adverse reactions from their environment (usually family) to their drug use. Some of them worried about disappointing their parents or other family members or causing them pain or anguish. Others did not want to aggravate the already existing problems of their parents or other family members. Sara (18) said that:

Among the things that have affected me the most is that my loved ones feel disappointed. Yes, my godmother has told me, ‘You disappoint me’. (...) She tells me that I totally disappoint her, that she thought I was a good girl and so on.

Claudia (18) lived with her single mother and a younger brother and was worried that they would find out that she used cannabis: ‘They really don’t know, and I feel that if they did know, it would be a big disappointment.’ She added: ‘I feel bad about myself.’ The concern women users have for how their substance use impacts family relations fits well

within the dominant *marianismo* identity of Mexican society (Smith et al., 2013). Women’s role in the family seems to take precedence over other identities and concerns. Susana (18) said that a friend told her to ‘think about my parents, that they gave me everything.’ Her boyfriend also ended their relationship because of her cannabis use. Family concerns also transfer to romantic relationships, sometimes even those with men who use cannabis themselves. Brothers and other male family members also often felt obliged to comply with the patriarchal mandate and be the guarantors of their sisters’ behaviour. Cannabis use has often been defined as ‘unwomanly’ behaviour, thus triggering the *machismo* cultural obligation to ensure the ‘honour’ of female family members (Johnson & Lipsett, 1998).

Another relational sphere affected by cannabis use was that of friends. Karina (19) was abandoned by a friend who did not approve of her drug use. She subsequently made a new friend who uses cannabis with her and stated that ‘I don’t intend to comply with any rules, rules are useless, whether you make rules or not, smokers won’t care.’ However, she was still concerned about the rejection of loved ones: ‘Some of my friends and family do not want me to smoke, they stopped talking to me and rejected me.’ The ambivalence shows that even though she does not want to care it is still problematic for her to be rejected by friends and family. As opposed to the men, whose circle of friends often both introduced them to cannabis use and supported their use, the women cannabis users more frequently stated that they were rejected by friends because of their drug use.

The stigma attached to women using cannabis was clearly worse than it was for men. Raquel (19) said that it was ‘rare for a woman to smoke,’ a common statement in the interviews. The stigma women experienced was connected to the fear of being considered a ‘bad woman,’ and thus losing social respectability. Tere (21) summarized it when she said that:

I see more men smoking, honestly, I hardly know women who smoke and the ones I know are like girls who look “bad” (...) If they see someone smoking marijuana it is more ‘He’s getting high!’. Of men, they say he is addicted, but if it is a woman, they start calling her a whore, or good for nothing.

Julia (19) similarly said that: ‘A woman is more marked than a man. Well, my cousins, they are more *fresa* [snobby, stuck-up], more alcoholic. They told me that marijuana was from the street, and that I would end up like an outsider if I used it.’ Cannabis clearly has a very different connotation to alcohol, and carries a far worse stigma for women than it does for men in this context.

In Mexico, the decency and virtue of entire families are fundamentally associated with women’s sexual behaviour and reputation (Hirsch, 2003). Associating cannabis use with frivolous sexuality is, therefore, a serious and dangerous claim, with huge implications for the women involved. Furthermore, not only does it stigmatize the female users, but potentially their family members as well. When describing the problems they experienced, women cannabis users paid particular attention to both the emotional damage they could cause to others as well as to the risk of losing family and friends. More importantly, they were subject to cultural

and strongly gendered stigmatization associated with being 'bad women.' This limited their cannabis use and increased the shame they felt when using the drug.

### **Men: police corruption and legal issues**

Male cannabis users sometimes mentioned the concern of family members, but they had a different language and emotional understanding of the conflict with their parents. After his parents 'scolded' him for using cannabis, Miguel (21) stated that he 'tried to convince them that it was not a big deal (...) I am doing well in school, I am still functional, so it doesn't affect very much.' Similarly, Rodolfo (18) lived with his mother and said that while his cannabis use made her 'angry, sad, those things,' he was not too concerned about it. Even when women and men were subject to similar comments from family members, it seemed to cause more concern for the women than for the men.

For men, the main stigma around their cannabis use was that the drug was associated with crime and illegality. Pablo (18) said that:

I have felt discriminated by people who notice the smell (of marijuana) and stare at us. We are not going to do anything to you! They must think "since they are addicts, they are going to steal from us". We're not doing anything wrong, we are not messing with them, we do not talk to them, we do not whistle at them, they shouldn't have those attitudes towards us just because we are smoking.

Manuel (21), who has finished high school and works in a convenience store, agreed that 'most people are closed-minded (...) and they associate marijuana use with crime, and anyone who uses marijuana is a criminal.' As illustrated by these quotes, men also experience certain stigmatization associated with cannabis use. However, in their case, this is not associated with the family, sexuality, and morality, but rather, is more directly connected to the illegality of cannabis.

Similarly, when men talked about their problems with cannabis, they emphasized those experienced in relation to authority and especially arrests and extortion by the police. Pedro (19) said that: 'If the police see that you are young and taking drugs, they try to take advantage of, and extort you.' Tomas (19) gave an example of such extortion, following an illegal and random stop and search in the street:

Tomas: We were leaving a party, I had a small bag with marijuana and we were walking, and they searched us, we had a check-up. It was very late at night and they searched my friends and me; they found it in my backpack.

Interviewer: What happened?

Tomas: Well, nothing, at that time they asked us for 500 pesos.

Interviewer: And you have not had another experience like that?

Tomas: Well, once we were playing in the street, in a park, and the police came. Then we had to – well, a friend of mine – he had to give up his cell phone.

According to José (21), such extortions were commonplace and had happened to all cannabis users caught by the police in Mexico. He preferred to pay rather than go to prison, which was a real risk for users: 'I was on a bicycle and you know, of

course, they took my money, they took my cell phone, it is not as big a cost, but it is the biggest one I've had.' Extortion by police was such a widespread phenomenon that male users tended to assume that it would happen at some point and calculated it as part of the cost of using cannabis.

The young men were optimistic regarding cannabis legalization and thought that it would promote greater general respect for the norms and laws of society. Miguel (19) argued that 'if you can acquire it legally, the police do not arrest you for being a consumer and the authorities do not treat you as a criminal.' Jorge said that 'I will follow the rules if the police do their job, without extorting, without arresting me... while they do what they have to do, I follow the rules.' Pedro (19) claimed that he 'would be willing to comply with the rules if there are safe places, if the police do not try to extort me, if the strategies used are the same for alcohol and tobacco.' In their view, many of the problems surrounding cannabis use, including their illegal behaviour, would be resolved if the drug was decriminalized.

Encounters with the police were less frequently reported by female cannabis users. While this may be because the police treat users differently according to sex (and it is more controversial to stop and search women), it may also suggest that the stigma associated with women's use propels them to use cannabis in more private settings. Women are also less involved in cannabis dealing (Hemsing & Greaves, 2020) which typically attracts the attention of law enforcement. Giacomello (2020) argues that such gendered policing sometimes leads to women and girls being designated to transport drugs, as they are less likely to be searched. In general, however, men's involvement in all parts of the illegal drug business far outweighs that of women.

## **Discussion**

Stigmatization around cannabis was a salient issue in early studies of the drug (Johnson, 1973; Young, 1971) and is arguably still important in many contexts (Sandberg, 2012). The culture of cannabis use in Mexico suggests that it is still far from being as normalized as it has been in other settings (such as in the UK, see Parker et al., 1998). Stigmatization appears to be highly gendered and far more serious for women than for men. If there is any tendency towards cannabis normalization in Mexico, it seems to be in what Measham and Shiner (2009) describe as 'the negotiated accomplishment of distinct social groups operating in bounded situations' (p. 507). These groups mainly consist of men and their drug use is viewed differently from that of women.

It is a recurrent finding in research on gender and substance use that women are subject to greater social control than men (Hemsing & Greaves, 2020; Measham, 2002; Sheard, 2011), and this seems to be particularly so in *familismo* cultures (Ingoldsby, 1991), such as Mexico. Drugs can still be used to express and enact alternative gender identities, for example, 'softer' and alternative masculinities removed from the *machismo* ideals of Mexican society, or femininities that break with ideals of other-orientation, for example when acknowledging the pleasures of drug use. These alternative gender norms embody a global cannabis



subculture with (occasional) androgynous gender expectations and an emphasis on pleasure, community, autonomy, and drug-induced creativity (Haines et al., 2009, Sandberg, 2013), as a resource for enactments of femininity that break with those that dominate Mexican society. Drug subcultures can therefore sometimes be progressive in terms of challenging the established gender order.

Nevertheless, traditional gender norms still dominate drug use in Mexico, and as this study has shown, cannabis use tends to reproduce and take place within dominating *machismo* and *marianismo* gender ideals (as it does internationally, Hemsing & Greaves, 2020). The new cannabis laws anticipate certain changes in customs and may potentially create new moralities related to the gender system. Indeed, if legislations are precursors to changes in culture, as seen with laws on abortion, same-sex marriage, and against gender-based violence, this is also likely to occur in the case of cannabis use. Morality and law may exert a mutual influence, and there are cases in which new moralities emerge precisely because of legal changes (Agoff & Cid, 2020). Should they occur, these changes will, however, only be felt in a few years. While the gendered associations of cannabis may thus indeed slowly evolve following legislative change to finally benefit women cannabis users, for male cannabis users, the effects of the ongoing liberalization are likely to be more direct, immediate, and positive.

The cannabis stigma experienced by men appears to mainly depend on the legal status of cannabis, while for women it is rooted in a patriarchal culture that is slower to change. Men's problems might thus be considerably reduced with the decriminalization of cannabis, while the challenges women experience when using cannabis may remain more or less intact, at least until the cultural and gendered associations of their cannabis use are altered. Legalization will limit arrests and police will have one less way of extorting people, both of which will essentially benefit male users. For women, the cultural stigma associated with their cannabis use will probably continue, given the strongly gendered stratification of Mexican society. We thus argue that the cannabis liberalization legal reform currently underway in Mexico will mainly and proportionally benefit men.

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