Between Survival and Sacrifice: Narratives of Criminalized Girls in Brazil's War on Drugs

by

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Abstract

This dissertation contributes to debates about the social conditions that enabled both the mass incarceration of women and girls and the rise of criminalized violence in the global peripheries of capitalism since the 1990s. In Global South countries like Brazil, neoliberal economic policies gave rise to increasingly precarious labour markets. The transnational War on Drugs led to the expansion of militarized security and the upsurge of violent – and ever more profitable – illegal markets. Women and girls in South America, the bottom of the cocaine economy, have borne the brunt of these interconnected historical processes. The feminization of poverty and the expansion of illicit markets intersect to produce new survival strategies and forms of criminalization. The three papers that form this dissertation contribute to the sociologies of violence, crime, and punishment by considering the centrality of gender as a social structure in shaping violence and criminalization at the urban margins. I combine Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice with narrative criminology to investigate how gendered structures inform narratives of crime and violence and how these narratives sustain patterns of interpersonal and state violence. To do so, I analyze 34 biographical narratives of criminalized young women (13-20) collected in 2016 and 2023-2024 and 40 judicial documents that accuse and sentence young women of violent offences

between 2015 and 2022. Both samples were collected in Porto Alegre, the capital of Brazil's southernmost state, Rio Grande do Sul. Together, the three papers reveal how the structural violence of economic precarity and gender domination intersect with illegal drug markets and their state repression to reproduce patterns of interpersonal and state violence at the peripheries of capitalism.

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1. Introduction

By her 11th birthday, Gabi had a job lined up in the sewing business that had long employed her mother. But "minimum wage goes nowhere" in the outskirts of an industrial city in Southern Brazil, and Gabi found better prospects in the booming local drug market. At 17, the profits of the cocaine trade had her outearning most of the Brazilian population. When we met, Gabi was serving a youth justice sentence for killing the tyrannical leader of her criminalized organization. She was just the designated driver for the mutiny but had to take matters into her own hands when the boys "chickened out" and failed to pull the trigger.

Gabi's story illuminates the economic and historical conditions that have enabled the mass incarceration of women and girls at the peripheries of global capitalism since the 1990s (Sudbury 2005). In Global South countries like Brazil, neoliberal economic policies gave rise to increasingly precarious labour markets (Braga 2013; Feltran 2014). The transnational War on Drugs led to the expansion of militarized security and the upsurge of violent – and ever more profitable – illegal markets (Bourgois 2003; Levenson-Estrada 2013; Yashar 2018). Women and girls in South America, the bottom of the cocaine economy, have borne the brunt of these interconnected historical processes (Fleetwood 2014). The feminization of poverty and the expansion of illicit markets enmeshed to produce new feminized circuits of survival and forms of criminalization (Sassen 2000, 2001; Sudbury 2015).

The three papers that form this dissertation contribute to the sociologies of violence, crime, and punishment. They do so by considering the centrality of gender as a social structure (Connell 2014; McNay 2005, 2008; 2013; Risman 2004) in shaping violence and criminalization at the urban margins. Empirically, this dissertation sheds light on the lives of a highly invisibilized population: young women and girls working and living in proximity to the violent and volatile drug markets of Southern Brazil. Theoretically, it traces the invisible threads that connect girls like Gabi to neoliberal economic precarity, the transnational networks of cocaine production, exportation, and its state repression, and the localized community and state violence it engenders. This dissertation aims at unraveling the gendered dimensions of what Bourdieu has called the law of the conservation of violence: the process through which structural economic dispossession

is converted into state and interpersonal violence at the peripheries of capital (Bourdieu 1998, see also Bourgois 2001, Levenson-Estrada 2013).

In the papers that form this dissertation, I combine Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical framework (1984, 1989, 1998, 2000) with narrative criminology (Presser and Sandberg 2015; Fleetwood et al. 2019) to investigate how gendered structures inform narratives of crime and violence and how these narratives sustain patterns of interpersonal and state violence. To do so, I analyze 34 biographical narratives of criminalized young women (13-20) collected in 2016 and 2023-2024 and 40 judicial documents that accuse and sentence young women of homicide, robbery-murder, drug trafficking, and robbery between 2015 and 2022. Both samples were collected in Porto Alegre, the capital of Brazil's southernmost state, Rio Grande do Sul. In the following paragraphs, I discuss the project's analytical focus and theoretical framework.

First, why women? They are, after all, the minority among perpetrators and victims of state and community violence. In sociology and criminology, women's experiences within violent criminalized settings, such as illegal drug markets, have often been consigned to the realm of the exceptional and, thus, to micro-level analyses on why they offend and how they are punished. Meanwhile, men's crimes, violence, and punishment have been studied at the macro-level, with reference to larger social structures, such as political economy (Bourgois 2003; Elliot 1997; Hall 2012; Wacquant 2023). Yet, I argue that this "intellectual division of labour" (Wacquant 2023: 101) works to the detriment of the field. Women's engagement in criminalized practices does not only reveal how gender operates but also illuminates the relationship between criminalization, violence, and precarity. Women "forge the basic links of society: producing food, daily necessities, communal networks, [and] market systems" (Nordstrom 2007: 50). Their experiences illuminate how criminalized actions are often taken in the name of collective survival, rather than in an individual search for profit and respect, as male-centred accounts have argued (e.g., Bourgois 2003; Contreras 2013). The following papers reveal the multiple ways in which criminalized violence is embedded in broader gendered structures. Paper 1 showcases the significance of care for girls' justifications for homicide. Paper 2 illuminates the role of girls' managerial and pacifying skills in illegal drug markets. Paper 3 highlights the centrality of the gendered division between public and private space in shaping personal and judicial narratives of criminalized violence.

Second, why narrative? This project builds on Fleetwood's argument (2016) that feminist narrative criminology can bridge the gap between micro and macro-level analyses of women's criminalized experiences. Specifically, narrative analysis can overcome the enduring dichotomy between agency and structure in feminist criminology. Structural approaches focus on women's victimization under male violence (see Maher and Hudson 2007 for a review), while micro-level analyses examine how women "do gender" in everyday interactions (see Miller and Carbone-Lopez 2015 for a review). While both perspectives offer valuable insights, they have limitations. The former cannot account for contexts in which women take positions of leadership in criminalized settings, which is the case of this study. The latter overemphasizes strategic behavior, risking overlooking the broader and more enduring facets of gender domination (Miller and Carbone-Lopez, 2015). Narrative analysis addresses these limitations by illuminating how women's self-conceptions and practices are shaped by and constrained within wider gendered material and symbolic structures (Fleetwood 2016). Through narrative analysis, this project attempts to answer Parreñas and Hang's call for "doing feminism" instead of "doing gender" in sociological research: "foregrounding structures, including the scattered hegemonies that constitute [gendered] inequalities in our experiences, relations, and material resources" (2023: 944).

In this dissertation, I conduct three narrative analyses with different foci: moral coherence, narrative temporality, and plot structure. Paper 1 explores the limited and gendered "space of possibilities" (Bourdieu 1983) available to girls for recounting morally coherent narratives of lethal violence. Paper 2 demonstrates that narrative temporality can aid the analysis of how critical life events change girls' understandings of gender and violence and pave their entrance into drug markets. Paper 3 highlights the role of gendered spaces, such as the home and the street, in structuring the plots that guide personal and judicial stories of drug market-related violence.

Third, why Bourdieu? Feminist narrative criminology investigates how gender shapes criminalized people's stories and how gender norms are reproduced or subverted in their narratives. But despite its promises, these analyses often emphasize the particularities of localized accounts over their structural components, assigning a secondary role to the global, social, economic, and political forces that shape them. This imbalance, I argue (following Fleetwood 2016; Sandberg and Fleetwood 2017), stems from the lack of a cohesive theoretical

framework to connect "large structures of power to the meso-level of institutions […] to the minutiae of everyday interaction and the phenomenological texture of subjectivity" (Wacquant 2023: 19–20). Bourdieu's theoretical framework offers tools to address this gap through four key interconnected concepts. *Habitus* refers to individuals' embodied dispositions and practices, which are shaped by and reproduce the social structure. *Fields* are bounded social environments with specific rules in which individuals struggle over dominance. *Symbolic systems* encompass the intersubjectively shared mental schemas that guide perceptions and shape worldviews. *Symbolic violence* refers to the ways in which symbolic systems legitimize social domination by masking power relations, making social inequalities seem natural and justified.

This framework is particularly valuable for feminist criminology because it provides tools to reassert the "epistemic priority of the macro-structural over the micro-phenomenological level of analysis" (Wacquant 2023: 104) without losing sight of women's subjectivity and capacity for action. In this dissertation, Bourdieu's framework allows me to achieve three objectives. First, Paper 1 reintroduces structural analysis into feminist criminology via the concept of habitus. Second, Paper 2 links macro, meso, and micro-level analyses of women's criminalized survival strategies via habitus and field. Third, Paper 3 conceptualizes personal and state narratives about criminalized violence as stemming from gendered and racialized social structures and legitimizes penal harm through the concepts of symbolic system and symbolic violence.

1.1. Dissertation Overview

The following paragraphs provide an overview of each of the three papers. The papers stand independently but are interconnected, with each subsequent paper building on the previous one by expanding the data sample and broadening the scope of analysis. The order of the papers reflects the chronological order in which they were written and/or their key arguments were originally conceived. Therefore, the order of papers also reveals the progression of my theorization throughout the PhD. Each paper focuses on a distinct subset of the interview sample, applies a specific analytical lens, advances specific Bourdieusian concepts, and employs a different form of narrative analysis. See Table 1 for a detailed comparison of the papers.

Table 1. Sample, analytical focus, Bourdieusian concept, and narrative analysis of each paper

	Sample	***Analytical Focus***	***Bourdieu's Concepts***	***Narrative Analysis***
Paper 1	13 narratives (2016)	gender domination	habitus	narrative frames: violence as a gendered resource, failure, & dilemma
Paper 2	20 narratives (2016, 2023-2024)	gender domination economic precarity illegal drug markets	habitus field capital	narrative temporality: crises & strategies
Paper 3	34 narratives (2016, 2023-2024) 40 judicial documents (2015-2022)	gender domination racialization spatialization	symbolic system symbolic violence	plot structure: home & street narratives

1.1.1. Paper 1

Paper 1, *"I Did What I Had to Do": Loyalty and Sacrifice in Girls' Narratives of Homicide in Southern Brazil*, was first published in *The British Journal of Criminology* in 2020.[1] This paper addresses the long-standing dichotomy between agency and structure in the literature on women's criminalized violence. While agency accounts emphasize women's volition in using violence strategically to achieve personal goals (e.g., money or power), structural accounts frame women's lawbreaking as a response to structural inequalities and male violence. However, both frames often neglect women's involvement in serious and lethal violence beyond contexts of intimate partner violence.

In this paper, I ask: how does gender shape girls' understandings of their use of violence in settings characterized by widespread state and interpersonal violence? To answer this question, the study focuses on the narratives of 13 girls incarcerated for homicide, kidnapping, and robbery murder in Southern Brazil. Using a feminist and Bourdieusian approach to narrative criminology, the paper investigates the narrative "space of possibilities" (Bourdieu 1983) in which these girls articulate and make sense of their actions. Drawing on Fleetwood's (2016) concept of *narrative habitus,* I investigate how girls construct morally coherent accounts of their crimes, reflecting the socially accepted ways in which femininity and violence can be understood and justified.

I found they mobilize three narrative frames, each representing a distinct relationship between femininity and violence. First, *violence as a gendered resource* refers to narratives in which girls depict violence as a strategic tool to fulfill gendered roles, such as protecting their loved ones or managing boys' emotions in the illicit drug economy. Second, in *violence as a gendered failure*, girls frame their actions as self-defence or forced killings but paradoxically blame themselves for it and portray such violence as a failure to uphold traditional roles as daughters or wives. Third, in *violence as a gendered dilemma,* girls involved in violent fights with other women over the love and loyalty of men present conflicting narratives, grappling with the tension of having to use violence to sustain their position as wives or girlfriends.

[1] This paper draws from an original sample of 22 interviews I collected in 2016 while completing my master's in Sociology at the University of São Paulo, Brazil (Otto 2017). The manuscript was developed during the University of Toronto's Sociology Department's Practicum, a year-long writing workshop for second-year PhD students.

Across all narratives, the central theme is the girls' relationships with others and their perceived duty to care. Girls' sense of womanhood remains intact when violence is framed as selfless and oriented toward the benefit of others but is threatened when force is used for personal gain. Thus, in their narratives, violence becomes redeemable and justifiable when it is presented as serving others' needs. This shared *narrative habitus* reflects a constrained "space of possibilities" for understanding femininity and violence, compelling girls to reconcile their actions within gendered norms of loyalty, sacrifice, and selflessness.

1.1.2. Paper 2

Paper 2, "*Girls Calculate Everything": Economic Precarity, Gendered Violence, and Illicit Drug Markets in Criminalized Girls' Survival Narratives*, expands Paper 1's analysis. The analysis focuses on the 20 girls who reported direct involvement with the illegal drug economy (among the 22 interviewed in 2016 and another 12 interviewed in 2023 and 2024). While Paper 1 considers how gender, as an overarching social structure, shapes criminalized girls' *habitus* across different contexts, Paper 2 examines how gendered dispositions are shaped by broader economic structures (the macro-level) and the inner dynamics of drug markets (the meso-level, or *field*).

In Paper 2, I argue that girls develop criminalized survival strategies within violent and volatile drug markets in response to economic precarity and gendered violence. These strategies, however, further expose them to state, community, and interpersonal violence. The analysis is situated at the intersection of the sociologies of gender, crime, violence, and urban marginality, linking three bodies of literature: micro-level studies of women's roles in illicit drug markets, macro-level analyses of neoliberal (and male) violence, and meso-level research on the organizational dynamics of drug markets. I argue that these works lack a cohesive framework to connect the micro, meso, and macro-level dynamics of women's involvement in violent drug markets.

To address this gap, I combine narrative criminology with Bourdieu's theory of practice (1984, 2000) and Connell's theory of gender and power (2014). This approach connects gendered *habitus*, violent criminalized *fields*, and neoliberal economic structures, providing an account of how drug markets mediate the relationship between structural inequalities and girls' survival strategies. The temporal structure of narratives – the retelling of events with a beginning, middle,

and end – enables an analysis of the crises that lead each girl into the drug market field. Additionally, narrative temporality showcases how girls' lives change once they enter the drug market field. The findings reveal how economic, violent, and emotional *crises* in girls' early life lead them into the drug market field, where they leverage their gendered skills to survive and – temporarily – thrive. But while the drug market promises economic independence and personal safety, it also generates new gendered crises, exposing girls to incarceration, economic exploitation, drug market-related and police violence, and intimate partner violence. I analyze these dynamics through Connell's theoretical framework (2014), which identifies three interrelated structures shaping gendered practices: labour (i.e., economy), power (i.e., violence), and cathexis (i.e., heteronormativity).

First, by considering the division of labour, I highlight how caregiving responsibilities and inadequate formal wages push girls to seek *economic capital* in the drug market field. Once there, they leverage gendered dispositions such as discipline and responsibility to achieve managerial roles. Yet, these gains come at the cost of increased state surveillance and diminished personal freedom. Second, by analyzing the division of power, I show how girls' exposure to violence at home and in their communities drives them to seek *violent capital* – resources to wield violence, such as weapons, skill, and peers – within the drug market field. In the field, girls gain their peers' trust by using their gendered dispositions of responsibility and care to manage businesses, mediate conflicts, and rise through the drug market ranks. Paradoxically, their involvement with the field, motivated in part by exposure to gendered violence, exposes girls to more violence in the form of 'turf wars' and police brutality. Finally, focusing on the structure of cathexis, I show how emotional crises, including feelings of neglect and isolation, lead some girls to pursue romantic relationships within the drug market field. These relationships, conceptualized as exchanges of *reproductive capital* for love and security, often reinforce gendered exploitation and expose girls to particularly dangerous forms of intimate partner violence. In sum, Paper 2 argues that illicit drug markets provide girls with criminalized survival strategies to navigate gendered economic precarity and vulnerability to violence, but these same strategies further entangle them in cycles of state, community, and gendered violence.

This paper contributes to feminist literature on the victimization-offending-criminalization overlap (Daly 1998; Maher 2000; Richie 1996) by demonstrating how illicit drug markets mediate the relationship between gendered victimization and criminalized actions, particularly in

the violent markets of the Global South. Addressing debates about victimhood and volition, I contextualize women's agency as a response to victimization, avoiding the romanticization of these strategies or overestimating their capacity to alter structural inequalities. Girls' experiences in drug markets, I argue, exemplify Bourdieu's *law of the conservation of violence*, where structural dispossession perpetuates interpersonal violence.

1.1.3. Paper 3

Paper 3 is titled *Between the Home and the Street: The (De)Gendering of Violence in Judicial and Biographical Narratives of Young Women's Crimes*.[2] In it, I conduct a *comparative narrative analysis* of two different groups: criminalized girls and criminalizing legal actors. In this paper, I ask how gendered vulnerabilities are articulated or silenced (Presser 2022) in narratives of criminalized violence produced both by criminalized girls and the state officials who prosecute and punish them. The data from the first group comes from 34 biographical narratives of criminalized young women collected in 2016 and 2023-2024. The data from the second group comes from 40 court records of criminal proceedings collected in 2024, in which girls were sentenced for homicide, robbery murder, drug trafficking, and robbery between 2015 and 2022.

In the analysis, I propose a theoretical framework emphasizing two interrelated phenomena often studied separately: *crime* and *punishment*. I argue that gender operates as a *symbolic system* (Bourdieu 1984), intersecting with other axes of domination (Alves 2018; Richie 2012) to assign meaning to spaces (Wacquant 2023) and make gendered dynamics visible or invisible (Presser 2022) across actors, institutions, and social contexts. Specifically, Paper 3 examines how the gendered boundary between the private and public spheres – referred to as the *home* and the *street* in Brazil (Da Matta 1997) – both shapes and is discursively enforced by narratives of criminalized violence.

[2] The paper follows an argument I began to develop in my master's thesis conclusion (Otto 2017). The argument was later refined in a co-written manuscript, of which I am the first author, with Roberta Pamplona and Luisa Schwartzman (under review as of November 2024). In this dissertation, I kept only the fragments of the paper I have written (much of which was not incorporated into the submitted manuscript), albeit edited by and discussed with Pamplona and Schwarzman. Previous versions of the Introduction and Sections 2.1 ("The Social Construction of the Public/Private Boundary in Feminist Theory"), 2.2 ("Racializing Danger"), 2.6 ("Good Girls' Homes, Bad Girls' Streets") and 2.9 ("Discussion") were discussed, reviewed, and edited by Schwartzman and Pamplona. Sections 2.3 ("Private Rehabilitation, Public Punishments"), 2.4 ("Theoretical Framework"), 2.5 ("Data and Methods"), and 2.7 ("Mad at Home, Bad in the Streets") were written for this chapter and not reviewed by Schwartzman and Pamplona.

The analysis compares the *general plot structure* (Frank 2013) in both narrative sets, uncovering what is *said* and what is left *unsaid* about gender, criminalized violence, and punishment (Presser 2022). When making sense of the series of events unfolding before, during, and after the violence is committed, the two groups' narratives share what is *said* about place, criminalized violence, gender, and punishment. They both depict the home as a site of gendered, emotional, and exceptional acts of violence, framed as pathological and reformable. Conversely, the two groups portray the street as a space of inherent, market-related, and hyper-rational violence, which cannot be reformed and deserves harsher punishment. I argue that the two groups' framing of the street as a degendered "always-already violent" place (Ferreira da Silva 2014: 213) and the home as a gendered place where violence is exceptional stem from a shared symbolic system that ties gender, violence, and punishment in a particular way. Such a system both stems from and reinforces a racialized territorial stigma (Wacquant 2023) against the subproletarian communities where the most visible instances of drug trafficking take place. This symbolic system is so culturally pervasive that is not only adopted by the state but also by criminalized girls, hence operating as a form of symbolic violence that obscures and legitimizes state and interpersonal violence against women.

This shared narrative *said*, however, stands in contrast to the *unsaid*. While the *general plot* of both sets of narratives is structured around the opposition between the home and the street, they display some differences. Girls' narratives highlight the economic and violent crises that propelled them into the drug markets, contextualizing their criminalized strategies in a context of social inequality. Judicial narratives, however, do not attribute girls' entrance into drug markets to their gendered vulnerability but to rational choices made by cunning and independent women. Judicial narratives, while portraying the street as inherently dangerous, paradoxically erase girls' vulnerabilities to gendered, state, and drug market-related violence. In these state narratives, young women are agents of danger but never prey to it. This *unsaid* invisibilizes women's vulnerability to violence and, consequently, legitimates the penal harm carried out against women and girls by the transnational War on Drugs.

1.2. Methodological Considerations

The data for this dissertation consists of two distinct sets of narratives about criminalized girls and a collection of judicial documents, all collected in Porto Alegre, the capital of Brazil's

southernmost state, Rio Grande do Sul. The first set includes 34 narratives collected through interviews with criminalized girls: 22 narratives were gathered in 2016, and 12 were collected between 2023 and 2014. The majority of these interviewees (29 out of 34) were incarcerated for homicide, robbery-murder, drug trafficking, or robbery. The second set of data consists of 40 court documents detailing accusations and sentences involving young women charged with the same offences between 2015 and 2022. There is no overlap between the interviewees and the defendants in the court cases, resulting in a combined sample of 74 narratives of girls' crimes in the region. Between 2015 and 2022, 147 girls were incarcerated in Porto Alegre for the specified offences. With 29 of the interviewees and 40 judicial cases focusing on similar crimes, the total sample accounts for 40% of all similar cases in the region during this period.

1.2.2. Conducting Interviews with Criminalized Girls' (2016, 2023-2024)

The first 22 narratives were collected in 2016 at the Foundation for Socio-Educational Services of Rio Grande do Sul (*Fundação de Atendimento Socioeducativo do Rio Grande do Sul*, henceforth FASE). This institution manages the custodial sentences of youths between 12 and 21 years old who have been convicted of an offence in the state of Rio Grande do Sul. Specifically, this study was conducted at the Women's Centre for Socio-Educational Services of Rio Grande do Sul (*Centro de Atendimento Socioeducativo Feminino do Rio Grando do Sul*, henceforth CASEF), FASE's only detention centre for girls.

I collected these narratives as part of my master's research about young women's uses of lethal violence in Brazil, defended at the University of São Paulo in 2017 (Otto 2017). I was familiar with the institution, having worked as a human rights journalist between 2010-2014 in constant collaboration with people who provided pro-bono legal advice to youths housed in the institution. Unlike many youth justice centres in the country, FASE is willing to facilitate research within the institution, having a specific office to manage studies. As a result, several research projects have been conducted at FASE's facilities (e.g., Fachinetto, 2008; Amin, 2011; Becher, 2012; Barros, 2017; Junges, 2019; Strzykalski, 2019; Barros, 2020).

In 2015, I sent my research project and university authorization to the research office. The project was reviewed and approved, and I started fieldwork in 2016. The young women housed at the institution have weekly meetings to discuss their concerns with the centre's staff. During

one of those meetings, I was introduced as a researcher and invited young women to participate in the study. I informed them that I was researching criminalized young women's trajectories and that I was interested in listening to their life stories. Those who wished to participate informed staff members, who produced a list of potential interviewees. The following month, I visited the detention centre daily and waited for those on the list to become available. Interviews were conducted in private administrative rooms at the institution's facilities. In total, in 2016, I collected 22 personal narratives of incarcerated young women ranging from 13 to 18 years old. A detailed description of this sample can be found in Paper 1.

In 2023, I returned to the same detention centre to conduct another 12 interviews, now as a PhD candidate at the University of Toronto. In 2022, I presented the research project to the institution's research office, which reviewed and approved it. I then received the approval of the University of Toronto's Research Ethics Board (Protocol #48176) to conduct the study. I moved from Toronto back to Porto Alegre, my hometown, and conducted interviews between April 2023 and March 2024.

The interviewing process occurred differently in 2023-2024 due to the number of girls housed at the institution. In 2016, the detention centre was operating at full capacity, with over 30 girls living at the centre at the same time. However, after the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of youths arrested and incarcerated decreased significantly in Rio Grande do Sul, shrinking the population of girls housed at the detention centre and the time they spent incarcerated.[3] In 2019, 127 girls entered the institution. In 2020, 2021, and 2022, this number progressively declined to 47, 34, and finally 29.[4] Because of the reduced number of incarcerated girls, my visits to the institution were less frequent in the second round of data collection, occurring only one to three days per month, but covered a longer time span, between April 2023 and March 2024. During each visit, the staff introduced me to girls who had just arrived at the centre so that I could invite them to participate in the study.

[3] Researchers are currently investigating the causes of this steep decline in youth apprehensions. The change might appear positive – less youth under penal control – but is a source of concern among advocates for criminalized youth. During my fieldwork, both interviewees and youth justice practitioners and activists (social workers, legal actors, and researchers, all with whom I talked informally) suggested a change in police practices might be the cause of the decline. Nonetheless, explaining the decline in youths' apprehensions is beyond the scope of this dissertation, as not enough data is available at the moment.
[4] Numbers provided by the institution.

This decrease in incarcerated girls also led me to seek interviewees at different sites. I sought to interview girls serving non-custodial sentences. Non-custodial sentences comprise Assisted Liberty (henceforth AL), which requires them to participate in weekly meetings with a social worker in their neighbourhood's social welfare centre, and Community Service (henceforth CS). To reach young women serving these sentences, I received approval from the Municipal Social Welfare Agency to contact all nine social welfare centres in Porto Alegre. I then asked their staff if they were working with young women serving AL and CS sentences. When that was the case, I went to the social welfare centres on the weekdays the young women would be there and invited them to participate in the study. However, the number of girls serving LA and CS sentences was limited, and there were logistical challenges to conducting these interviews – for example, a few scheduled interviews were cancelled due to girls' difficulties in going to the centres. As a result, despite my several calls and visits to these centres, only three of the 12 interviewees from 2023-2024 were serving LA sentences.

Both at the detention and social welfare centres, the interviews took place in private rooms and lasted between thirty minutes to two hours. Consent was obtained through face-to-face question-and-answer, with me reading out loud the Consent Form with the potential interviewees. During this reading, I reiterated that I had no ties to the institutions where girls were serving their sentences, that I would not disclose any information to staff or other youths serving sentences with them, and that they would neither be punished nor compensated for participating. I also informed them that they did not need to speak about anything that made them uncomfortable and could stop the interview at any point.

To secure their anonymity, no personal information was recorded, and no contact was established with the participants outside of the institutions. The interviews were recorded with the participants' consent, transcribed personally by me, and the recordings were deleted. I then created a dataset of anonymized narratives to analyze and code. The 2023-2024 interviews were added to the already existing anonymized dataset from 2016. To increase anonymity, I sometimes altered case details when irrelevant to the analysis. I also randomly assigned pseudonyms to girls to ensure they do not bear any resemblance to their real names, of which I have no record. A detailed description of the complete sample of 34 interviews can be found in Paper 2.

Self-narratives differ from the kind of interviews sociologists usually conduct. Unlike traditional sociological interviews, in the collection of self-narratives, "the researcher positions herself as an empathic listener who is somewhat invisible." As a result, interventions are limited to prompts like "Tell me more" or simply silence (Petintseva 2019: 325). In collecting personal narratives, the researcher does not ask questions nor propose specific themes, inviting spontaneous storytelling. Mobilizing Bourdieu, Petintseva (2019) calls this type of interview "doxastic" because it aims at probing into the participants' "doxa," that is, how they spontaneously and subconsciously conceive the world.

To capture girls' doxastic views, I sought to be as unobtrusive as possible. To do this, I followed Presser's (2010) suggestions for collecting narratives of criminalized individuals with vague probes and minimal intervention: "The story-seeking interviewer does best by listening much more than talking, by tolerating silence, and by asking open-ended questions" (2010: 437). Since the language participants choose to talk about their experiences would be the "data for understanding constructions of self and world" (2010: 437), I avoided as much as possible to provide the participants with words to construct their narrative. I did not probe my interviewees with questions about my research topics, such as violence, drug markets, and economic precarity, waiting to see how these made part of girls understanding of their own experience.

As I began interviewing, such a strategy proved to be fruitful. Presser's observation that criminalized individuals often initiate interviews with a retelling of the act that led to their incarceration, even without being asked to, was proven true for my sample. Most girls were eager to talk about their experiences and started the conversation by narrating their criminalized actions. When they did not initiate the narrative themselves, I prompted them with the question, "So, how did you get here?" (Presser, 2010: 346). As their narratives progressed, I followed up with generic prompts such as: "Can you tell me more about that?", "and then what happened?", "and how did that make you feel?", "Why do you think that happened the way it did?". Given that I had an interest in their life story as well, I prompted them to reflect on these events in light of their childhood experiences. While that might not come spontaneously to older interviewees (Presser, 2010), the young age of the girls allowed them to draw from their childhood more easily. When they did not, I prompted them with questions such as "Was this always the case?" or "Were things in your home always like that?".

1.2.3. Collecting Judicial Narratives (2015-2022)

I collected the 40 court cases in 2024 at the archives of the same detention centre. The archives contain a file on every youth (12-18), boy or girl, who has been incarcerated in Porto Alegre since the mid-20th century. These files contain, among other documents, the criminal complaint and judicial sentence that led to the youth's incarceration. I requested a random sample of 40 files of young women who had been incarcerated between 2015 and 2022, with ten files for each of the following offences: homicide, robbery, robbery-murder, and drug trafficking.

The analytical focus on gender and violence guided the sample. The time frame was designed to (i) encompass the rise in violence rates in the region and (ii) capture the same period as interviewees' experiences in criminalized settings. The four offences were chosen due to (i) homicide, robbery, and robbery-murder being the most common offences involving physical violence and the ones participants are more likely to have been accused of, and (ii) drug trafficking being considered analogous to violent offences by youth justice courts (see Cornelius 2018).

To collect the data, I visited the archives daily for one month. There, I took anonymized written notes of cases' characteristics (e.g., year, region, offence, defendant's age and racial categorization) and recorded myself reading anonymized passages of documents for qualitative analysis. The recordings were later transcribed to create a database of anonymized judicial documents to analyze and code. No personal identification information, including names, dates, and places, was recorded at any stage. Details of cases were sometimes altered when irrelevant to the analysis to ensure anonymity. The capital letters used to identify defendants were assigned randomly and have no relation to their names, of which I have no record. A detailed description of this sample can be found in Paper 3.

2. “I Did What I Had to Do”: Loyalty and Sacrifice in Girls’ Narratives of Homicide in Southern Brazil[5]

When Gabriela went out to settle a conflict with her boss, she was not expecting to kill him herself. A manager of a drug-selling spot since she was 13, Gabriela and her co-workers organized a ‘mutiny’ against the male leader of their drug-selling group because he was excessively violent. Gabriela was the designated driver for the ordeal, which involved abducting and killing him by the side of a road. But she had to take matters into her own hands when the boys that accompanied her “chickened out” and refused to pull the trigger. She was 17.

At 16 and three months pregnant with her second child, Ana scrubbed the floors of her house clean after her father's murder. The homicide was a family effort set into motion by Ana, her husband, and her mother. The father's occasional visits to Ana's house left behind a trail of destruction: he abused her mother and sexually harassed her older sister. Ana did "what she had to do."

Ana, Gabriela and the other girls interviewed for this paper live in urban areas in southern Brazil. They grew up and came of age in the context of an increasingly precarious labour market, a militarized police state, an ever-more violent and profitable illicit drug economy, and a long-standing patriarchal culture that severely punishes women who do not conform to gender expectations. At first sight, Gabriela and Ana embody a dichotomy between “volition and victimization” (Maher, 2000: 2) long debated in the literature about women’s violence (Batchelor, 2005; Fleetwood, 2016; Grundetjern and Miller, 2019; Jones, 2010; Miller, 2008). Volition accounts emphasize women’s agency, gender-defying strategies, and the use of violence to achieve personal gains like money or power (e.g. Grundetjern and Miller, 2019). Victimization accounts focus on women’s lawbreaking as a last-resort response to gender

[5] This paper was published in *The British Journal of Criminology* in 2020. The paper is reproduced here as it was published, except for the “Data and Methods” section, which was moved to the Introduction of this dissertation to avoid repetition. I am grateful to the editors and anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments, which greatly improved the original manuscript. The manuscript was developed as part of the University of Toronto’s Sociology Department Practicum, a year-long writing workshop for second-year PhD students. I am deeply thankful to Practicum Professors Josée Johnston, Ron Levi, and Phil Goodman, to my colleagues for their valuable feedback, and to Jerry Flores and Jennifer Fleetwood for their constructive comments on earlier versions of this manuscript.

inequality and male violence. It might seem, at first glance, that Gabriela's narrative is one of agency, and that Ana would craft a narrative of powerlessness and victimization. But, as this article demonstrates, women's narratives about violence in Brazil defy such expectations.

Women's involvement in serious violence is under-researched and under-theorized in criminology. Research on the matter has focused on causal gendered pathways to crime and violence (Daly, 1998; Heimer and Kruttschnitt, 2005), violence in the context of intimate relationships (Ajzenstadt, 2009; Dobash and Dobash, 2004; Saunders, 1986), and, more recently, girls' violent practices within gangs and peer groups (Giordano, 1978; Irwin and Adler, 2012; Jones, 2010; Like and Cobbina, 2019; Messerschmidt, 2002; Miller, 2008; Ness, 2010; Young, 2009). Less is known, however, about how women themselves conceptualize and talk about lethal violence. Few scholars have examined how women depict and characterize their involvement in violent crimes, and "even fewer have moved out of the realm of what might be considered the somewhat atypical act of violence, homicide" (Kruttschnitt and Carbone-Lopez, 2006: 322).

Research has shown that women's motives to commit violence often do not differ substantially from men's. Kruttschnitt and Carbone-Lopez (2006) found that protecting one's reputation and demanding respect – motives commonly associated with "doing masculinity" in criminal settings (see Bourgois, 2003; Messerschmidt, 2013) – are also present in women's accounts of their crimes (Anderson, 1994; Batchelor, 2005; Messerschmidt, 2002; Ness, 2010). Yet, if women's motives might be similar to those of men, the ways in which they make sense of themselves as actors of violence can be deeply gendered. Recent studies have investigated how drug mules make gender-appropriate accounts of their crimes (Fleetwood, 2015) and how methamphetamine users make sense of their drug consumption (Miller, Carbone-Lopez, and Gunderman, 2015). They found that women resort to traditional cultural schemas about femininity to explicate their actions: care for family members and manipulation by romantic partners, in the case of drug mules; motherhood and beauty standards, in the case of drug users. But while a narrative frame of care might fit stories of drug use and drug trafficking, less is known about how women reconcile their gendered identities with the act of killing.

Narrative criminologists suggest that analyzing personal narratives can bridge the divide between interpretations of women's violence that focus on agency and structure. They call for an

understanding of self-narratives as dialectic, "as agency conditioned by context" (Sandberg and Fleetwood, 2017: 11). More recent scholarship calls for a Bourdieusian approach to narrative criminology (Caputo-Levine, 2013; Fleetwood, 2016; Grundetjern and Sandberg, 2012; Page and Goodman, 2018; Sandberg and Fleetwood, 2017a; Shammas and Sandberg, 2016). Bringing social domination to the front stage, Bourdieusian narrative criminology investigates how personal narratives are embedded in symbolic violence and, as such, naturalize and reproduce social inequalities. While traditional narrative analysis focuses on individuals, a Bourdieusian perspective highlights how stories are *shared* by people in similar positions in the social structure. Social structure, under this perspective, "functions like an ensemble of offers and appeals, bids, solicitations, and prohibitions, […] a system of expressive possibilities and impossibilities that prohibits or encourages different psychological processes" (Bourdieu, 2000: 512). As such, this paper investigates the narrative 'space of possibilities' in which girls are able to tell their stories of violence.

Within this feminist and Bourdieusian tradition, I use Fleetwood's (2016) concept of *narrative habitus* to interpret the narratives produced by criminalized girls as *embodied knowledge*, produced by and (re)productive of social structures. I investigate how violent practices are reconciled with self-conceptions of femininity in narratives of criminalized Brazilian teenage girls who committed or attempted homicide. I identify how they ascribe different meanings to the practice of violence to tell intelligible and morally coherent accounts of their crimes. Through these narratives, I assess how girls conceive of "the order of things" (Bourdieu, 2000: 61), that is, the socially appropriate ways in which femininity and violence can be made sense of, reconciled, and justified. I found that girls share a *narrative habitus* that allows for three different frames for violence: as a gendered resource, as a gendered failure, and as a gendered dilemma.

2.1. Narrating Women's Violence: Between Victimization and Volition

Criminology has long focused on the narrative of offenders. Sykes and Matza's (1957) study on the 'techniques of neutralization' criminalized youth employ to justify their actions is arguably the earliest example. Scholars have analyzed criminalized individuals' narratives to understand violent moral projects (Katz, 1990), formula stories (Brookman, Copes, and Hochstetler, 2011),

and desistance (Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph, 2002; Maruna, 2007). Presser (2009) summarized these coinciding developments and set a research agenda for *narrative criminology* based on the premise that stories motivate and legitimize harm (Presser and Sandberg, 2015). Since then, the narrative paradigm has studied interpersonal violence (Ugelvik, 2015; Brookman, 2015; Hochstetler, Copes, and Cherbonneau, 2017), drug use and drug trafficking (Dickinson and Wright, 2017; Fleetwood, 2015; Grundetjern, 2015; Miller and Carbone-Lopez, 2015; Miller, Carbone-Lopez, and Gunderman, 2015; Sandberg and Pedersen, 2011), and mass murder (Presser, 2012). Yet, thus far, little attention has been given to women's stories (Fleetwood, 2015; Gilmer, 2019; Guo, 2012; Kruttschnitt and Kang, 2019; Miller, Carbone-Lopez, and Gunderman, 2015).

Feminist approaches to narrative criminology can contribute to debates in the literature about women and crime. One of these debates is the dichotomization of women's violence as tales of victimization or volition (Maher, 2000) – that is, as signifiers of structural oppression or agentic behaviour (Ajzenstadt, 2009; Banwell, 2010). Studies that focus on the former emphasize criminalized women's victimization, especially by male violence. One notable example is Daly's 'street woman scenario' (Daly, 1998). Despite the relevance of structural approaches, scholars claim that this perspective has failed to unravel the "black box" that connects women's crimes to their prior abuse (Daly, 1998; Fleetwood, 2015).

On the other side of the structure vs. agency dichotomy, studies call attention to women's bounded agency in contexts of criminality. Most of this research is informed by the 'doing gender' framework. Under this perspective, "gender is best understood as socially produced in the ongoing interactions of everyday life" (Miller and Carbone-Lopez, 2015: 694). These studies investigate how girls and women negotiate traditional gender norms and local gendered survival strategies in contexts of urban violence (Jones, 2010; Miller, 2008). Findings show that teenagers are expected to perform femininity through heterosexual relationships and compliance with beauty standards while also cultivating a 'tough' reputation to deter violence (Messerschmidt, 2002; Ness, 2010). In some contexts, women reject femininity altogether and see themselves as "one of the guys" (Miller, 2001) or mobilize contradictory representations of femininity, some culturally hegemonic, some specific to their social locations (De Coster and Heimer, 2017; Grundetjern, 2015; Henriksen, 2017). These studies have given insightful new directions for understanding women's agency in criminalized settings. Nonetheless, their approach can over-

emphasize the rational and strategical components of gender performance and overlook the "more persistent, yet often invisible, facets of gender inequality" (Miller and Carbone-Lopez, 2015: 694).

Fleetwood (2015) suggests that this "oversimplification" of women's lawbreaking is due to a lack of focus on the discursive and symbolic components of gender that inform criminalized women's self-conceptions and practices. Narrative analysis offers a solution to this problem: narratives reflect both social structure and agency because they are the result of a reflexive rearrangement of memories but are also constrained by culturally available discourses (Fleetwood, 2015). Focusing on language and discourse can highlight how gendered meanings not only inform situated actions and rational survival strategies but also "reflect… prevailing patterns of hegemony in the economic, political, and cultural contexts wherein human lives are situated" (McAdams 2008: 247 apud Miller, Carbone-Lopez, Gunderman, 2015). Still, narrative criminology can only do so if it overcomes its own "problematic dualism," in which agency is located in the individuals' narrative creativity and structure in culture (Fleetwood, 2016). Too much volition has been granted to storytelling. To address that, Sandberg and Fleetwood (2016) call for a narrative criminology that draws from Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu's theory is particularly fitting to this project because it considers how "wider cultural and social structures such as poverty, unemployment and class interact at the individual and group level to shape unconscious behaviours and dispositions" (Moyle and Coomber, 2017: 3 apud Sandberg and Fleetwood, 2016).

Admittedly, the usefulness of Bourdieu's theory in tackling matters of agency and structure is contested. His scholarship is criticized across different fields for being overly deterministic (Sewell, 1992), engaging in circular argumentation (Jenkins, 1982) and denying agents' reflexivity (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1999). Within feminist studies, Bourdieu has been criticized for a lack of emphasis on gender in his theory of practice (Reay, 2005) and for the simplified generalizations of his ethnographic accounts in *Masculine Domination* (2001, see Witz, 2005 for a critique). However, scholars have recently worked 'with and against' Bourdieu to reclaim his theory and address feminist concerns with agency and structure (see Adkins and Skeggs, 2005). McNay (2004) proposes that there is space for contradiction and change within the *habitus* (as Bourdieu himself argued with the notions of 'cleft *habitus*' and 'double bind'). In this paper, I

follow her call for a feminist theory of the *habitus* that emphasizes the embodied dialectical relationship between subjective lived experiences and objective social structures.

Agency and structure meet in the *habitus.* The *habitus* is a scheme of perceptions and representations that allow individuals to establish adaptable and renewable strategies to navigate social life. These strategies, however, are always constrained within the limits of social structures. The *habitus* is formed by the incorporation of social knowledge through lived experiences (Bourdieu, 2000: 169). It is an embodied sense of prohibitions – a feeling that 'some things are not for the likes of me' – that constrains individuals' practices. The *habitus* also encourages particular practices and makes them intelligible, rendering life and suffering bearable by making "virtue out of necessities" (2000: 143). This practical knowledge learned "through the body" (Bourdieu 2000: 172) is relevant to narrative and feminist criminology because it speaks of prohibitions and justifications that are not always *rational* but *reasonable* and taken for granted.

Therefore, a Bourdieusian approach is fitting to investigate the "narrative needs" (Bruner, 1991) of criminalized individuals. Their stories are not just interpretations of events, but interpretations of how events ought to be explained and justified in an intelligible manner. As such, they reveal the structural constraints imposed on the narrator since pathways to morality and redemption are deeply bounded by cultural scripts of gender, race, and class. Under this perspective, gender is not a deterministic structure but an open system of bodily dispositions – of "regulated freedoms" – that are strong but not eternal (Bourdieu, 1992).

Fleetwood (2016) mobilizes the concept of "narrative *habitus*" to account for a Bourdieusian analysis of narratives. While it is not possible to capture individuals' *habitus* solely through narratives, one can apprehend parts of an individual's scheme of perceptions through a story. Bourdieu sees the *habitus* as an internalization of one's position in the social space. Thus, the narrative *habitus* is the internalization of the narrative *doxa* of this position – vocabulary, genres, identities, characters, and clichés that are available to an individual to construct a coherent narrative. Accordingly, the narrative *habitus* structures people's stories and identities (Fleetwood, 2016: 9). It guides interpretations and actions. People cannot choose from an infinite pool of language and meaning; they rely on forms of representation and *self*-representation they have already learned and mobilized elsewhere. As such, the narrative *habitus* framework allows

for the analysis of hegemonic storylines. It showcases how each narrative has creative limitations and how these limitations relate to one's social position in terms of gender, race, class, and place. Since a Bourdieusian analysis understands stories as embedded in objective social and economic structures (Sandberg and Fleetwood, 2016), I now turn to a discussion of violence and gendered relations in Brazil.

2.2. Brazilian Guerreiras: Gendered Loyalty Among Everyday Violence

Brazil is a peculiar country for investigating gendered practices within violent urban settings for two reasons. First, Brazil differs from North America in the rate of violent crime recorded in urban settings. The country has experienced growing rates of lethal violence since the 1990s. Porto Alegre, where the fieldwork for this research took place, was the 39th most violent city in the world in 2017, with a homicide rate of 40.96 per 100,000 inhabitants. Among young people, the rates are even higher. In 2011, in the same city, the homicide rate for individuals between 15 and 24 was 82.9 per 100,000 inhabitants (IBGE, 2017).

Not only the rate of homicide is higher, but one could also claim that the cultural conceptions surrounding violence are different in South America. Interpersonal violence is portrayed in North American criminological literature as a *rupture* of the social fabric, even when it is informed by a 'code' (see Anderson, 1994). Violence is understood as an exception and 'oppositional', and its use and justification are necessarily founded in localized community values and beliefs that are *contrary* to so-called middle-class values. Approaches from the Global South have recently challenged this perspective, framing violence as a core component of all social relations, not as an exception rooted in divergent values or institutions (Walby, 2013). In "violent democracies" (von Holdt, 2013), such as Brazil and other Latin American countries, violence is better understood as a continuum that ranges from structural state violence to localized interpersonal violence (Bourgois, 2001). The everyday violence of "neoliberal peacetimes" (Bourgois, 2001) in Brazilian urban communities can help us understand interpersonal violence as a complex matrix of meaning and practices that shape the very core of social relationships, both demobilizing and productive, disruptive and unifying (Auyero and Kilanski, 2015). In contexts in which the "law of conservation of violence" (Bourgois, 2001) is in place, the relationship between gendered self-conceptions and interpersonal violence can take unexpected shapes.

Brazilian scholars discuss how the growing drug-related violence in urban outskirts since the 1980s is connected to the widening of a "crime-world sociability" (Feltran, 2010) through which conflict-solving techniques that once pertained to the illicit drug economy have come to inform other social relations. Feltran (2010) refers to crime-world sociability as a discursive matrix that informs practices and meaning in Brazilian urban outskirts. Furthermore, police brutality and racial profiling lead to a 'criminal subjection' (Misse, 2010) through which stigmatized youth embody criminal dispositions, in a self-fulfilling prophecy. Distrust for police and other institutions also leads to informal mechanisms of social control, since it is implausible for working-class and sub-proletarian populations living in urban outskirts to go to the police for protection (Fonseca, 2004: 97)

Culturally hegemonic gender prescriptions in contemporary Brazil resemble Connell's concept of emphasized femininity (2014). According to this concept, femininity is defined and organized around the sexual availability of young women and the domestic and maternal labour of older women. Indeed, both sexuality and motherhood are sources of status and recognition among Brazilian women, especially those who face economic insecurity. For girls excluded from most spheres of social recognition, sex has crucial exchange value but rarely is valuable enough to warrant men's lasting affection (Souza and Grillo, 2009).

Most working-class households in Brazil are led by single mothers, who provide for their children and extended family (IBGE, 2014). In a patriarchy without men, local femininity has its particularities. Mothers are saint-like. Loyalty and family honour are highly valued, and women especially are measured by their devotion to their family and partners (Fonseca, 2004). In Rio de Janeiro, for example, young men refer to their main girlfriend as *a fiel*, 'the faithful' (Pinho, 2007), meaning not only sexual fidelity but overall loyalty. In this context, passivity is not always demanded of women; rather, war-like loyalty is expected. Not coincidently, the highest praise to a working-class woman is to be defined as a *guerreira* – a warrior (see Garcia et al., 2010). These structured gendered schemas of representation inform how women make sense of themselves and their practices. But how these notions of femininity – sexuality, motherhood, family duty, and loyalty – intersect with understandings about the (i)legitimate use of lethal violence is yet to be investigated.

2.3. Data and Methods: Collecting Criminalized Girls' Narratives

Please see the Introduction of this dissertation for a detailed account of data collection.

The participants in this study were imprisoned for violent offences such as robbery, kidnapping, robbery murder, attempted homicide, and homicide. Two-thirds of them were white, and one third were Black.[6]. Over half of the participants reported cohabitation with a partner; a third have children, and the majority reported having experienced or witnessed domestic violence. Almost half reported involvement in the illicit drug economy. Most participants came from families led by women. The vast majority of these families can be classified as members of the *precariat* (Braga, 2014; Standing, 2016): underpaid labourers subjected to high levels of employment instability within the new service economy, which bloomed in Brazil in the 1990s. Respondents' female guardians were domestic workers, caregivers, low-skilled office managers, and cooks. Male guardians were often manual labourers on seasonal contracts, working in construction or farming. Occasionally, girls mentioned their family's dependence on welfare benefits.

2.4. Resource, Failure, Dilemma: Making Sense of Gender and Violence

While I interviewed a total of 21 girls, in this paper, I focus on the narratives of the 13 girls who engaged in acts of lethal violence, that is, those who committed or attempted homicides or robbery-murders. With this choice, I hope to understand the specific ways in which girls make sense of this form of violence, given the lack of research on the topic and the possible contradictions that the use of lethal violence might impose on girls' self-conceptions of femininity. The other participants were incarcerated for acts of robbery, which did not involve serious violence, and therefore, for the purpose of this paper, did not have their stories analyzed.

Narratives were analyzed holistically. Following Presser, I ask: "What is the logic or plot that is being developed?" (Presser, 2010: 444). I also look for moments in which girls include or exclude themselves from the action being described, as for "deflecting of passivizing structures, arrangements of words that shift the focus from the speaker's agentive act" (2010: 440), and for

[6] Black girls were overrepresented in the youth detention centre, as Black Brazilians make up less than 20% of Rio Grande do Sul's population (IBGE, 2010).

justifications – “phrases that interject, before the action, a structure that makes the criminal act seem appropriate or necessary” (2010: 440).

Girls provided different motivations and made sense of their violence in diverse ways. Some were able to present a redemptive narrative, and some were not. I found three different frames for violence in participants’ narratives, each one conveying a different relationship between the narrators’ self-conception of femininity and the appropriate use of lethal violence, that is, a different “order of things” regarding gender and violence.

Girls whose stories focus on the illicit drug economy and on family duty construct narratives in which violence is presented as a gendered resource, portraying violence as an embodied strategy to achieve femininity. Girls whose narratives focus on self-defence and non-consensual acts of killing produced narratives marked by 'self-despair,' in which violence is understood as a gendered failure. Lastly, girls whose stories focus on violently-enforced monogamy present a *cleft* narrative in which violence is understood as a gendered dilemma.

2.4.1. Violence as a Gendered Resource: Achieving Femininity Through Violence

These girls’ stories share a similar narrative structure. Albeit in different contexts – some within the illicit drug economy, some in family affairs – these girls produce personal narratives in which their gendered self-conception is not threatened by their use of violence but rather *reinforced* by it. They are able to tell morally coherent tales in which they take responsibility for their actions but do not feel the need to display regret or guilt. In these stories, violence is employed as a resource that reasserts the narrator’s identity as a woman – a self-controlled manager in the case of drug dealers and a dutiful and loyal daughter in the cases of Ana and Paula.

Responsible managers: Responsibility and self-control in the illicit drug economy

Gabriela, 18, was incarcerated for the homicide of her boss, the local male leader of her drug-selling group. She and other drug dealers organized the attack because he was unfair and overly violent towards his subordinates. Gabriela was a manager for the group, a position of relative authority. She dealt with the finances and logistics of her *boca* (a drug-selling spot). Involved in

the illicit drug economy since she was 13, Gabriela is cool-headed and speaks matter-of-factly. She joined the drug ring after working for two years with her mother in a small factory. The money wasn't good. *Look at how much things cost at the supermarket*, she tells me. *You can't buy anything with that kind of money*. In her story, there is no space for emotion or contradiction; hers is a tale of meticulously thought-out events from early youth. She narrates the homicide, which occurred after she and her peers successfully kidnapped the victim:

> *In the most important moment, the boys chickened out. They didn't want to get the guy out of the trunk, put him on the ground and kill him. They chickened out and just shot him in the arm. I told them: "I can't believe this is happening. We have to kill him, not hurt him." Then I took the gun and shot him twice in the face.*

This tale comprises all major elements of Gabriela's narrative: she is responsible and takes control over situations when her male counterparts fail. In her story, women are self-possessed and trustworthy. She tells me the bosses – always men – value women workers because they can trust them with money and drugs: *We calculate everything. Boys always make a mess.*

Gabriela is not alone when she highlights girls' sense of responsibility in the violent drug trade. In my sample, girls in high-ranking positions in the illicit drug economy consistently opposed their self-possessed personalities against boys' emotional responses to violence, be it cowardice or cruelty. Samantha, 14, was also a manager for a drug ring known for its violent tactics. She is incarcerated for shooting at a police officer when he broke into her *boca* (he was not harmed, but she was convicted of attempted homicide nonetheless). She agrees that girls are valued workers due to their self-control. Boys are often too cruel. This is illustrated in the way she refuted a 'favour' offered by her male peers while she was detained: to kill the entire family of the girl who tipped off the police about her *boca*'s location. *But there was no need for all that*, she told them, sounding sensible and paternalistic, like one reasoning with a child. Likewise, Tina, 18, incarcerated for kidnapping, jokingly wondered if her husband – a leader of a powerful drug ring – had "psychological problems" due to his pleasure in killing. Like Samantha and Gabriela, Tina held a managerial position in her organization and employed violence when necessary to achieve the goals of her enterprise, but not "excessively."

In the context of a violent drug economy, femininity is associated with responsibility and self-control. Occasional acts of violence committed by the girls *in the exercise of their labour*

within the drug economy are not seen as opposed to their gendered self-perceptions. There is no room for regret or contradiction in these tales, as girls present themselves as proper managers whose actions are thought-out and always called for. Through "reasonable" acts of violence, they perform a femininity that is highly valued in their social context: one that takes control of the situation when men are lost in cruel games. In their narratives, violence is framed as a gendered resource employed to produce a self-controlled and responsible feminine identity valued in the illicit drug economy.

Avenging daughters: Violence as a righteous act of care

Ana, 16, was incarcerated for participating in the homicide of her father, alongside her husband and her mother. Her father was abusive toward her mother and her half-sister. Although her parents were no longer married, he would occasionally come by their home to "make a mess ."At the time of the interview, Ana was nine months pregnant with her second child. She is shy, and words do not come easily to her. Still, she recounts her story with a sense of quiet self-righteousness: *I was getting angrier and angrier with him. Then one day, my mom told me he was threatening her. Then I said… that was it. I was no longer going to accept that in my house.*

She then planned the homicide with her family. Her mother drugged him, and Ana's husband stabbed him. Ana's job was to clean the room afterwards. She says the homicide was their last option. They tried to go to the police, but her father had family in the force. *Then one day… I couldn't take it anymore. It was my mother or him. Easy choice.*

A young mother and wife, Ana recounts her participation in the killing as a reclaiming of control over the domestic realm – which she refers to as *her* house (despite it being her mother's). She frames her violence as an act of care. Sacrifice and duty are common themes in her story: *I'd rather he abused me than my mother*. She tells me her family and her community are "on her side" because they know she did the right thing for her family.

Sacrifice and family loyalty are also present in Paula's story. Paula, 14, killed a girl from her community. Paula's story is a supernatural tale of fate and revenge. She had "nothing against" the victim, but when they were standing next to a cliff, something "overcame her," and she pushed the girl over the edge. Later, she found out that the victim's father had killed her father years ago.

Who would have thought that I, without knowing, would be avenging my late father?, she said with dramatic wonder.

Both tales convey themes of dramatic sacrifice in the name of family. Ana and Paula's gendered identities – Ana as a young mother and wife, Paula as a vengeful daughter – are sustained through righteous acts of care. Vengeful acts of violence are reconciled with the narrators' self-perceptions of femininity through narratives in which violence is framed as a selfless act of loyalty and thus mobilized as a strategy to improve the narrators' identities as good daughters.

2.4.2. Violence as a Gendered Failure: Self-Despair in Survival Crimes

Girls who recount being forced to commit violence or doing it as self-defence construct narratives that frame violence as a gendered failure. These stories pose a paradox. They are the ones that most resemble what feminist criminology calls 'survival crimes' (Chesney-Lind, 2006), crimes committed as a response to abuse and/or after cumulated victimization. One could expect these narrators to be able to justify their actions, draw from 'victim narratives' and avoid responsibilization (see Guo, 2012; Katz, 1990). And yet, these are the stories in which narrators struggle the most to reconcile their self-conceptions of femininity with violence. Girls in this group feel guilty for 'putting themselves' in the situation for which they were criminalized. In their stories, they list their failures as wives, girlfriends, daughters, and mothers and establish a connection between these faults and the violence they were forced to commit.

Thus, they construct a narrative rooted in "self-despair" (Bourdieu, 2000: 64), that is, the inability to reconcile one's habitus with one's position in the social space – in the case of the narrative with one's subject position in the story as a murderer. This "discordance" generates the feeling of being "displaced, out of place and ill at ease" (Bourdieu, 2000: 157). Here, narrators lack an appropriate frame to turn "necessity into a virtue", that is, to put a reasonable and redemptive spin on their stories. Not coincidentally, these are the stories more deeply filled with shame and sadness.

Runaway wives: Domestic Redemption for non-consensual killings

Five girls in the sample reported being forced to commit the violent acts for which they were imprisoned. Fatima, 16, was forced by an older man to attack a woman she did not know. She

and a girlfriend took a ride with this man, who was their acquaintance. He pulled a gun on them and forced them to leave the car and stab a woman whom Fatima believed was a sex worker. She was traumatized by the event and did not remember the attack in detail. In her narrative, she reinforces her role as a stay-at-home wife and an obedient daughter in an attempt to distance herself from the killing. While she states that she was forced to attack the victim, she also blames herself. She takes a demure and childish tone when considering that she was to blame because she "ran away from home" that day, against her husband and her father's wishes.

Olivia, 18, was also traumatized by being forced into participating in a homicide. Olivia's story resembles what Chesney-Lind (2006) has called 'survival crimes .'She was sexually abused by her brother at 11 and, unable to confront her family about it, ran away from home. She ended up marrying an older man for protection. Her husband became a drug dealer and was incarcerated when she was 14. Olivia was left alone with her husband's son from his previous relationship, whom she unofficially adopted. Sheepishly, she says she met a wealthy elderly man and became his companion in exchange for money so that she could provide for her stepson. Her husband's fellow drug dealers heard of her new relationship and threatened to tell him the truth if she did not help to plan a robbery against her new partner. She feared her husband would have her killed if he knew of her arrangement, so she agreed under the condition that they would not harm the victim. But during the robbery, they killed him nonetheless. Shame runs through Olivia's story, from how she talks about her sexual abuse to her resorting to sex work, culminating in her participation in the homicide of her new partner. All the while, she produces a narrative of sexualized self-blame. Similarly, she presents a gendered redemption arc in which she is healed through virginal motherhood (her son was given to her as "a gift from God") and a reconciliation with her sexually abusive brother: *I see a bright future for us three, me, my son, and my brother*.

Olivia and Fatima recount a story in which their gender identity is tainted by the violence in which they were forced to participate. They share *a narrative habitus* that frames violence as a gendered failure, a pathology that must be cured by adhering to and overplaying traditional scripts of motherhood and wifehood. In these stories, notions of femininity and violence cannot be reconciled in a way that frames their violent acts as justified and morally coherent.

Unworthy: Guilt in self-defence narratives

Two girls in the sample committed violence in acts described by them as self-defence. Luisa, 15, shot her cousin when he attacked her with a knife. He was struggling with addiction and was intoxicated when it happened. His ghost haunts her in her room at the detention center, asking why she did that to him. *I tell him I don't know. Sometimes, I don't believe it could be true… This is a wound that will never heal.* Her narrative is filled with guilt. She lists all the times she failed to be a "good girl" and failed her loved ones: when she could not protect herself and her little sister from a rapist when they were, respectively, 8 and 10 years old; when she was arrested the first time, for lending a gun to a friend, which led her mother into depression and made her lose custody of the children; when she got involved in robberies, which is the reason she had a gun when her cousin attacked her, being, thus, the reason he died. *I used to be a good girl; all I did was care for my siblings,* she considered. *But then I got mixed with the wrong crowd, and horrible things happened.*

Sandra, 17, also attacked a family member. She stabbed her older brother when he attacked her during a heated argument, but he survived (for which she is thankful). She was living in an orphanage with her siblings after Social Services found out she was sexually abused by her stepfather. Sandra blames herself for the attack against her brother and for other tragedies that fell upon her family. She takes the blame, especially for her inability to regain custody of her daughter (she was put up for adoption because the orphanage's staff deemed Sandra unfit to be a mother) and to get her siblings out of the foster care system. Like Luisa, she hears voices that blame her for what happened.

Luisa and Sandra share a common narrative. Striking in both tales is the fact that they cannot find a way to tell a redemptive and morally coherent tale despite their history of extreme poverty and child abuse and their tales of self-defence against older male aggressors. Their narratives follow the script of a "survival crime", but the girls do not see themselves as worthy of survival. In their narratives, violence is framed as a gendered failure from which there is no redemption, the ultimate misfortune on top of other gendered failures as daughters, mothers, and sisters.

2.4.3. Violence as a Gendered Dilemma: Contradiction in Tales of Violently-Enforced Monogamy

Girls in this group mobilize contradictory understandings of femininity and violence to construct their personal narratives and to make sense of their violent acts. Both participants murdered other young women in hopes of maintaining the stability of their heterosexual relationships. While they are able to make sense of this violence from the subject position of a wife or girlfriend, the act also threatens their self-conceptions of 'mother' and 'good girl'. As such, the act of violence is framed in both stories as a gendered dilemma that cannot be easily reconciled with conflicting self-conceptions of femininity. They construct a "*cleft"* (Bourdieu 2000: 64) narrative constrained by a double bind, a "tormented habitus bearing in the form of tensions […] the mark of the contradictory conditions formation of which they are the product" (2000: 64). This is an experience of unresolved contradiction; a lack of fit between one's own self-conceptions and the cultural expectations of one's surroundings.

Three girls in the sample killed other girls due to conflicts involving their romantic relationships with men. Helena, 16, killed a 12-year-old girl from her neighbourhood because she had an affair with her husband. Helena portrays herself as an aggressive and invulnerable person who refuses victimization. She compares herself to her mother, who was abused by men, and prophesizes that she "will never be abused by a man ."Hoping to escape a violent household, Helena left home at 11 to live with her boyfriend. They had a child but lost custody of the baby to Helena's mother. This was a "turning point" in Helena's life, making her more aggressive and distrustful of others.

Rumours surfaced in the neighbourhood that Helena's husband was having an affair with a 12-year-old girl. They were acquaintances, so Helena invited her to talk on a road near their neighbourhood, at the edge of a cliff. There, the girl confessed the affair and Helena, with the help of her friend Paula, attacked her. Helena recounts the murder in energetic detail, talking about blood and broken bones. But Helena's identity as a mother comes back at this point of the narrative and interrupts the action. While pushing the girl's body off the cliff, she saw her son in the girl's face. This made her cease the aggression on sight: *I backed off, saying no, Paula, no*. Days later, Helena and Paula were arrested and shown photos of the body. Helena was shocked by the damage she had caused: *I couldn't believe I had done that. It could have been my son in her place.* Helena's subject positions as a vengeful wife and good mother cannot narratively

coexist. This tension produces a narrative with contradictory emotions and rationalities – the pride of the act of killing and the motherly remorse of the aftermath.

Juliana, 15, also killed an acquaintance who had an affair with her boyfriend. Juliana's relationship with the men in question was transformative to her. She mentions how her former boyfriends were all drug dealers who treated her badly, while her new boyfriend was a good, hard-working guy who made her "want to stay at home away from trouble ."But a 14-year-old girl from their neighbourhood was threatening their relationship: she was hitting on him and intimidating Juliana. After exchanging threats, Juliana and the victim met for a "talk" that escalated into a fight. Juliana was armed with a boxcutter and stabbed her.

Throughout her narrative, Juliana simultaneously justifies her act – construing her victim as promiscuous and untrustworthy and her romantic relationship as something worth defending to the last consequences – and diminishes her agency in the events. Yet, she also recounts in detail her past 'thug life', *vida bandida*, which she led with her ex-boyfriends involved in the drug trade. This belligerent, street-smart persona comes forth in the story when Juliana, usually soft-spoken, acts as herself in the past and enunciates her voice in a defiant and aggressive tone. Despite her occasional 'gangster' performance, she refuses the label of 'murderer .'At the end of her narrative, she recounts an interaction with a nurse at the detention center, where the nurse was shocked to find out about her crime. *I said: "Aunty, I think you've already realized I am not what people are saying I am ."She said I was "the girl with the pretty smile". People who know me know I'm not a murderer.*

At the center of Helena's and Juliana's narratives is the killing of a girl in order to defend their respectable social statuses as wife and girlfriend. These are not solely romantic relationships, but connections with highly 'valuable' men, whose respectability is expected to 'rub on' the girls' identity and save them from their past (in Helena's case, her history of child abuse; in Juliana's, from the 'criminality' of her past boyfriends, that had 'contaminated' her). The defence of their status as girlfriends, however, does not come without its gendered dilemmas. 'Girlfriend' or 'wife' is not the only role they play in their social context. Helena can coherently make sense of her violent act while she is in the position of a vengeful wife, but her role as a mother is incoherent with the same action. When an identity shift happens, Helena halts. But it is too late, and it is as a mother, not a wife, that she mourns. Juliana, on the other hand, tries to cut ties with her past 'thug

identity .'She challenges the 'murderer' label by reclaiming a *good girl* identity, "sweet" and with a "pretty smile," as the unsuspecting nurse described her. She, too, lives a gendered dilemma. While on the streets, defending her respectability as a girlfriend, she takes on an aggressive demeanour that seems coherent with her social context. She recognizes, however, the need to let go of this street identity and embrace a 'sweet girl' persona to escape the label of 'murderer.'

2.5. Discussion: Gender, Sacrifice, Violence, and the “Art of Making Do”

This paper aimed to understand how criminalized teenage girls narratively reconcile – or not – their self-conceptions of femininity with violent practices. I found that girls' narratives have three different frames for violence, depending on the context and motivation they attribute to the act of killing (see Table 2). Some framed violence as a gendered resource, some as a gendered failure, and some as a gendered dilemma.

Table 2: Summary of findings (Paper 1)

Frame	Context
Resource	Drug economy Family duty
Failure	Forced killings Self-defence
Dilemma	Heterosexual relationships

But what is the organizing principle of these different narratives? What 'order of things' regarding gender and violence is being conveyed through these narratives? In other others, what is the *narrative habitus* shared by all participants? An investigation of what constitutes the *habitus* “should be concerned with understanding how the social order collects, channels, reinforces or counteracts psychological processes depending on whether there is a homology,

redundancy, and reinforcement between the two systems or, to the contrary, contradiction and tension" (Bourdieu, 1999: 512). Likewise, in Bourdieusian narrative analysis, we ought to ask whether the *narrative habitus* of the participants derives from a homology between *habitus* and structure. This homology, in the case of these stories, is the appropriate fit between the meaning of the narrators' violent actions and their beliefs about femininity. Does violence reinforce or contradict one's femininity in these stories? As we have seen, it does both, and often simultaneously. Violence is framed as strategy and failure, accomplishment and pathology, necessity and fault. The practice of violence can make or break the girls' sense of femininity and self-worth.

The key organizing principle in these narratives is girls' relationship with others and their perceived selflessness or selfishness. In other words, the legitimate relationship between femininity and violence is established based on whether girls' violence is not selfish and self-promoting but is instead oriented towards *others.* This is the case of family protection in Ana's story (and the failure to protect in the case of Luisa), motherhood in Helena's story, and even Gabriela's managerial and leadership work. Violence was framed as a resource and, thus, redeemable and justified when done for someone else's sake. When girls looked after themselves, in cases of self-defence and forced killings, they could not justify their violence and had to overplay traditional scripts of femininity. Those who lacked access to traditional feminine statuses of wife and mother were left to be haunted by their actions. Therefore, participants share a *narrative habitus* about femininity and violence that constrains their ability to make sense of their actions. They must do so under the premise that violence is only justifiable when done in a sacrificial and/or selfless manner. The space of possibilities for reconciliation with their gendered selves is bounded by notions of loyalty and sacrifice.

This paper contributes to a growing feminist narrative criminology that investigates how personal narratives of violence are embedded in gendered social structures. Fleetwood (2016) and Miller and colleagues (2015) found that criminalized women make sense of their practices – respectively, being a drug mule and using methamphetamines – through care, describing their crimes as attempts to be better mothers and wives. This research found that the framework of care – here interpreted as an orientation towards the other – also applies to young women who engaged in serious acts of violence. Furthermore, 'caring' is not only employed to justify criminalized behaviour, but it is the *organizing principle* of most stories, including those in

which there was a *failure to care*. Girls whose narratives were embedded in self-despair connected their violence to a series of 'failures' as mothers, daughters, and sisters.

Even more surprising is the lack of victimization narratives. Victimization is a common theme in narrative criminology. Sandberg (2008) found that criminalized Danish men drew from both ‘gangster’ and ‘oppression’ discourses to make sense of their crimes. Similarly, Miller and colleagues (2015) argue that victimization narratives might be more easily available to women due to gendered expectations. But while girls in my sample did talk about suffering and oppression, they did not mobilize their victimization as a ‘technique of neutralization' (Sykes and Matza, 1957), that is, as a way to avoid responsibility. The common narrative criminology trope – "I am a victim; therefore it is not entirely my fault" – is turned upside down here: *I am a victim, therefore it is entirely my fault*. Girls’ victimization led to self-blame, not absolution. Violence is only justified if it is sacrificial or selfless. Selfishness, even in the form of self-preservation, can only produce cleft and self-despairing *narrative habitus*. This calls attention to the gendered dimensions of people’s ability to justify and absolve themselves of their criminalized practices. These findings suggest that narrative criminology would benefit from a stronger focus on the gendered dimension of guilt, self-blame, and responsibilization rhetoric.

In addition, I found that teenage girls' narratives of violence are not based on localized cultural values or on 'street capital' or 'street talk' (Sandberg and Fleetwood, 2017b; Sandberg and Pedersen, 2011). Girls involved in drug trafficking might be an exception. They share a particular conception of femininity, one associated with responsibility and self-control. Further research is required to investigate whether the Brazilian illicit drug economy can be considered a social field with particular capital and *habitus* attributed to women. Overall, however, girls told stories that could be considered traditionally gendered: tales of fallen or righteous daughters, wives, and mothers whose morality is bounded by selflessness and loyalty. Violence is thus embedded in a larger array of practices and beliefs that Wacquant calls women's "art of making do": the "managing of the household economy and the web of kinship and friendship relations that constitute critical resources in strategies of daily survival" (2000: 150, see also Scheper-Hughes, 1993).

These findings reinforce Miller and colleagues’ (2015) call for a conceptualization of narrative as the “scaffolding of social structure” (2015: 71). While personal narratives have been seen by

some criminologists as a site of creativity and strategy (Fleetwood, 2016), this research calls attention to how deeply narratives of lethal violence are constrained by dominant gendered perceptions, that is, *how strongly they are informed by symbolic violence*. This is not to say, as some of Bourdieu's critics would argue (see Boltanski and Thévenot, 1999), that these girls are not able to think critically about their gendered identities but rather that their capacity for reflexivity is informed by social structures. Future research will be strengthened by assessing whether accounts collected in different sites produce multiple and contradictory narrative strategies, illuminating how stories change to fit particular institutional settings (Presser and Sandberg, 2015). In this case, narrative criminologists might benefit from a more flexible theory of social dispositions, like the one proposed by Lahire (2011).

A Bourdieusian framework allows narrative criminologists to emphasize the dialectic relationship between subjective lived experiences and objective social structures. Girls interviewed in this study embodied and reproduced a particular form of knowledge about gender identity, self-sacrifice, and loyalty that informed the content, form, and emotional landscape of their storytelling. Respondents who lacked the correct framing for their violent practices not only could not produce an intelligible narrative but suffered from the tensions and contradictions in their stories. In their *narrative habitus,* femininity is a lived experience that one can only survive through self-sacrifice. Femininity and violence coexist as long as they follow the *order of things* that states that women must prioritize caring for others over protecting themselves.

3. “Girls Calculate Everything”: Economic Precarity, Gendered Violence, and Illicit Drug Markets in Criminalized Girls’ Survival Narratives

3.1. Introduction

Somewhere along the 1.365 kilometres of the border between Paraguay and Brazil, Vera sits and waits. She hopes the Federal Border Agent doesn't find the kilos of cocaine hidden in every nook of her car. But she and her driver are out of luck. The agent finds the packages. Vera prepared for this worst-case scenario. She cries and tells the agent she had no idea about the drugs: her boyfriend made her do it, she thought they were on a romantic getaway. The police put her on a bus back home.

Had Vera's mission succeeded, the packages would have made their way to Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil's southernmost state. Every month, tons of cocaine pass through the Paraguayan border into Brazil, the giant piece of land that separates the Andes from the Atlantic, the coca plantations from the Parisian clubs. Some of the cocaine stays in Brazil to be sold in local markets. Some go through the ports all the way to Europe and Africa.[7]

Vera’s shipment would have travelled through the transit routes controlled by her then-husband, a powerful drug dealer and bank robber incarcerated in a high-security prison. The whip-smart Vera met him during visitation hours and became his right hand. She manages the logistics of his enterprise from her SUV, driving in and out of prison, her cell phone always on. At 17, Vera moved to an upper-class neighbourhood. She tells her nosy neighbours she is a twenty-something lawyer.

If successfully smuggled, the cocaine might have reached the state’s capital, Porto Alegre, to be sold at Samantha’s *boca*.[8] Sam’s serene personality earned her a manager position at 14. But 2016 is a tough year to be a *boca* manager in Porto Alegre. The city's drug market is at war, and

[7] United Nations, Office on Drugs and Crime. 2022. *Cocaine Insights 4: Brazil in the Regional and Transatlantic Cocaine Supply Chain: The Impact of Covid-19.* Vienna, Austria: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.
[8] A *boca* (“mouth,” short for *boca de fumo*, “smoking mouth”) is a drug sales point, often functioning also as a warehouse for drugs and weapons. Each *boca* has a *gerente* (“manager”) who is responsible for sales and security. The managers have subordinates and answer to the organization’s leader, the *patrão* (“boss”).

Sam's *facção* is on the offensive, gunning for more territory.[9] She is not on the front lines but stands her ground as the police come shooting into her *boca*.

Vera's shipment might have made its way through transit routes and territory fights and ended up in the hands of Ursula in a chilly small town near the Uruguayan border. She sells crack-cocaine in between her shifts at the local grocery store to fill up her cupboards and pay the bills. You never know when the Child Protection Services agents will show up. Ursula hopes she can get custody of her daughter back this time.

I met Vera, Sam, and Ursula in 2016 while researching criminalized teenage girls' understandings and uses of lethal violence in Brazil for my master's thesis in sociology at the University of São Paulo (Otto 2017). They were incarcerated at a youth detention center in Porto Alegre, serving sentences for violent offences – respectively kidnapping, attempted homicide, and homicide. In 2016, I was interested in what the criminology literature calls the victimization-offending overlap, that is, the relationship between women's victimization and their criminalized actions (see Daly 1998; Maher 2000; Richie 1996). I hoped to understand how narratives of victimization under male violence and patriarchal domination were woven into girls' retelling of their own acts of violence. Back then, I thought I was going to find a traditional story of women's oppression.

However, I was surprised to learn how unescapable the inner dynamics of illegal drug markets, both its related practices and representations of violence, were to the stories of the interviewees. Of the 22 girls I interviewed in 2016, almost all had their lives touched by the illicit drug economy, its inner clashes, and its state repression – or, to put it in local jargon, simply by *tráfico*.[10] Some girls were directly involved in these conflicts, like Vera and Sam, who held

[9] In Brazil, *facção* ("faction") is the preferred word to designate a criminalized organization that handles the importation, transportation, and sales of illegal drugs and drug-market-adjacent activities such as armed robberies, kidnappings, and racketeering. To various degrees of force and consensus, factions manage the practices of criminalized actors inside prisons and jails (with many leaders often being imprisoned themselves) and in the streets of their designated territories (see Feltran 2023 for a detailed discussion). Brazil has approximately 70 catalogued factions, with Rio Grande do Sul having the highest number of factions within one state, 15 (see Dibe 2024).

[10] *O tráfico*, literally translated to "the traffic," is the word Brazilians use to denominate an illicit drug enterprise (*entrar para o tráfico*, "to enter the traffic," means to start working in drug sales), a diffused local power (*"o tráfico protege o bairro"* i.e. "the traffic protects the neighbourhood"), the target of the state's security policy (*a guerra contra o tráfico*, i.e. "the war against the traffic"), among other usages. It is common to say *tráfico* as if it was a collective and diffused entity, rather than to use the individualized *os traficantes*, "the traffickers." Most interviewees would not say "traffickers protect the neighbourhood." Rather, it is *the traffic* that does so. Similarly, they do not "become traffickers" but "enter the traffic," as if it was a space to be inhabited. A person is not a

leadership positions in criminalized organizations undergoing violent expansion. Others, like Ursula, worked in lower-ranked positions but had their lives shaped by drug market logics, such as the availability of physical violence as a resource to solve interpersonal conflicts. Others yet had only peripheral involvement with the illegal drug economy but were deeply affected by it nonetheless – by losing family or friends to drug conflicts or police violence, becoming indebted to local drug traffickers, or being displaced from their neighbourhoods. These criminalized drug markets informed girls' objective experiences of violence (e.g., their uses of violence and victimization) and subjective assessments of such experiences (e.g., their perceptions of the legitimate uses of violence).

My 2017 master's thesis focused on girls' narratives of homicide. In that work, I examined how they reconciled their understandings of femininity with their use of violence.[11] Still, I continued to think about the role of the illicit drug economy in shaping criminalized girls' lives. In 2023 and 2024, now as a PhD candidate in sociology at the University of Toronto, I returned to the same field site to conduct another 12 interviews. There are multiple differences in the economic, social, and political background of both samples standing between 2016 and 2023: a presidential impeachment, a major economic crisis, a political turn to the far right (see Schwarcz 2021 for a review), and the covid-19 pandemic, to name a few. Homicide rates also fluctuated during this period: on the one hand, the 2016 'trafficking war' wound down in 2018 and established relative peace in the Greater Porto Alegre; on the other, the conflict spread across the countryside, hemorrhaging into smaller cities. Additionally, a puzzling development transformed the social control of youth in the region: after the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of youths arrested and incarcerated decreased significantly in Rio Grande do Sul and the rest of the country.[12]

Given these transformations, I expected to find differences in the two cohorts' narratives. Yet, I found no major changes in their stories' content or form. Similarly, the 40 judicial narratives analyzed in Paper 3 are also consistent, in content and form, between 2014 and 2022. In this paper, I argue that these narratives' homology across time demonstrates how the interplay of structural forces – namely, gendered violence, neoliberal precarity, and the transnational War on

trafficker, but *do tráfico*, i.e. from the traffic: "I was dating a boy, he was from the traffic." To quit selling drugs is *sair do tráfico*, "to leave the traffic."

[11] A revised version of that analysis can be found on Paper 1 of this dissertation.

[12] See "Methodological Considerations" in the Introduction of this dissertation for a detailed discussion.

Drugs – consistently shapes the practices and representations of young women living and working at the bottom of the cocaine economy.

In this paper, I conceptualize interviewees' stories as *survival narratives* because they contextualize and explain actions taken in moments of personal crisis. I analyze which experiences are represented by narrators as *crises* to be overcome and which *criminalized survival strategies* (Chesney-Lind and Shelden 2004, Sudbury 2005,) emerge as a response to such crises. In my analysis, I demonstrate how illicit drug markets provide girls with criminalized survival strategies to overcome gendered economic precarity and vulnerability to violence, but these very strategies further expose them to state, community, and gendered violence.

3.1.1. Research Questions

Navigating between the brutality and neglect of the state, the volatility of warring drug markets, and gendered violence at home and in the streets, all while chasing dreams of power, freedom, and love, the 34 young women I interviewed worked *with* and *around* violent practices, both in their labour in the drug economy and their personal lives. In 2016, Rio Grande do Sul's capital, Porto Alegre, ranked among the most violent places in the world, with 903 homicides that year – the most brutal in the city's history (Feltran et al. 2022). State actors and the residents of affected communities attribute this rise in violence to a turf war between local drug organizations (Feltran et al. 2022; Barros 2020; Cipriani 2021), a phenomenon known as *guerra do tráfico*, "trafficking war." Most victims were youths living in low-income neighbourhoods (known in Brazil as *favelas* or, in Southern Brazilian jargon, *vilas*) (Feltran 2023; Hoff 2022). After 2016, Porto Alegre's trafficking war spread across Rio Grande do Sul, due in part to the state government's strategy to build maximum security prisons across the countryside to hold faction leaders (Cipriani 2021), which brought unprecedented violence to smaller cities.

The girls I interviewed were both victims and perpetrators in these conflicts. Their stories illustrate multiple paradoxes of 21st-century Brazil. First, their life stories complicate *macro-level explanations* for the rise of criminalized violence in Latin America and other global peripheries since the 1980s. These explanations associate the rise of violence with the neoliberalism : the deregulation of the economy, erosion of public goods, retraction of the social security nets, weakening of labour movements, and expansion of the penal state across the Global North and

South since the 1980s (Hall 2012; Hall, Winlow, Ancrum 2008; Wacquant 2001; Young 1999, 2007). In Latin America, scholars attribute the rise of violent crime to the enmeshing of political legacies of authoritarianism, neoliberalism, and deindustrialization; all of which generated gendered anxieties among working-class men in the region who lost their role as industrial breadwinners (Auyero, Bourgois, and Scheper-Hughes 2015; Bourgois 2003; Davis 2010; Levenson-Estrada 2013; Rivera 2013). However, Brazil, the largest economy in the region, does not fit clearly into this narrative (see Caldeira 2009 for a critique of Wacquant's argument).

Born in the 2000s, Vera, Sam, and Ursula saw the expansion of employment, income, and welfare state benefits to the urban and rural subproletariat.[13] They were born in the dawn of the first Lula Era (2003-2011) and lived through the rise and fall of the first Workers' Party government (2003-2016). This administration succeeded in reducing the "extremely poor" population from 24% in 2002 to 7% in 2014 (Singer 2012).[14] As a consequence, income inequality decreased greatly, in what is known as one of the most successful cases of poverty reduction in the world. Yet, Brazilian scholars argue that the expansion of *consumerism as a proxy for citizenship* produced a sense of relative deprivation among youth, fueling economic anxieties and, in turn, their engagement with criminalized organizations (Feltran 2014; Pinheiro-Machado and Scalco 2020, 2023). In other words, scholars describe a decrease in inequality but increase in precarity, characterized as "casual labour, difficulties in making it to the end of the month financially, dwelling on the urban periphery" (Han 2018: 332). In this paper, I ask: (1a) what are criminalized girls' reported experiences of economic precarity and (1b) what role do they play in their survival narratives.

Despite Brazil's economic growth, welfare investments, and racial and gender-attentive policies, violence against women and youths continued to rise. With a growing economy and welfare system, a world-renowned gender-attentive policy against intimate partner violence, and affirmative action programs that led unprecedented numbers of Black youth into higher

[13] The *subproletariat* is composed of informal and seasonal workers in construction, security, sales, domestic work, and similar occupations in the service industry. The term also encompasses the extremely poor who work on and off jobs, are economically dependent on welfare benefits, or work in illicit/informal markets (a class fraction known in the traditionally Marxian sense as the "lumpenproletariat") (see Braga 2013 and Singer 2012 for a review). Most of this study's interviewees are part of the subproletariat. I deliberately use the term "subproletarian" instead of broader terms like "marginalized" to classify them because the experiences discussed here are specific to this class fraction.
[14] Following the World Bank criteria for the poverty line (1.25 dollars per day per person in a household), "extreme poverty" was defined by the Brazilian government as households living with 70 cents of a dollar per day per person.

education (Pinheiro-Machado and Scalco 2023), all roads seemed to point Brazil as the country of the future, a South American nation what would finally curb its toll of violent death. Yet, lethal violence rates continued to rise, and disproportionately so in the case of women and youths. Approximately 100,000 women died by homicide in Brazil between 1980 and 2013, with the rates rising every year. Between 2007 and 2017, homicides of women increased by 30% (Cerqueira 2019). These numbers are largely racialized: the murders of non-Black women grew only 4.5%, against 30% for Black women in the same period. In Rio Grande do Sul, this difference is even more striking: the homicides of Black women more than doubled in the same period, against a 50% increase for all women (Cerqueira 2019). In this paper, I ask: (2a) what are girls' reported experiences of gendered violence (i.e., domestic, sexual, and intimate partner violence), and (2b) what role does gendered violence play in their survival narratives.

Young people are also on the receiving end of rising rates of violence. Between 2007 and 2017, the homicide rate in Rio Grande do Sul increased 47.6%, going from 19.8 to 29.3 per 100,000 inhabitants. This was a decade of over 20,000 homicides, of which 2,667 were women. Looking at the population at the front lines of drug-related conflict and state repression (Feltran et al. 2022), the numbers are even more staggering: the homicide rate for young men between 15 and 29 years old went from 76.3 in 2007 to 117 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2017. In that decade, 12,496 youths were killed (Cerqueira 2019). While young women represent only a fraction of this number, these figures indicate how routine violent death has become pervasive in the regions where the girls I interviewed have grown up and lived.

The legal violence of the carceral state has also skyrocketed in the early years of 21st-century Brazil, despite economic growth and welfare state expansion. Police killings are responsible for 12.8% of all lethal violence in the country (Bueno et al 2021): almost 22,000 people were killed by state forces between 2009 and 2019 (Zilli 2018). Other hundreds of thousands were imprisoned – mostly under inhumane conditions. Between 1995 and 2015, the carceral population grew 410%, going from 148,000 to almost 607,000 (Alves 2018: 120). Scholars argue that post-2003 Brazil established a doubled-edged system of governing social marginality, including the urban subproletariat in the consumer market through welfare benefits and expanded credit lines while criminalizing, incarcerating, and often killing those not assimilated to the new economic order (Feltran 2014; Pinheiro-Machado and Scalco 2014, 2020, 2023).

This double-edged sword was even sharper in the case of women and girls. They were the ones who benefitted the most from welfare and income expansion, as women are the majority of household providers in Brazil. But women and girls were also incarcerated at unprecedented rates since the 2000s. The female carceral population grew from a timid 5,000 in 2000 to 40,9700 in 2017. Importantly, women were confined for drug trafficking at much higher rates than men: while only 24% of incarcerated men were serving sentences for drug offences in 2017, the proportion of women was 59% (Ministério da Justiça e Seguraça Pública 2017). Girls between 12 and 18 were also detained at larger rates than boys (Ministério da Mulher, da Família, e dos Direitos Humanos 2019).

Conflicts between criminalized organizations and state repression under the banner of the War on Drugs fuel youths' growing violent victimization and criminalization. Scholars argue that, among youths at the front lines of these conflicts, the routinization of death and the normalization of a perpetual *state of war* transformed youths' dispositions towards extreme violence (Barros 2020). In this paper, I ask: (3a) what are girls' reported experiences of 'urban' and state violence (i.e., drug-related conflicts, police use of force), and (3b) what role do they play in their survival narratives?[15]

In sum, girls interviewed for this study are part of a generation of urban subproletarian women who faced better material prospects than their mothers and yet found work in an increasingly profitable and violent drug market – and were victimized, criminalized, and incarcerated as a result. Their life stories complicate common assumptions about the relationship between gender, inequality, and violence, in a context where "dystopic terrors coexist with deep optimism and […] unprecedented political openness" (Fisher 2024: 3).

Their stories also pose a challenge to the literature on gender, crime, and violence. Girls' experiences and self-perceptions defy accounts of women's involvement in drug markets traditionally documented in the sociological and criminological literature. Early accounts depict women dealers as victims in hypermasculine markets, as drug users forced into sex work, or as caught up in romantic partnerships with male drug dealers (Maher 2000). More recent studies

[15] The definition of what is considered 'gendered' (Research Question 2) and 'urban' violence (Research Question 3) is a sociological question in itself. Paper 3 of this dissertation examines this question in length. However, as Paper 3 demonstrates, the symbolic divide between gendered and urban violence is prominent in girls' narratives, making it a relevant distinction to analyze how they report their experiences of violence and make sense of them.

emphasize women's care-taking roles (Miller, Carbone-Lopez, and Gunderman 2015), their uses of social capital (Anderson 2005), and their entrepreneurial abilities to navigate illegal markets (Denton and O'Malley 1999; Grundetjern 2015). However, the girls I interviewed do not fit clearly into these narratives. On the one hand, they were subjected to extreme violence from peers, families, and the state. On the other, they are far from passive and docile secondary players in the drug economy. My interviewees' stories complicate both empowerment and victimhood narratives, particularly in contexts in which they are both victims and perpetrators of extreme violence.

Vera was the head of a complex kidnapping enterprise, powerful and respected by her subordinates. Sam ruled her boca with equal parts grace and terror. Ursula, carrying *tráfico* strategies of conflict resolution into her personal life, killed a girl from her neighbourhood when her marriage was threatened. As discussed in Paper 1, many interviewees stressed their sense of responsibility and self-control in the illicit drug economy, contrasting their poised personalities against boys' emotional and impulsive manners around money and violence. In this paper, I ask (4a) what are girls' reported experiences within illegal drug markets, and (4b) what role do illegal drug markets play in their narratives?

In this paper, I argue that criminalized girls' survival narratives illuminate the interconnected nature of multiple forms of violence among girls living at the peripheries of global capitalism, even in contexts in which there have been relative generational economic and social gains (Gago and Gutiérrez 2014). Macro-level explanations of the relationship between neoliberalism and violence and micro-level accounts of gender domination in criminalized settings are caught in a bind: How are we to make sense of the relationship between them? Girls' narratives showcase a missing piece in this puzzle: the role of criminalized drug markets in shaping women's survival strategies, victimization, and criminalization.

3.1.2. Research Contributions

This paper is situated at the intersections of the sociologies of gender, crime, violence, and urban marginality. It seeks to contribute to debates on how social structures inform practices and representations of crime and violence and how, in turn, these practices and representations sustain patterns of interpersonal and state violence. To do so, I put three bodies of literature in conversation: (i) women's experiences in illicit drug markets, which I argue focuses mostly on

the *micro-level* of analysis; (ii) neoliberalism, violence, crime, and punishment in the peripheries of global capitalism, which I argue focuses on the *macro-level* of analysis; and (iii) the relative autonomy of drug markets in regulating violence, which I argue focuses on the *meso-level* of analysis.

Therefore, this paper seeks to advance debates about gender, violence, criminalization, and precarity. First, this paper builds from studies on women's involvement with drug markets. This literature has been divided into four perspectives: those which focus on women's victimization in male-dominated markets (Maher and Hudson 2007), those that centre on women's agency and gendered strategies to navigate drug markets (Anderson and Kavanaugh 2017), those that analyze how organizational features of illegal markets impact gendered roles (Smith 2020; Grundetjern 2023); and finally, political economy approaches that contextualize women's engagement with drug markets within neoliberalism and the transnational War on Drugs (Fleetwood 2014; Sudbury 2005). In this paper, I argue that these bodies of literature lack an integrated theoretical framework to point out the connections between localized gendered strategies (i.e., the micro-level), drug market dynamics (i.e., the meso-level), and neoliberalism (i.e., the macro-level).

Second, studies on the connection between urban marginality and violence, while attuned to the role of macro-social processes such as neoliberalism and deindustrialization in producing violence at the urban margins, overwhelmingly focus on men’s violence. They consider how rising inequality and precarity produced gendered anxieties in working-class men who lost their position as industrial workers and breadwinners and found a new source of respect in violent illegal markets (Auyero et al. 2015; Bourgois 2003; Davis 2010; Levenson-Estrada 2013; Zaluar 2017). Other scholars point to the rise of individualism, consumerism, and hedonism under neoliberalism, which increased people's willingness to harm others for profit (Valencia 2018; Hall 2012). Yet, in this paper, I argue that these approaches cannot fully make sense of women's involvement in these markets nor account for cases in which economic growth and employment rose hand in hand with criminalized violence, such as in Brazil.

Third, scholarship on illicit drug markets reveals their relative autonomy in regulating violence within particular territories, which is shaped by their place in transnational illegal networks (Arias 2006; Biondi 2016; Feltran 2020; Gay 2010; Lessing 2018; Yashar 2018). Other studies

on illegal markets focus on *street culture*, *street fields,* and *street capital* (Fraser 2013; Grundetjern and Sandberg 2012; Ilan 2013; Moyle and Coomber 2017; Sandberg 2008; Shammas and Sandberg 2016; Sandberg and Fleetwood 2017), highlighting how the inner dynamics of criminalized settings lead to actors' incorporation of different sets of skills and competencies. In this paper, I argue that these studies, while illuminating the meso and micro-level dynamics of criminalized settings, do not sufficiently connect illicit markets to broader social and economic structures, nor focus on how gender, as a social structure, interacts with fields.

In conclusion, these three bodies of scholarship illuminate different pieces of the puzzle that connect gender domination, economic precarity, and violent drug markets. However, they lack a coherent theoretical framework to analyze all components of women's engagement in drug markets *in tandem* and, thus, to establish the connections between them. In this paper, I propose to capture these connections through a theoretical framework that simultaneously addresses the micro, meso, and macro dimensions of social reality. To do so, I will combine Pierre Bourdieu's (1984, 1990b, 2000) concepts of *habitus* (to account for the *micro-level*), *field* (to account for the *meso-level*), and *social space* (to account for the *macro-level* as it relates to the economy) with Raewyn Connell's (2014) concept of the structures of labour, power, and cathexis (to account for the *macro-level* from a feminist theory lens).

In the following sections, I review the literature on women in drug markets (3.2.), neoliberalism and criminalized violence (3.3.), and the relative autonomy of illicit drug markets in shaping violent dynamics (3.4), highlighting their contributions and shortcomings. I then develop my theoretical framework (3.5), accounting for the questions laid out by the literature review. Next, I discuss the data collection and method of analysis (3.6) and introduce the findings in three sections (3.7, 3.8, 3.9, 3.10).

3.2. Women in Drug Markets

Let's recall two interviewees from 2016 whose stories were analyzed in depth in Paper 1: Olivia and Gabi. Olivia ran away from home after being sexually abused by her brother and married a powerful faction leader for protection. She was a victim of intimate partner violence throughout the relationship and suffered death threats once her husband was incarcerated, being forced by his peers to join in a robbery-murder that led to her incarceration. Olivia's story is permeated by

shame – from her silence about sexual violence in her childhood home to her guilt of having had to resort to sex work to survive once her husband was incarcerated.

Gabi joined the local faction after realizing that the wages she earned working with her mother were "nothing" compared to what she could earn in the drug economy. With a sharp business mind and a no-nonsense demeanour, she quickly became a *boca* manager. When we met, Gabi was incarcerated for leading a mutiny against the faction leader. By her arrest at 17, she already had enough money in the bank to buy a house for her family in another city. There were no tales of victimization in her story – no room for weakness or regret.

Olivia and Gabi's stories illustrate – and complicate – two long-standing interconnected debates in the literature on gender and crime: (i) the relationship between victimization, offending, and criminalization (Daly 1998; Maher 2000; Richie 1996) and (ii) women's agency in criminalized settings (De Costner and Heimer 2017). These theoretical questions are the crux of feminist criminology, an intellectual movement that emerged in the 1970s to criticize the *gender blindness* of both traditional and radical criminology. The former aimed at explaining the origins and causes of crime without accounting for social inequality and power relations. The latter focused on the importance of class struggle to understand criminality and, in so doing, "brushed under the rug" inequalities of gender and race (Messerschmidt 1997: 30). Therefore, early feminist criminologists have focused on women's victimization by studying historically invisibilized crimes, such as intimate partner and sexual violence (Frazer and Hutchings 2020). When concentrating on women's crimes, the literature has often focused on "criminalized survival strategies" such as theft, robbery, drug trafficking, sex work, and violence against male aggressors (see Chesney-Lind and Shelden 2004).

This tradition has historically informed studies on women's engagement with drug markets. Maher and Hudson (2007) argued that this field was plagued by a dichotomy between "victimization and volition." (2000: 2). In this review, I argue that the scholarship on women's involvement in illicit drug economies can be group in four different analytical perspectives: victimization, volition, organizational factors, and political economy.

First, earlier studies addressed women's victimization in male-dominated criminalized markets, arguing that impoverished women occupied subordinate and gendered roles (i.e., as sex workers) in drug markets for financial survival and to support their drug use (see Maher and Hudson 2007

for a review). Indeed, Fleetwood (2014) argues that, in the context of the international cocaine trade, "men's participation has been generally assumed to be rational and intentional, whereas women's has been understood through the lens of exploitation and victimization" (14). While some scholars argued that the rapid expansion of the crack-cocaine market in the United States in the late paved the way for greater participation of women, studies on women's role in this market mostly showcase their extreme vulnerability (Maher and Hudson 2007). Maher's nuanced ethnographical account of women in 1990s Brooklyn's crack-cocaine market highlighted how, despite women's attempts to navigate power relations in the streets, "the advent of crack cocaine served to solidify women's positioning within the lowest echelons of the drug and sex trades" (Maher and Hudson 2007: 807). Similarly, Miller's (1995) study on women sex workers in the crack cocaine market revealed how, despite women defining their engagement with sex work as a movement towards independence from men, they continued to face "disempowerment and dependence in relation to drug dealers in the street" (427). Investigating the perspective of male dealers, Bourgois' ethnography of crack dealers in New York in the late 80s showcased how "extreme levels of violence against women are normalized in the common sense of street culture," (2004: 253), which fueled women's victimization to sexual and intimate partner violence.

In sum, victimization accounts focus on women's engagement in drug markets as a last-resort response to gender inequality and male violence, and one that perpetuates their domination. Olivia's story reads like a textbook "survival crime" (Chesney-Lind and Shelden 2004), a neat tethering of victimization, offending, and criminalization: a woman pushed to find protection within drug markets when the state failed her, later pushed to sex work, and finally criminalized by an act committed in the name of her own survival. Perhaps the reader will be surprised to learn that tales like Olivia's are the minority in my sample of 20 girls directly involved in drug markets. Rarely did girls tie their victimization and criminalized acts that clearly in their stories. Tales like Gabi's, while the majority in my sample, do not fit that plainly into the picture painted by victimization accounts. Lacking a clear-cut narrative of victimization under male violence or a neat justification of killing as a desperate last resort, stories like Gabi are often relegated to the realm of "volition."

A second body of work on women's engagement with drug markets emerged in response to the over-emphasis on victimization. Studies within this group argue that earlier scholarship on

women and drug markets has not been able to break from a "pathology and powerless framework" (Anderson 2005, 2008; Anderson and Kavanaugh 2017). In so doing, these studies deny women agency and solidify the image of women as inherently vulnerable. In contrast, works focusing on agency argue that women play essential, if less visible, roles in drug markets (Fleetwood 2014). In a classic study of women dealers in Australia, Denton and O'Malley (1999) demonstrated how women employed gendered strategies, such as mobilizing their interpersonal skills, to build trust in drug markets. Similarly, Anderson (2005) highlighted the importance of women's relational power – e.g., their social networks – in drug markets. Importantly, this scholarship highlights that women might have something to gain by their engagement with drug markets, both materially – e.g., profits – and symbolically – through the feeling of reclaiming control over their lives (Anderson 2008). In a critique of Maher's victimization account, Fraser and Valentine argued that pleasures such as "enjoying sex and wielding the power of the employer over some men" (2005: 123) are also central to women's experiences and should be considered in feminist criminological analyses.

Another branch of studies on women's agency in drug markets derives from the "doing gender" framework: the notion that gender is a "situated accomplishment," not a fixed reality and that women perform gender differently depending on their social positioning and the context of their interactions (West and Zimmerman 1987). These studies disaggregate "women" as a unifying category and investigate their different strategies in drug markets. Analyzing "how drug dealers 'do gender'" in Norway, Grundetjern (2015: 254) argued that women employed different cultural repertories to succeed in the drug economy: some performed emphasized femininity (e.g., holding positions as girlfriends and sex partners of men dealers); others, street masculinity (e.g., focusing on respect and ability to use violence); others developed a "feminine business model" based around care and solidarity; and finally, the most successful dealers employed all repertoires flexibly. Similarly, Grundetjern and Miller (2019) found that women who navigated drug markets successfully and independently from men developed a sense of empowerment and recognition in opposition to the majority of women working in subaltern positions. Still, the "doing gender" framework also explores the constraints imposed on women in drug markets. Milagros Early and Grundetjern, for example, argued that "compulsive heterosexuality both constrains and allows agentic navigations within drug markets" (2022: 3), creating possibilities for gendered negotiations but also exposing women to the risk of intimate partner violence.

A third body of studies offers a solution to the dichotomy between volition and victimization by focusing on the organizational features of drug markets. Building from Steffensmeier's theory about the "institutional sexism" of crime worlds (1983), these studies argue that women's participation in drug markets "vary by the structure and organization of the specific market," which shapes "patterns of gender performance and autonomy" (Deitzer, Leban, and Copes 2017). Steffensmeier's argument, as summarized by Grundetjern, states that "the more uncertain, the more rational, the more complex, the more professional, and the more violent their modus operandi, the greater will be the barriers for women's participation" (2023: 495). Indeed, studies on the methamphetamine market showcase how women are more likely to thrive in markets that follow the "independent model" (i.e., small businesses where sellers work for themselves, Anderson 2008), as opposed to the business model of rationalized, violent street markets (Carbone-Lopez, Owens, and Miller 2012). In an innovative study of women's roles in illegal markets before and after the Prohibition era in the United States, Smith (2019, 2020) demonstrates how disruptive events outside criminal organizations (e.g., changes in legislation) can lead to the centralization of power and the consolidation of inequalities within organizations – a movement that tends to disadvantage women. In her account, women are also more likely to thrive in decentralized, relationship-based illegal markets. Yet these arguments about North American criminalized organizations are complicated by narratives such as Gabi's, who is at ease in a hyper-volatile and violent organization.

Finally, a fourth group of studies on women and drug markets approaches the subject through the lens of political economy. These studies frame women's drug dealing as an empirical manifestation of *the globalization of the feminization of poverty*, that is, the process through which women increasingly bear the sole economic responsibility for their households while simultaneously being overburdened by reproductive labour due to the collapse of the welfare state and community ties (Sudbury 2005; Sassen 2000). Importantly, this scholarship considers how the global imposition of neoliberal economic policies and the War on Drugs security policies led to the disproportionate incarceration of Latin American women since the 1980s (Boultron and Constant 2003; Fleetwood 2014; Sudbury 2005). In these approaches, there is a return to the focus on women's violent victimization and economic dependence on drug markets. About the former, scholars have shown how the spread of "narco-violence" across the Latin American continent has had dire consequences for women: "violence against women is no longer

a collateral effect of the drug market, but a strategic objective within this context, transforming the female body into a territory of domination" (Segato 2014: 8, see also Muehlmann 2014; Wright 2011). About the gendered economic dynamics of drug trafficking, Boutron and Constant (2013) argued that selling drugs becomes a "survival strategy" (177) after the "erosion of women's economic security under neoliberal globalization" (Sudbury 2005: 174). Despite their significance, these macro-level approaches are often not in dialogue with the more specific field of criminological studies on women's engagement in drug markets, to their – and the field's – detriment (for an exception, see Fleetwood 2014).

In this paper, I argue that each one of these bodies of work highlights an important component of women's experiences in drug markets, although approached from different theoretical perspectives: (i) the structural character of their gendered domination and economic dependency (i.e., a macro-level *feminist* analysis); (ii) women's agency and ability to navigate these markets through gendered strategies (i.e., a micro-level analysis); (iii) the role of organizational structure of drug markets in shaping women's roles and strategies (i.e., a meso-level analysis); and (iv) the historical processes – i.e. neoliberalism and the transnational War on Drugs – that produced both drug markets and women's needs to resort to them (i.e., another macro-level analysis). In this paper, I develop a theoretical framework to account for all these levels of analyses simultaneously.

3.3. Neoliberalism and Criminalized Violence

The relationship between neoliberal economic and social policies and the intensification of criminalized violence has become a central concern in sociological and criminological literature since the 1990s (Currie 1997; Fraser 2013; Hall 2012; Wacquant 2001, 2023; Young 1999, 2007). Yet, in the following literature review, I argue that most theorizing about this relationship do not account for (i) the particularity of women's experiences with criminalized violence and economic precarity and (ii) the Brazilian case, where economic development and welfare grew alongside criminalized violence and the expansion of the carceral state.

Neoliberalism is a transnational political project that has material and symbolic effects. In terms of material transformations, neoliberalism has imposed the deregulation of the economy, the erosion of public goods, the retraction of the social security nets, the weakening of labour movements, and the expansion of the penal state across the Global North and South since the

1980s (Harvey 2007; Wacquant 2023). All these transformations are symbolically "glued together by the justificatory tropes of technical efficiency, fiscal integrity, and individual responsibility" (Wacquant 2023: xi).

Since the late 1980s, a significant body of literature in critical criminology has attempted to explain what exactly is "criminogenic" about neoliberalism. In 1997, Elliot Currie summarized the crux of this scholarship: "We will simply not understand the character of violent crime in the contemporary world unless we view it within the context of the growth and spread of a dominant culture of exploitation, predation and indifference to human life in our lifetime" (162). This scholarship argues that the weakening of economic opportunities and social solidarity, coupled with the rise of an individualist culture, foments alternative markets in which people enter to "acquire material goods or achieve positions of domination or status" (Hall 2012: 48). Importantly, scholars highlight the centrality of masculinity in this search for material goods or status. Deindustrialization is pointed as a key process in the social production of men's violence, as young men "are bereft of social position and destiny […] being denied the respect of others, they create a subculture that revolves around power and respect" (Young 1999; see also Fraser 2013).

This masculine neoliberal criminogenic impetus towards material goods and status has been widely documented in qualitative studies. In his classic ethnography of crack dealers in a Puerto Rican neighbourhood in New York, Bourgois (2003) analyzes how deindustrialization and urban segregation have shaped the lives of his research participants, fostering a culture of resistance marked by self-assertion and a violent search for respect within fluctuating social hierarchies. He contextualizes the violence of El Barrio in a shifting labour landscape, in which second-generation Puerto Ricans, dreaming of stable, unionized jobs like those of their parents, found only low-paying service roles in a deindustrialized economy. Bourgois examines how changing gender dynamics and feelings of humiliation drive these men to embrace patriarchal ideals, linking their violent tendencies to systemic shifts in labour, family structure, and unattainable middle-class expectations.

More recently, Contreras (2013) contributed to this debate in an ethnography of ex-crack dealers turned-drug robbers in New York. Like Bourgois, he pointed to the role of unemployment and economic precarity in producing violence within these communities. Most importantly, the

author highlighted the importance of the American Dream as an intangible cultural goal in generating feelings of humiliation, frustration, and despair that fueled acts of extreme violence, all justified by the need for monetary gain.

Analyzing interviews with drug dealers in the United Kingdom, Ayres and Treadwell (2023) argue that individuals – mostly men – turn to "criminal entrepreneurship" as legitimate job opportunities fade after deindustrialization. Driven by the principles of market dominance, risk management, and individualism, these "criminal entrepreneurs" adopt the same competitive and self-interested strategies that define legal markets, often resorting to violence to maintain status within illegal markets. The authors argue that economic austerity and a culture of hyper-individualism foster a consumer-driven mentality where drug dealers seek to achieve a desirable lifestyle filled with luxury cars and designer clothes, symbolizing social distinction (see also Hobbs 2013 on consumerism and illegal markets in the UK).

However, much of this scholarship overlooks how neoliberal precarity shapes *women's* criminalized survival strategies. Feminist political economists argue that neoliberal policies disproportionately burden women, as they must support families and communities through unpaid reproductive labour, in addition to their increasingly unstable paid labour (Sassen 2000, 2001). This "feminization of survival" (Sassen 2000: 506) drives women at the peripheries of capitalism into "illegal and merciless ways of profit-making" (Sassen 2001: 100), including global illicit networks like drug trafficking. Yet, women's perspectives and experiences are largely absent from ethnographic studies of 'street crime' (Fraser and Valentine 2005). This gap is partly due to the "division of labour in studies of poverty," where research on women "rarely makes it into the male-dominated discussion centred on (un)employment, crime, and incarceration" (Wacquant, 2023: 101). Consequently, women's criminalized survival strategies are confined to micro-level analysis within specialized fields, such as feminist criminology, while men's violent acts get to be contextualized within the broader political economy.

3.3.1. Gore Neoliberalism in Latin America

What we should ask about the Maras is what happened to the Latin American working class.[16]

[16] Guatemalan dramaturgist Tito Estrada, cited in Levenson (2013).

Another important but underexplored issue in studies of neoliberal violence is its geographical variation. While neoliberalism has led to an increase in criminalized violence worldwide (Hall 2012), the scale of violence differs significantly between the Global South and North (Currie 1997). Nowhere is the link between neoliberalism and violence more visible than in Latin America, the world's most violent region (Yashar 2018). Theorizing extreme narco-state violence, Valencia introduces the provocative concept of *gore capitalism*, describing it as "the undisguised and unjustified bloodshed that is the price the Third World increasingly pays for adhering to the increasingly demanding logic of capitalism" (2018: 19). If the North, neoliberal violence is often shaped by market dominance, risk management, and individualism (Ayes and Treadwell 2023), in the South, these ideals are intensified and exposed in their rawest forms within narco-state networks, where "the commodity becomes the body and human life itself" (Valencia 2018: 20). As such, Valencia urges scholars to examine how the interplay of global capitalism, drug trafficking, and necropower contributes to uneven patterns of violence and terror across different regions.

Historically burdened by colonialism, the lingering consequences of the Atlantic slave trade, and the U.S.-backed authoritarian anti-communist regimes during the Cold War, violence and dispossession are nothing new to Latin America. But since the 1980s, after re-democratization and the imposition of neoliberal policies across many countries in the region, Latin American marginalization has transformed into a "new poverty" marked by rising inequality, informal employment, weakened social safety nets and social movements, and the increasing role of NGOs in providing welfare as governments retreated from these responsibilities (de la Rocha et al., 2004). In this context, urban violence – and its state repression – has become "the defining feature of life" in working-class neighbourhoods across the region (Auyero et al., 2015). As Guatemalan dramaturgist Tito Estrada argued, studying gang-related violence in Latin America involves investigating what happened to the Latin American working class (Levenson-Estrada 2013: 8).

Drawing from the recent history of Mexico, Davis (2010) argues that the pervasiveness of urban violence in Latin American democracies can be traced back to the encounter between neoliberal politics and authoritarian institutions that survived democratization. Tensions over security and crime skyrocketed in Mexico City in the mid-1990s when the country suffered through crushing deindustrialization in the wake of NAFTA. As a result, a generation of working-class youth was

left to fend for themselves in the informal market amidst mounting privatizations and declining public expenditures. During the same period, the United States succeeded in cutting the cocaine supply route between Colombia and the U.S. (known as the 'Caribbean Corridor'), shifting drug routes to Mexico (Yashar 2018). As drug money flowed, the drug economy presented itself as an opportunity for unemployed youth. Attempts by then-president Fernando Calderón to mobilize the army against cartels in 2004 have only increased violence in the country (Davis 2010; Lessing 2018).

Others point to the legacy of authoritarianism in the region after multiple U.S.-backed regimes during the Cold War. In a compelling historical ethnography of the Mara gangs in Guatemala, Levenson-Estrada (2013) argues that the routinization of violent death during the counterinsurgency war (1950s-1980s), the weaking of working-class movements that followed, the lingering trauma from state terror, and rising economic precarity fueled by neoliberal policies in the 1980s and 1990s contributed to produce the Maras' *necroliving*, that is, their strategies and rationales about the use of extreme violence. Born after the Guatemalan Civil War, the second generation of Maras (operating in the 1990s) went from protecting neighbours and committing petty theft to becoming increasingly involved in violent deaths as perpetrators and victims. As economic precarity increased in Guatemala City, so did the forms of violence used by the Maras.

Similarly, in Nicaragua, Rodgers (2015, 2017) describes how the transformation of gang dynamics and the rise of new armed actors in the 2000s changed local perceptions of death, leading to a distinct "moral economy of murder." Comparative studies on Colombia (Riano-Alcala 2017), Honduras (Rivera 2013), and Argentina (Auyero and Berti 2016) further showcase the historical links between state violence and violent crime and show how economic anxiety and political trauma combine to produce violence across generations of Latin Americans. Together, the authors reviewed in this section demonstrate how structural forces – economic marginalization, authoritarian state violence, and neoliberal policies – drive criminalized violence across the region, producing environments where extreme violence is normalized in the struggle for survival and control. Yet, as important as these findings are, they alone cannot help us make sense of the stories of the girls I interviewed. Contemporary Brazil does not fit into the overall picture about neoliberalism, economic dispossession, and violent crime in Latin America.

3.3.2. Less Inequality, More Violence: The Brazilian Exception?

In the 2000s, Brazil saw an unusual combination of economic growth, rising employment, and expanded welfare benefits, all accompanied by escalating rates of violence and incarceration. During the Workers' Party government (2003-2016), President Lula, a former metalworker and union leader, led with a conciliatory economic policy, promoting steady industrial and infrastructure development through state investments and securing the economic inclusion of the extremely poor via welfare programs and expanded credit lines (Braga 2013; Singer 2012). But despite economic growth and welfare expansion, Brazil continued to experience large-scale criminalized violence (Arias 2006), police violence (Lima et al. 2015), vigilantism (Martins 2015), paramilitary groups (Misse 2011), growing rates of feminicide (Gomes 2018), and land conflicts between wealthy landowners, social movements, and indigenous peoples (Sant'Anna and Young 2010; Zhouri and Oliveira 2007). Between 1980 and 2017, every state in the country, with the exception of São Paulo, saw an increase in rates of lethal violence despite their economic growth (Altas da Violência 2017).

Economically, Brazil's urban subproletariat remains bounded by precarity, reliant on low-paying, unstable jobs in a service sector that has expanded, but remains fundamentally insecure. Feltran (2011) argues that the shift from stable industrial employment to precarious service work disrupted collective social structures like unions, which once organized and represented working-class interests. In their place, welfare institutions and NGOs have taken a more top-down approach to "governing social marginality," managing but not addressing the underlying issues of poverty and inequality. Scholars have argued that the Workers' Party strategy of expanding the consumer market for the subproletariat through the extension of credit worked to consolidate *consumerism* as the main signifier of dignity and citizenship – a choice made at the expense of attempts to extend actual citizenship rights, democratic participation, and reform of military institutions such as the police (Feltran 2014; Pinheiro-Machado and Scalco 2020, 2023). The result is a generation of subproletarian youth whose increased educational and employment opportunities will not keep them from falling into the cracks of a precarious service economy. For youth caught between widespread police brutality and dreams of social mobility that seem closer than ever, but never quite in reach, illicit markets present themselves as a means of

achieving social mobility through the consumption of coveted goods. It is in the space of drug markets that "desperation meets temptation, in a complex dynamic process" (Hall 2012: 61).

As such, neoliberal precarity alone cannot explain the rise of criminalized violence among the urban subproletariat in Brazil. Indeed, "it is only when drug trafficking is taken into account that the relationship between economic conditions and violence, and the abject failure of so many recent attempts at reform *[in Brazil],* can be understood" (Gay 2010: 202). In other words, to understand the impact of macro-social economic processes in shaping violence at the urban margins of Brazil, one must look at the meso-level of drug markets.

3.4. War and Peace in Drug Markets

> *In my neighbourhood, there are a lot of fights because of trafficking, petty fights, they kill themselves over nothing... for no reason. Even more so now because they carry guns. Before, they used to fight with knives. Nowadays, anything is a reason to start shooting.*[17]

Let's go back to Sam, the gracious *boca* manager from Porto Alegre. Sam was incarcerated for shooting at a police officer when they broke into her boca. At the time, in 2015, the local drug market was in the midst of the worst turf war in the last decades. Sam's faction was known for its extremely violent tactics, including the display of mutilated bodies, live-streamed executions, and mass killings. Sam says she had no direct involvement with these tactics – she was a manager, not a soldier. But she navigated this context with apparent ease and thoughtfulness. This is illustrated in the way she refuted a favour offered by her male peers while she was detained: to kill the entire family of the girl who tipped off the police about her *boca*'s location. "They offered to kill everyone, the granny, the babies," she tells me. But there was no need for all that, she told them, sounding sensible, like one reasoning with a child.

Porto Alegre was not always this violent. Ten years ago, no one could imagine that drug dealers would threaten to harm "grannies and babies," least of all from their own neighbourhoods (see Fonseca 2004; Pinheiro-Machado and Scalco 2020 for comparative ethnographies). The transformation in the city mirrors broader trends in Latin America, where scholars note the autonomy of drug markets and their role in regulating violence. Yashar (2018) identifies three

[17] Excerpt from an interview from 2016.

factors influencing violence in drug markets: proximity to drug transit routes, the political strength or weakness of the state, and the level of competition among illicit organizations (that is, the existence or not of a monopoly over drug sales in a given region). These elements create an "outer structure" that influences the scale of violent deaths and shapes the internal rules of particular drug markets, such as the acceptability of violent tactics (Lessing 2018; Yashar 2018).

Geographically, Brazil's position between Andean cocaine-producing countries and the Atlantic Ocean makes it a key transit point to Europe and Africa. The high profits incentivize violence, as cocaine trade profits increase exponentially through transit and retail. Yashar (2018) notes that while one kilogram of pure cocaine may cost $370 in Peru, it can fetch $148,000 in North America. This profitability encourages violent competition, especially along major transit routes in places like Central America, where murder rates are among the highest globally. Brazil's domestic drug market also drives violence: Feltran (2018) describes how stolen cars are exchanged for cocaine paste at border regions, yielding significant profits when processed and sold.

This economic and repressive structure ensures that the drug trade remains deeply embedded in local economies and fuels ongoing cycles of violence. In a classic proposition, Goldstein (1985) described the forms of systemic violence that emerge within illegal drug markets, the following of which are common in Brazilian cities: disputes over territory between rival drug dealers, assault and homicides committed within dealing hierarchies as a means of enforcing normative codes, elimination of informers, punishment for failing to pay one's debt (1985: 10).

While meso-level analyses highlight the organizational dynamics of drug markets (Goldstein 1985; Lessing 2018; Yashar 2018), qualitative studies on 'street culture' have documented how these dynamics impact social interactions between actors who live in spaces where the wholesale of illegal drugs takes place. In this literature, Anderson's argument about the "code of the streets" (1994) has been widely influential. He argued that North American youth in criminalized communities adhere to a code that prescribes no tolerance for displays of weakness and the need to always perform a 'tough' persona --- an adaptation to the persistent threat of violence in the inner city. Other studies have focused specifically on how young women navigate these spaces (Jones 2010; Miller 2008). They find that girls often balance traditional femininity – through

relationships and beauty standards – with a 'tough' persona to deter violence (Messerschmidt 2002; Ness 2010).

These analyses, however, do not dwell deeply into the inner dynamics of drug markets, focusing more on broader interpersonal relationships, gang relations, and police violence. Likewise, they cannot fully shed light on girls' survival strategies in hyper-violent – or *gore*, as Valencia (2018) would have it – and highly profitable drug markets, like the one of Porto Alegre, the site of this study.

3.4.1. Case Study: Porto Alegre and Rio Grande do Sul

Porto Alegre ("Joyful Harbour" in a literal translation) is the capital of the southernmost state of Brazil, Rio Grande do Sul, located in the traditional land of the Guaraní peoples. Colonized in the 18th century by Azorean settlers, the city has around 1,500,000 inhabitants, making it the 12th most populated city in the country. It is also the center of the fifth-largest metropolitan area in Brazil, known as Greater Porto Alegre (GPA), composed of over 4,200,000 people. The GPA is an important industrial center in the Southern Cone and the Mercosur,[18] home to many of the biggest manufacturing companies and multinationals in the region. Historically, the city has higher income and lower unemployment rates than the Brazilian average and is one of the wealthiest cities in the country. But Porto Alegre is also the most racially segregated city in Brazil – the 20% of the population who identifies as Black suffers disproportionally from unemployment and lack of access to education, health, and housing (IBGE 2017).

Conveniently located at driving distance from the Argentinian, Uruguayan, and Paraguayan borders, Porto Alegre has seen a rapid expansion of its drug market since the 1990s. Since then, changes in the structure of the local drug market and state strategies to curb organized crime have produced various dynamics in the city. Between 2015 and 2018, the city faced its most violent drug market-related conflict to date. The 'war,' as people who lived through it call it, was between one faction, Faction X, and a conglomerate of smaller factions that formed a united front to fight X's advances, called Anti-X (Barros 2020; Cipriani 2021).[19]

[18] The Southern Common Market, or Mercosur, is a trade bloc established in 1991 between Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay, and Uruguay.
[19] Pseudonym.

In Rio Grande do Sul, the interplay between prison-run criminalized organizations and state repression had an important role in shaping the local drug market. In 1995, the state government put the military police in control of Porto Alegre's major jail after a series of riots and escapes. To avoid in-prison fighting between the multiple faction members who resided in the jail, the police divided the carceral population into different buildings, one for each faction. From 2005 to 2011, the city's drug market functioned in relative peace, with each faction respecting each other's territories, both within and outside prison walls. To disrupt the centralization of faction power inside the jail, throughout the 2000s, the state government built high-security prisons in the countryside. As faction leaders were transferred from the city to the interior, they expanded their organizations alongside them, fueling drug-related conflicts in smaller cities throughout the state (Barros 2020; Cipriani 2021).

In Porto Alegre, however, the drug market remained relatively pacified until a new player emerged outside of the jail in the mid-2000s. Faction X was formed by members of a particularly violent branch of another major faction. In the mid-2010s, Faction X attempted to obtain a monopoly over the city's drug sales. Using extremely violent tactics against other people involved in the drug economy and their communities, Faction X rapidly expanded and took over territories of smaller factions, one *boca* (drug-selling spot) at a time. They threatened and forced the staff of a *boca* to turn against their own faction, igniting internal wars in different neighbourhoods. Ethnographic accounts note that youth involved in the conflict often felt like they were turned against their friends and neighbours (Barros 2020). When one side – X or Anti-X – was victorious in a particular territory, often those involved with the losing side, including their families, were killed or expelled from the neighbourhood. During these years, the killing of women also increased. Among the war tactics were the use of girls as bait to attract rivals or the killing of rivals' girlfriends (Barros 2020).

In the following years, the conflict wound down in Porto Alegre, but other turf wars erupted across the state. It is in this context of a volatile and competitive drug market in which the girls interviewed for this study worked. Therefore, in this paper, I ask: How do gender violence, economic precarity, and drug market dynamics shape girls' criminalized survival strategies?

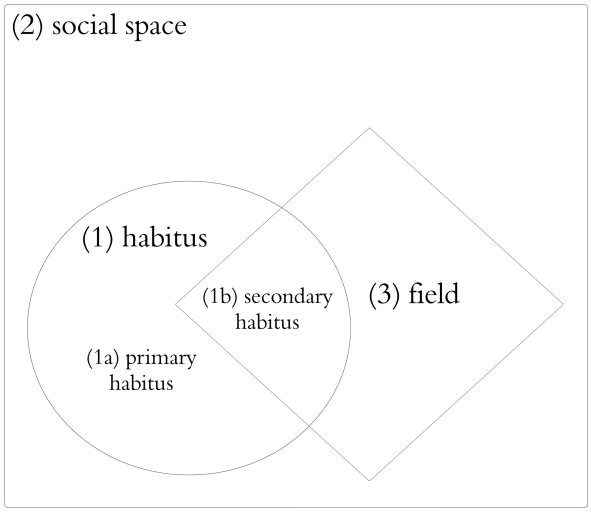
3.5. Theoretical Framework

In the literature review, I have argued that the analytical separation between micro-level analyses of women's work in drug markets, meso-level analyses of drug market organizational dynamics, and macro-level analyses of men's violence under neoliberalism produces only a partial image of the relationship between gender, violence, precarity, and illicit markets. To address this lack of connection across levels of analysis, I propose a structuralist-constructivist approach to feminist criminology that merges Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice and Raewyn Connell's theory of gender and power to grasp the interplay between gendered *habitus*, violent criminalized *fields*, and neoliberal economic structures. This approach allows me to untangle how local drug markets mediate the relationship between broader social structures, such as neoliberalism and gender, and girls' survival strategies.

3.5.1. Bourdieu and Criminology: Street Habitus, Field, and Capital

With this formulation, I hope to contribute to the growing literature on Bourdieusian criminology (Fraser 2013; Grundetjern and Sandberg 2012, Ilan 2013; Moyle and Coomber 2017; Sandberg 2008; Sandberg and Fleetwood 2017; Shammas and Sandberg 2016). Bourdieusian criminologists mobilize the concepts of *field*, *capital*, and *habitus* to produce a structured account of life at the urban margins, in which individual strategies are not framed as rational choices or products of a subculture, but as practice constrained by social structures (Moyle and Coomber 2016). In the following paragraphs, I lay out the basis of this theoretical framework and how it will be employed in this study. See Figure 1 for a visual representation of Bourdieu's conceptual framework.

Figure 1: Bourdieu's conceptual framework



I begin with Bourdieu's "structuralist constructivism" (Bourdieu 1990: 123). By structuralist, Bourdieu means that the social world is composed of *material* structures that are independent of people's individual consciousness and desires and guide their actions and beliefs – e.g., economic and gendered structures. These objective structures establish the "space of possibilities" for action and thought in a given time and place. By constructivism, Bourdieu means that these social structures are constructed and reproduced through social practices and *symbolic* systems, i.e., "mental classifications that guide persons in their cognitive and conative construction of the world" (Wacquant 2023: 34).

Social practices and symbolic systems are (re)produced by the *habitus* (1 in Figure 1). The habitus is formed by the incorporation of social knowledge through lived experiences (Bourdieu 2000: 169). It is a set of internalized perceptions and dispositions that enable practical, often pre-discursive knowledge, allowing individuals to navigate social life with adaptable strategies. Rather than a deterministic reflection of social structure, the habitus is formed in a dialectical relationship between the objective history of social structures and individuals' subjective histories (McNay 2005, 2013).

The habitus is informed by one's position in the *social space* (2). Individuals are differently positioned in the social space depending on their access to efficient resources, or *capital*. Capital can be economic (e.g. financial resources), cultural (e.g., competencies and skills), and social (e.g., access to social networks). According to Bourdieu, people with similar capital will share

similar habitus (Bourdieu 1984, 2000). In other words, people similarly positioned in the class structure will share representations of the world and, thus, engage in similar practices.

Importantly, Bourdieu (1984) distinguishes between *primary* and *secondary* habitus. The *primary habitus* (1a) comprises the set of dispositions acquired in childhood, "slowly and imperceptibly, though familiar osmosis and immersion" (Wacquant 2014: 8). The "sexed habitus" (Bourdieu 2001, henceforth "gendered habitus"), that is, the incorporation of gender, is a prime example: "the essence of learning masculinity and femininity tends to inscribe the difference between sexes in bodies, in the form of ways of walking, speaking, behaving, looking, and sitting" (Bourdieu 2001: 173). This incorporation operates through positive emotion (e.g., "you look so pretty all dressed up" for girls, "you're so brave" for boys) or psychological and physical suffering (2001: 173). In this study, girls' primary habitus are analyzed through their retelling of *personal crises* that occurred before their engagement with illicit drug markets.

The *secondary habitus* (1b) is the set of dispositions that individuals acquire once they are socialized within a particular social setting (e.g., academic or business spaces) (Wacquant 2013: 8). As such, the secondary habitus is formed by the "cumulative exposure to certain social conditions and […] internalization of the necessities of the social environment" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 13 *apud* Fraser 2013: 973). In other words, the secondary habitus is formed to enhance one's ability to acquire cultural capital, i.e., efficient competencies and skills. While this concept was originally coined to describe the formation of habitus within formal organizations such as schools, I argue that Bourdieusian criminologists' concept of *street habitus* is an example of secondary habitus. Fraser (2013), for example, theorizes that gang-affiliated youths' *street habitus* is deeply impacted by territorialization, producing a sense of belonging and a duty to protect a given territory as if it were one's very self.

Relatedly, Sandberg and Peterson employ the concept of *street capital* to define the "skills, competencies, and dispositions necessary to survive as a lower-level drug dealer" (2009). These skills include the ability to adhere to street norms of "rugged masculinity, crimino-entrepreneuralism, and the recourse to violence," which grants young people a series of advantages in their social contexts, from a subjective sense of security and dignity to objective material gain (Ilan 2012: 3). In their formulation, *street habitus* refers to the habituation and skillful mobilization of violence in criminalized settings (Fraser 2013).

Finally, to capture the relationship between the habitus and the social space, Bourdieu uses the concept of *fields* (3). Fields are relatively autonomous social environments bound by internal rules, logics, and hierarchies, which are (re)produced by the habitus of actors in the field. By navigating in these spaces, actors' primary habitus incorporate field logic, which will, in turn, shape their dispositions to act in the future, thus forming their secondary habitus. Bourdieusian criminologists argue that the concept can serve as an analytical tool for street culture and other criminalized settings (Sandberg 2008; see also Ilan 2015; Shammas and Sandberg 2016).

Admittedly, illicit drug markets are not strictly fields in an orthodox reading of Bourdieu (Sandberg 2008). One could argue that they lack the degree of institutionalization and autonomy present in Bourdieu's traditional conceptualization of fields, such as the field of law, the field of cultural production, and the field of power. However, others have claimed that Bourdieu's work is narrowly focused on the complexities of elite formations to the detriment of more nuanced accounts of the (sub)proletariat: "for Bourdieu, fields are confined to the dominant classes, whereas the dominated classes only inhabit the structures of the social space" (Burawoy 2019: 42).

In this study, illicit drug markets will be conceptualized as fields because they are shaped by relatively autonomous material (e.g., profitability of drug sales, location of transit routes, competition between multiple factions) and symbolic (e.g., legitimate uses of violence to solve business and personal conflicts) structures (Arias 2006; Lessing 2018; Sandberg and Pedersen 2011; Yashar 2018). In other words, drug markets, like other fields, are localized "structures of probabilities – of rewards, gains, profits, and sanctions" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992 apud Sandberg 2008: 156), with internal rules that shape actors' strategies to acquire capital (i.e., their secondary habitus).

3.5.2. Gendered Habitus, Genderless Fields? Towards a Feminist Bourdieusian Criminology

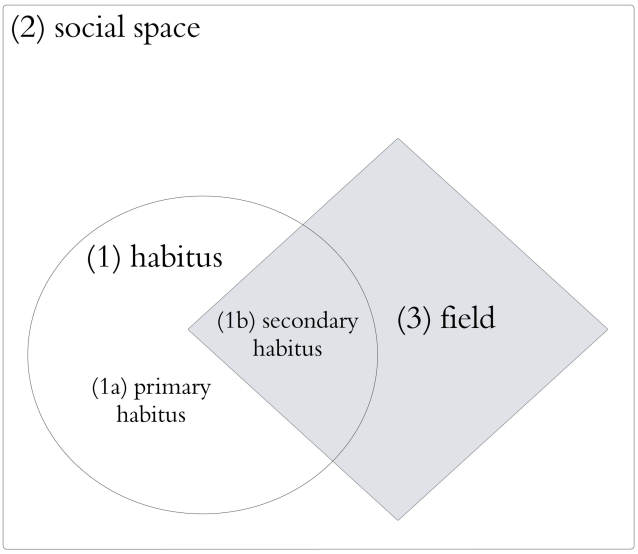
This study builds from Bourdieusian criminologists' work on *street fields*, *street capital*, and *street habitus* (Fraser 2013; Grundetjern and Sandberg 2012, Ilan 2013; Moyle and Coomber 2017; Sandberg 2008; Sandberg and Fleetwood 2017; Shammas and Sandberg 2016). In the following paragraphs, I offer a feminist critique of these studies and argue that this scholarship ought to return to its focus on broader social structures, such as gender and neoliberalism, to

“reassert the epistemic priority of macro-structural over the micro-phenomenological level of analysis” (Wacquant 2023: 104).

Bourdieusian criminology’s theoretical framework assumes that individuals’ practices and representations are rooted in social structures through their habitus and (re)produced via the specific logics of the criminalized fields in which they operate. Yet, these studies tend to focus either on the relationship between *primary habitus* and *social structure* or between *secondary habitus* and *field*. The former analyzes the interplay between criminalized people's habitus and all-encompassing ("fieldless") social structures, such as gender or neoliberalism (e.g., Fleetwood 2014, Bourgois 2003). Paper 1 of this dissertation is an example of such studies, in which I argue that girls' gendered habitus (especially their duty to care) shapes their understandings and uses of lethal violence. The latter studies investigate how individuals develop skills and competencies (i.e., secondary habitus) to thrive in fields with specific rules and logics, such as the need to develop a tough persona to impose respect (Bourgois 2003; Fraser 2013; Grundetjern and Sandberg 2012; Sandberg 2008).

I argue that such division risks reifying the dichotomy between macro and micro-level analyses that this theoretical approach seeks to overcome. It does so by, in the former studies, ignoring how general social structures that inform the habitus (e.g., gender) are also shaped by field-specific logics; and, in the latter, by missing how field-specific competencies, such as uses of violence, are also shaped by broader social structures. In other words, I argue that studies on *street fields* have narrowly focused on only some aspects of Bourdieu’s theoretical framework, namely *field* (3) and *secondary habitus* (1b). See Figure 2 for a visual representation.

Figure 2. Bourdieusian criminology's analytical emphasis within Bourdieu's framework



However, by not examining the primary habitus, criminologists might lose sight of how gender shapes people's strategies in criminalized fields. Gender is a social structure that shapes actors' dispositions *across fields*. Yet, these dispositions are filtered through specific field logics, such as those of drug markets. Importantly, particular field norms may contradict one's primary – and gendered – habitus. Some field logics (e.g., drug markets' uses of lethal violence) incorporated in one's secondary habitus may contradict the dispositions incorporated through 'fieldless' social structures (e.g., women's disposition for care). In theory, the habitus of a girl involved in violent drug trafficking is exposed to apparently contradictory socialization forces: empathy and indifference, kindness and cruelty, nurturing and killing. How do girls make sense of these contradictions, and how do they reconcile habitus and field in their personal narratives?

I also posit that Bourdieusian theory alone does not offer a suitable framework to answer this question and thoroughly account for gender. While Bourdieu is not averse to contradiction and provides concepts like "double bind" and "cleft habitus" (Bourdieu 2000), he neither expanded on the possibilities of these contradictions nor considered their gendered nature. To account for the flexibility of the habitus and contradictions that arise in the interplay between habitus and field, I mobilize Connell's theory of gender and power (2014).

Connell argues that gendered social structures are reproduced and transformed through social practice and interaction. Practices are encouraged or constrained depending on a person's

position in the social structure and the perceived appropriate gendered practices associated with that position. What her theory adds to my broader Bourdieusian framework is a conceptual toolkit to grasp how femininities and masculinities are constructed and transformed in specific contexts.

With a fine-grained approach to gender, Connell proposes that there are three main gendered social structures whose interplay with local contexts shape and transform gendered practices. These structures are *the division of labour, the division of power,* and *cathexis*. The division of labour concerns the social allocation of reproductive labour, paid and non-paid work, the material consequences of this division (e.g. the gender pay gap), and the symbolic representations that uphold them (e.g. women's duty to care). The division of power concerns the social distribution of male authority in the private and public sphere, the gendered uses of violence and the control of women's sexuality (e.g. rape, intimate partner violence), and the symbolic representations that legitimate them (e.g. rape culture). Finally, cathexis refers to the social structuring of emotions, social relations, affect, and eroticism (e.g. heteronormativity).

The interplay between these three social structures, the context in which people live, and their everyday interactions shape practices and representations of gender. Therefore, Connell's theory allows me to analyze specific gendered structures through my broad structuralist-constructivist perspective. It directs me to investigate how the illicit drug economy shapes and transforms girls' understandings and practices of labour, power, and intimate relationships.

In sum, this study seeks to understand how the material and symbolic dimensions of girls' position in the social space (i.e., their experiences and representations of gender and class) intersect with the material and symbolic dimensions of the drug market field to shape girls' criminalized survival strategies. Table 3 contextualizes the themes of the literature review within the proposed theoretical framework, indicating each dimension's correspondence to Figure 1.

Table 3: Material and symbolic dimension by level of analysis

	Social Space (2), macro-level	***Drug Market Field (3), meso-level***
Material	*Neoliberal economy* (e.g. informal employment, blockages to social mobility)	Location of traffic routes
	Gendered division of labour (e.g. feminization of poverty)	Profitability of drug sales
		Competition between multiple organizations
	Gendered division of power (e.g. gendered violence)	State response to drug trafficking
	(1a)	(1b)
Symbolic ***Habitus (1), micro***	*Neoliberal subjectivity* (e.g. entrepreneurship, market rationality, consumerism) *Representations and dispositions about gender, work, and violence* (i.e. gendered habitus)	*Rules and rationales that regulate work, violence, and peace in drug markets* (e.g. required competencies to thrive in drug markets, rules for the use of lethal violence, faction hierarchies)

3.6. Data and Methods

Data from this study comes from a larger sample of 34 biographical narratives with young women (13-20) serving sentences for youth offences in Porto Alegre in 2016, 2023, and 2024. This paper focuses on the 20 interviewees who reported direct involvement with the illicit drug economy and its affiliated activities (e.g., armed robberies, kidnappings). Of these interviews, seven were collected in 2023-2024 and 13 in 2016. Interviewees were between 13 and 19 years old and were serving sentences for homicide (8), robbery (6), robbery-murder (2), drug trafficking (2), kidnapping (1), and theft (1). Half of the participants were classified as Black and half as white. A detailed account of data collection can be found in the Introduction of this dissertation.

3.6.1. Analysis: Crises and Strategies in Girls' Narratives

As previously discussed in Paper 1, narrative criminology provides a framework to bridge the macro (large-scale social forces) and micro (individual actions and perceptions) levels of analysis (Fleetwood 2016; Fleetwood et al 2019; Presser and Sandberg 2015). It argues that individuals' personal stories reflect broader societal structures, connecting personal experiences to larger social forces. This perspective allows criminologists to see individual narratives as shaped by and responsive to cultural, economic, and social contexts. A Bourdieusian approach, particularly through Fleetwood's (2016) concept of "narrative habitus," is well-suited to exploring the "narrative needs" (Bruner 1991) of criminalized girls. This approach views their stories not just as descriptions of events, but as ways of explaining and justifying those events within socially intelligible frameworks. In so doing, stories reveal the structural constraints narrators face, what they perceive as their greatest challenges, and how they view the potential solution to their troubles. Therefore, narrative criminology offers a framework to examine the link between broader social forces, such as neoliberalism and gender, and girls' individual criminalized strategies within the drug market field.

Narratives' temporal nature – their structure as retellings of events over time that have beginning, middle, and end (Labov and Waletzky 1967; Ricouer 1983) – allows for the analysis of the critical turning point in each girl's narrative, that is, the event or series of events that led them into the drug market field. I term these turning points *"crises"* and examine them to

understand how girls experience economic and gendered domination, which allows insight into their primary habitus.

Additionally, narratives' temporal dimension permits me to analyze how girls' lives change after entering the drug market field. I refer to their accounts of navigating this environment as their *"criminalized survival strategies"* and analyze these tales to explore how their experiences are influenced by the internal dynamics of the field, which sheds light into their secondary habitus.

Finally, the temporal nature of narratives and their moralizing character (Presser 2022) lead narrators to reflect on the consequences of their actions towards the end of a story. I term *"downsides"* the negative consequences of girls' criminalized strategies within the drug market field.

I conducted the analysis through a multi-stage coding process. First, each narrative was coded inductively, coding for objective experiences (e.g., economic precarity) and subjective assessments (e.g., feelings and responsibilities associated with economic precarity). After analyzing all narratives, I conceived the concepts of *crises* and *strategies*, noticing they were present in all narratives. I then returned to each narrative and coded each crisis and strategy according to their relationship to the structure of labour (i.e., economic), power (i.e. violent) and cathexis (i.e. emotional).

3.7. Summary of Findings

Girls' narratives reveal how economic, violent, and emotional *crises* lead to girls' entrance into the drug market field, where they leverage gendered skills to craft economic, violent, and emotional *strategies* to survive and thrive. The drug market field promises economic freedom, access to the means of violence (to be wielded for safety or revenge), and exciting love stories. For some, it delivers on its promises, but not without a price. This field produces its own economic, violent, and emotional crises, exposing girls to the risk of incarceration, economic exploitation, faction and police violence, and intimate partner violence.

Within the division of labour, girls are burdened with care responsibilities and constrained by inadequate formal wages, which leads them to seek *economic capital* in the drug market field. In the field, they leverage their gendered dispositions towards discipline and responsibility to wield *managerial capital*, earning positions of authority within their organizations. Yet, these gains

come at a high cost to their personal freedom, as girls who stand out as managers become the subject of state surveillance.

Within the division of power, girls face and witness extreme violence in their homes and communities, which prompts them to seek their own *violent capital* in the drug market field. Paradoxically, in the field, girls earn their peers' trust by wielding their gendered *pacifying capital*, aiding in conflict de-escalation. Still, their skills cannot fully protect them from the violence of faction wars and police brutality.

Finally, in the structure of cathexis, girls face emotional suffering due to feelings of neglect, boredom, and isolation, all experiences connected to the previous economic and violent crises. Some seek romantic relationships within the drug market field, using *reproductive capital* – in other words, *caring* skills – to support faction-involved men in exchange for love and security. Yet, these strategies ultimately reinforce gendered exploitation, exposing girls to higher risks of economic manipulation and intimate partner violence. See Table 4 for a summary of the analysis.

Table 4. Girls' crises, survival strategies, and their downsides by gendered structure (labour, power, cathexis)

Structure	***Crisis***	***Survival Strategy***	***Downside***
Labour	care work and economic precarity	*economic*	criminalization
Power	gendered, community and state violence	*violent*	state and drug-market violence
Cathexis	loneliness and boredom	*emotional*	intimate partner violence

In the following sections, I expand on each aspect of this analysis. Each section (3.8. In Search of Freedom; 3.9. In Search of Power; 3.10. In Search of Love) is divided into discussions of crises (i.e., girls experiences *before* entering the drug market field), strategies (i.e., girls experiences and practices *within* the drug market field), and downsides (i.e., the negative consequences of girls' entrance in the drug market field).

3.8. In Search of Freedom: Economic Crises, Economic Strategies

This section analyzes how the structure of labour (the gendered allocation of paid and non-paid work) shapes girls' narratives about their engagement in the illicit economy. It does so by asking (1a) what girls' experiences of economic precarity and state failure are (e.g., poverty, housing and food insecurity) and (1b) what role they play in their survival narratives. The first subsection discusses the economic crises faced by interviewees: their caretaking responsibilities and insufficient wages, which propel them to enter the drug market field. The second subsection analyzes girls' economic strategies in this field, where they obtain *economic capital* by mobilizing a gendered skill: *managerial capital*. Finally, I examine girls' reflections on the price of drug market profit: incarceration and loss of earnings.

3.8.1. All Work, No P(l)ay: Crises of Unpaid and Paid Work

In consonance with the literature on crime and inequality, I found that economic precarity is at the centre of many of the girls' survival narratives. Economic struggles are one type of personal crisis that propelled them into the drug market field, where they could access otherwise unattainable economic capital. However, their stories center less on unemployment, relative deprivation, hedonism, and consumerism than the traditional literature on neoliberalism and crime would suggest. Rather, their narratives reveal that crises related to *unpaid (i.e. care) and paid work* are the crux of girls' criminalization.

Most interviewees were burdened with unpaid care work from an early age. They were often tasked with caring for family members and younger siblings. Vivi, a *boca* manager incarcerated for armed robbery, had two disabled brothers and one struggling with addiction. "I helped with everything," she recalled. "But I got into a lot of fights for defending my brothers." Ceres, who was serving an Assisted Liberty sentence for theft, was ten years old when her grandmother had a stroke. Her mother was busy caring for Ceres' older sister, who was chronically ill and "lived on and off the hospital." It became Ceres' responsibility to care for her grandma: "I had to take care of her, change her diapers and cook for her. I had to figure it out by myself and grow up quickly." Hilda, incarcerated for getting caught up in a homicide with her then-boyfriend, faced similar challenges. When she was 12, her mother lost the ability to walk. Hilda had an 18-year-old sister, but she refused to become their mother's caretaker. "I would come home from school,

and I would see the state of my mom's soiled sheets," Hilda recalled sadly. "I could not see her like that." At 12, she quit school to stay with her mother.

Many girls discussed their role as the main caretaker for their siblings. As eldest daughters, some became the sole caretaker and breadwinner for younger children after their guardians' death, incarceration, abandonment, or loss of custody. Lu always took care of her siblings while her mother worked long hours as a cleaner: "I fed them, bathed them, cleaned the house." Even after her mother lost custody of the children and they moved to a shelter, Lu continued to care for her siblings, fighting for food, beds, and safety in the shelters and the streets.

The same happened to Ceres, who cared for her grandma at ten years old. As she grew older, her responsibilities piled up. When she was 12, her mother remarried. “He did not like us *[the children]*,” Ceres said, “and there was a lot of fighting in the house.” When Ceres was 13, her mother expelled her and her older sister (15), and they moved to Porto Alegre. Their new home was a shack that belonged to family members, but they had to fend for themselves. After the move, Ceres' sister became pregnant and had a little girl: "We had to support ourselves from early on," Ceres recalled. Similarly, Bibiana, incarcerated for attempting to kill an abusive boyfriend, became the primary caretaker of her six-year-old sister at 12. They grew up with their grandfather and mother on a house by the sea, the setting of her happiest memories. But when their mother died, their grandpa moved away and left them behind: "I had to learn how to take care of my sister. It was difficult, but I managed. She's like a daughter to me."

Some of the girls had the ultimate caretaking responsibility: motherhood. Among the 20 girls directly involved in criminalized organizations, four are mothers. Recall Vivi, who took care of her brothers. She had a daughter at 14. The father was incarcerated, and Vivi was left as a teenage single mother: "After I had her, I started to have all this responsibility; I had to run around to figure stuff out." Olivia, incarcerated for robbery-murder, adopted the son of her then-husband, a powerful faction leader. When he was incarcerated, she was left alone with a baby. Suddenly, she had to afford "electric bills, heating, water, telephone, internet, clothing, food, everything." Food insecurity also haunts another young mother's story: Ursula insisted her daughter would never "starve" as her mother did. "My cupboards will always be full," she vowed, no matter the cost.

In sum, many of the girls' survival narratives are shaped by *care crises of unpaid work*. Some girls are burdened with the unpaid work of caring for family, while others suffer from their guardians' inability to care for them. Miriam, incarcerated for robbery at 13, said her life's turning point was when her mother had to "leave home" to start working after getting divorced and becoming a single mother. Emilia, incarcerated for drug trafficking at 13, spent most of her time alone because her father and sole guardian, a seasonal contract worker in construction, travelled across the country for work. "He only sent 1,000 *reais* per month, which was only enough to pay rent and the electric bill, but not food," she recalled.

Girls' needs, be it care or survival, inevitably led them to look for paid work. However, in the licit job market, they faced another crisis: their inability to make ends meet despite working long hours in exhaustive and often humiliating jobs. Lu, for example, was forced by her father to sell dishrags at streetlights to passing drivers. She also worked in a Car Wash for pennies before she turned to armed robberies for survival. Like many girls in this study, Ceres tried making a living as a cleaner: "My aunts got me some cleaning gigs. I would clean their houses; they would give me 100 *reais*. I gave everything to my sister. She bought us the basics, but we had to buy diapers, milk… it was not enough."

Formal, legal jobs did not pay girls enough to take care of their family's basic needs. Gabi, incarcerated at 17 for the murder of a faction leader, exemplifies how the legalized work available to her parents' generation does not satisfy the needs of the new subproletariat youth. She grew up in an industrial town where the economy relied heavily on the textile and leather industries. Her mother, a seamstress, got her a job in the factory where she worked most of her life. Starting at eleven, Gabi worked in the factory for three years. "We made 200, 300 *reais [a week]* ... That's not money," she recalled, shrugging. "Look at how much things cost nowadays. Minimum wage goes nowhere."

Both *paid and unpaid crises of care* led girls to employ criminalized survival strategies. From the entrapments of domestic work to the insufficiency of formal wages, these economic crises led girls to resort to distinct strategies for survival in the illicit drug economy. Some would do so through intimate partnerships with powerful men in the drug market field. These stories will be discussed under *emotional strategies*. Other girls found profitable positions for themselves,

accessing unprecedented economic capital. I call these *economic strategies* because girls name *money* as their primary motivation for engaging with criminalized organizations.

3.8.2. A Numbers Game: Needs and Pleasures in Girls' Economic Strategies

Fernanda laid out her theory for how and why girls end up working in drug markets: "Let's say this. There's a family. There is a mother, a father, and two kids. The mother has no money and makes minimum wage. The girl gets pregnant. She has no money, she is too young, she can't get a job. She'll quit school and join *tráfico*. Because she'll see that she can make easy money. The hours are good: she doesn't have to be there all the time *[at the boca]*, she can be with her baby… She will be able to afford what she needs."

My analysis could end here, thanks to Fernanda's power of synthesis. Her explanation highlights one of girls' motives to join criminalized drug organizations: it is, to put it simply, a better job. The enormous profits of the cocaine trade offer girls financial advantages to fulfill their caretaking responsibilities, survive, and – sometimes --- even *thrive*. Bibiana, abandoned by her grandfather and left to care for her sister, explicitly made the connection between financial need, care work, and trafficking: "After my mom died, I had choice but to start selling drugs […] It gave me money and a house to live with my sister." Likewise, Ceres explained her decision to work in the drug economy after realizing that her wages as a cleaner were not enough to support her family and that she had no other options for assistance:

> *I would give everything I earned [in cleaning gigs] to my sister. She bought us the basics, but we had to buy diapers, milk…it was not enough. My mind got all messed up because my sister was the oldest, but in my mind, I was the one responsible for my niece. My sister worked, she hustled. I wanted to help somehow. So, I chose the wrong life. During the morning, I would do wrong things [robberies and trafficking], and I would come home and give her the money so she could cook us a meal. She didn't like that. But I would say: "What can I do? We will starve. Who can we ask for help?"*

Girls recounted their astonishment with the amount of money they could make working for a *facção*, as well as how quickly it came to them. "When I became a manager, it was *so much*

money, lots and lots of it," remembered Sam, widening her eyes. "I spent it all every day, and the next day I had more." It was not uncommon for the girls who worked as managers to tell me the actual amount of money they made in their roles. The number was often contrasted with what they or their parents earned through legal employment. Recall Gabi, who earned 200 *reais* a week working in a textile factory. She recounted her escalating wages as a *boca* manager: "The first week, I made 100, then 200… suddenly I was making 5,000 *reais* a week."[20] Similarly, Vivi, who helped to support her brothers, said: "I got into trafficking because my family was struggling. I started making 250 *reais* per day." "To pay for food," Emilia earned 1,600 *reais* per month as a manager, on top of her father's 1,000 stipend. Ceres also contrasted the 100 *reais* she made per cleaning job with how much she could make in one morning: "I left home early in the day, at noon I already had 1,000 *reais* in my pocket."

But economic precarity and personal responsibilities are not the only frames girls use to describe the financial pull of drug markets. Their stories highlight a balance between survival and pleasure, as they describe the satisfaction of earning their own money to provide for their families *and* themselves. Vivi, for example, gave 90 out of her daily 250 *reais* to her mother and "spent the rest on parties." Fernanda, a *boca* manager, "bought clothes *[for herself]* and paid the Internet and electrical bills *[at home]*." Karine was introduced to the promises of the drug market by her boyfriend but quickly surpassed him in power and influence, becoming a manager. She reflected on how she used her money: "I made a lot of money, bought things for my house. I did the monthly groceries, bought the good suff. Then I also bought clothes, had my nails done, got eyelash extensions."

Girls emphasized the joy and freedom that came with financial independence. After her parents' divorce and her mother's entrance into the job market, Miriam turned to robberies: "I thought I could support myself, buy whatever I wanted with my own money, whatever way I could get it." Vera's story is perhaps the best example of the drug trade's extravagant profits and the pleasures they allow. Incarcerated for kidnapping at 17, she had met her ex-husband – a powerful faction leader – in prison, during visitation hours. She was 14, and he was in his thirties. They communicated by phone, and she started working for him: "He would say: 'you go there, get a

[20] BR$5,000 amounts to US$880,00 in 2024. Per month, Gabi would have made 20,000 *reais*, outearning 95% of the Brazilian population (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística 2016). Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística. *Pesquisa Nacional por Amostra de Domicílios: Síntese de Indicadores 2015*. Rio de Janeiro: IBGE, 2016.

portion of the money and give it to this person.' From my perspective, I wasn't doing anything and was making a lot of money.*"*

During our conversation, I asked Vera if her mother knew of her involvement with this faction. She politely laughed at my ridiculous question. "Yes, she had to know, because I was 15 years old and driving an SUV." For Vera, the drug market was not just a means of survival but of escaping the constraints of her class – even if those constraints were not a matter of life or death. "I had everything I *needed* from my mother, but obviously, she was not going to give me an SUV," she shrugged. "With him… I had multiple houses, could sell them at will, move to a better one."

While girls sought economic capital in the drug field, they also brought their own *gendered* capital to it. Their early socialization in the gendered structure of labour – to care for themselves and family members – meant that girls' *habitus* gave them a specific form of capital: the ability to manage money, people, and logistics in a responsible and reliable fashion. This skill stands in contrast to the highly masculine character of the drug market field, dominated by men who are too impulsive to be trusted to move money and guns around. In a field dominated by impulsive men, girls' gendered habitus provides them with *managerial capital*.

As already discussed in papers 1 and 2, girls who were *boca* managers perceived themselves to be more responsible and rational than boys. This rationality had an economic component: girls are better *with money* than boys. Gabi explained:

> *We had more power than the boys. They trust us more. I had a great relationship with the bosses because I didn't do drugs, and I handled the money well. Girls calculate everything. Boys always make a mess. It was all calculated – I got my commission and left the rest [of the sales profit]. So, trust came easy. They would give me a briefcase full of money to take to the bank and would not even check on it afterwards because they knew I was going to do it right.*

Emilia echoed Gabi's assessment: "They *[the bosses]* see that we are responsible, that our head is in the right place. They feel safe leaving things with us, telling us stuff." Indeed, much of a manager's responsibility concerns handling money: counting profit, paying workers, moving stacks of bills, making bank transactions. "It's like a job," Emilia described. "I had to wake up

early to get the money from one place, take it to the bank, check to see if it was the right amount, if the payment was right. If it wasn't, I had to cover it with my own pocket money." Tania, another *boca* manager, recounted a similar routine: "I would take the drug *[somewhere]*, get the money, come back home, hide. I was always hiding. Then they *[the bosses]* would take their part, and I would take mine."

Girls were responsible for another economic-related task: logistics. In their work for the factions, they managed, moved, and stored drugs and weapons. Vera was the head of logistics for her faction's complex kidnapping scheme: "I didn't kidnap people myself because I'm not strong enough, but I managed all the logistics; I would rent the house and the car, find the weapons, etc." Sam was the middle-woman between her faction and the group of schoolgirls she managed: "I bossed the girls around to sell drugs. I would get the drugs, give it to them, and get the money." Ursula would move drugs to expand the market to her mother's *vila*, where "I knew there weren't any," at the request of her faction: "They left everything in my hands: guns, knives, drugs," she explained proudly. "Every time I went to my mother's *vila*, I would hide it all in my motorcycle to sell there."

3.8.3. The Price of Profit: Downsides of Girls' Economic Strategies

Despite girls' economic gains, their economic strategies have significant downsides. The failure to retain money was one of them. It was common for them to refer to their profits as "easy money" (although, listening to their stories, one learns that their work is anything but easy) and to say that what "easy comes, easy goes." Sam regretted not thinking long-term about her finances: "I made so much money and didn't even think about putting it in the bank." Vera lost all her earnings in police raids and had her bank account emptied by her then-husband when she was arrested. That is not true for everyone, though: Gabi saved money in the bank and was able to buy a house for her family in another city, where she hoped to restart her life. Surely, the ability to defer gratification and guide one's actions based on prospective thinking, a fundamental disposition to thrive in a capitalist economy, is unlikely to be expected from any teenager. However, this is even more true when one is raised in a household where there never was any surplus to be saved for the future, and that life is lived one day after the other. Here, girls' ability

to retain the economic capital they earned is tarnished by their *presentist* dispositions, a consequence of their position in the class structure (Pascalian Meditations - Bourdieu 2000).

State punishment is another downside of girls' survival strategies. Girls who work for profit in illicit drug economies, especially those who are managers, face surveillance, arrest, and incarceration. They explained that the police were often able to track their comings and goings and their monetary exchanges. Those who "behaved" like managers in public gained notoriety and were surveilled: "The cops were always watching; they knew me already. They knew all our movements," Emilia explained. She was arrested when the police invaded her home after they saw her "handing crack to a boy" through the window. At the end of girls' stories, incarceration is often framed as a price too high to pay despite their high profits. The irony of Emilia's search for economic freedom being repaid with incarceration is not lost on her: "The 1,600 *reais* I made there cannot pay for my freedom here." Miriam joined the armed robbery that led to her arrest to help a friend who was pregnant and needed money. "Now, I'm here, and she is in *[adult]* prison, pregnant," she lamented.

In conclusion, the drug market field offers girls criminalized strategies to deal with crises of paid and unpaid work. In this field, girls can access otherwise unattainable economic capital. In the Porto Alegre *vilas*, the federal government's success in improving the economic conditions of the subproletariat does not offer girls enough financial resources to take care of themselves and their families, for which they became responsible at a very early age. Besides economic capital, the field offers girls the opportunity to pay for leisurely activities they could not afford with a regular job. Their need for money, be it for survival or pleasure, meets a vital need of the hyper-masculine drug field: girls' gendered ability to handle money, people, and logistics responsibly and reliably, which I termed *managerial capital*. In this encounter between a gendered structure that prepares girls for responsibility and boys for impetuousness and a violent drug market field in need of managerial skills, girls find a strategy to survive and – albeit temporarily – thrive. However, such strategies are as dangerous and ephemeral as they are rewarding. Lack of financial planning leads some girls to spend all their money. Also, the perils of working in a field in constant conflict with the state's penal apparatus meant that the price of profit could be one's freedom.

3.9. In Search of Power: Violent Crises, Violent Strategies

This section analyzes how the division of power (the social distribution of male authority and violence in the private and public sphere) shapes girls' narratives about their engagement with drug markets. It does so by asking (2a) what are girls' experiences of gendered violence, (2b) what role does gendered violence play in their survival narratives, (3a) what are girls' experiences of 'urban' and state violence, and (3b) what role do they play in their survival narratives.

The first subsection analyzes girls' *violent crises* at the hands of their families, the state – either in institutions or by the police – and their communities. In response to these forms of domestic, state, and community violence, girls resorted to violence themselves. The drug market field offers girls an important form of capital to defend themselves, which I term *violent capital*. This violent capital manifests itself in material form (e.g., guns), embodied (e.g., the skills to use guns), and social (reliable allies that can protect them from violence and can be summoned to engage in violence).

As I will show, this violent capital obtained in the highly masculine drug market field produces a paradoxical effect: it shields girls from gendered violence, allowing them to be treated, as Fernanda put it, as "a normal person." At the same time, girls' gendered habitus brings a *pacifying capital*, which curbs violence and increases profit, to the hyper-volatile drug market field. Nonetheless, like in girls' economic strategies, their violent strategies might lead to short-term security at best and serious violent victimization at worst.

3.9.1. Monsters and Men: Gendered, State, and Community Violence in Girls' Violent Crises

Family violence against women and children is often part of girls' narratives. Half of the 20 girls whose narratives I analyze in this paper recounted experiencing or witnessing violence against women and children within their families. In these survival narratives, experiences of gendered violence at home propelled them to the space of criminalized organizations. Olivia, for example, was sexually abused by her brother at home when she was 11. She did not have the heart to tell her mother and chose to run away from home instead. Alone in the street, she soon married a powerful faction leader to survive.

Val's story is a tale of economic precarity, sexual violence, sisterly love, and state failure. Val, her mother and siblings lived precariously under the tyranny of their stepfather. "He was a monster," she recalled. "We were starving, my brother and I begged for money in the streetlight so we could eat. And he would take the money to buy cigarettes." The siblings did not only endure economic violence: the man sexually abused Val's older sister and battered Val and her mother. When Val was eight, her 12-year-old sister got pregnant. The pregnancy revealed the abuse to their school, which called Child Protection Services. Val was sent to the shelter system with her siblings. In the shelters, Val protected her siblings, even though she was the youngest: "I was the smartest, had the quickest mind." Yet, in those institutions, they continued to be subjected to mistreatment, and Val eventually ran away "to the streets" and began working for criminalized organizations, selling small amounts of drugs, committing petty thefts, and engaging in sex work.

Some crises revealed girls' constant potential vulnerability to male violence. Recall also Vivi, who was incarcerated for armed robbery and took care of her disabled siblings. She explicitly discussed the financial motives for her work in illicit markets. But her story also highlights a violent crisis. When she was 12, her older cousin attempted to sexually assault her. Like many interviewees, Vivi had an unbothered demeanour. She recounted this tale of survival with restraint, almost nonchalantly: "In the moment he tried it, I punched him. We fought, and I stabbed him five times. It wasn't because I wanted to; he was trying to abuse me; it was my defence; *a man has three times the strength of a woman*." Additionally, some girls were victims of family violence. Gabi resented her mother for beating her. Ursula carried deep emotional scars from the physical abuse she suffered at the hands of her mother. As previously mentioned, Ceres was often in the middle of physical fights between her mother and stepfather: "We almost killed each other daily," she recalled.

Direct victimization was not the only violent experience impacting girls' narratives. Witnessing their mothers and female guardians (grandmothers, older sisters, aunts) suffer gendered violence was often a significant event for them, as girls feared and promised not to repeat their mothers' fate. Mothers' victimization by male violence haunted some girls' stories, providing a backdrop against which they portrayed themselves: If mothers cowered under men's violence, the daughters vowed to fight against it. Tania considered her stepfather's violence against her mother unacceptable and resisted it: "I got into a fight with him *[the stepfather]* because he assaulted

her." Val could not forgive her mother for "allowing" sexual and domestic violence at home: "I don't understand how she let that happen. […] If I could hurt him as much as he hurt my family, I would."

Two narratives detail how mothers' vulnerability to violence shaped girls' criminalized strategies. First, take Lucia, 18, who was the powerful local boss of her faction. She once commanded all drug sales in her hometown, a middle-sized city near a national border. Hers is a tale of both convergence and divergence from her female guardian's path. Lucia and her siblings were raised by their aunt. When Lucia was a child, her brothers were briefly incarcerated for petty theft. While visiting them, Lucia's aunt, then a domestic worker, met the faction leader who "ran the prison." She started a relationship with him and began working for the faction, moving drugs and money. After the man left prison for the first time, he moved to Lucia's and "turned our home into a *boca*." There, he battered Lucia's aunt: "When he drank, he was like a devil." Lucia and her brothers attempted to protect her, but their uncle always carried a gun, making resistance impossible.

Eventually, the man snitched on Lucia's aunt to the police, and she was arrested. During and after her first incarceration, the aunt continued to work in the drug economy and independently became an important faction leader. But despite her aunt's rise to power, Lucia complained about her continued emotional dependence and financial exploitation: "She made so much money and still wanted to give him *[the uncle]* all of it to pay his debts. I would say, 'girl, *please*!'" Indeed, throughout Lucia's account of her own ascension in the faction, she highlighted her independence from men, reiterating that she would not suffer from the same emotional and physical fate as her aunt. "This guy wanted me to visit him in prison," she scoffed. "Psst! I will *never* visit a man in prison."

Ursula also witnessed domestic violence at home from an early age. Her father battered her mother, and her unwillingness to fight back exasperated Ursula: "I would say: 'let's run away from him.' And she always said, 'no, let's wait for him to get better, wait for him to heal.'" The violence trickled down to Ursula herself, as her mother "let out her rage on us *[the children]*." Eventually, her mother divorced and married another man. "But he also beat her. She had a 'rotten finger' for choosing men," Ursula said, resigned. When she met the boy who would become her husband, her mother gave her a warning – which, in Ursula's retelling, sounded more

like a curse: "Be careful, he is a hobo, he will beat you, and you will starve." When recounting the dialogue, Ursula held her chin up. "I said: 'I think it will be the opposite. It will be *you* who will starve and *you* who will be beaten by a husband. I will *never* be beaten by a husband.'" To me, Ursula added, proudly: "And I never was."

Girls and their families were not only vulnerable to violence in their homes. They also experienced violent crises in the streets, at the hands of the police, factions, or their own communities. Recall Vivi, who cared deeply for her older brothers. One of them committed robberies to support his drug addiction. His callous execution by the police was a turning point in Vivi's life:

> *When he died, my head got messed up. I lost it because we couldn't even dress him up for the wake. He was doing a robbery. After two shots, he had already fallen from his motorbike. He was fine. He surrendered. Then the cop shot him six times. That's why I have this hurt… because he did not get a second chance.*

Girls were also exposed to local factions' violence, as their members resorted to it in interpersonal conflicts. As a result, girls' daily interactions in their communities were always potentially unsafe. Julie got into a fight in school and hurt a classmate. The conflict escalated because her classmates' family was involved in a faction, and Julie's life was threatened: "They told me her uncle already had been incarcerated for homicide multiple times, that another one would mean nothing." Men in motorbikes would stalk Julie around the school, and she eventually stopped going altogether.

In Lucia's story, the family and the drug market, and thus domestic and drug-related violence, are deeply intertwined. On top of her aunt's abuse and incarceration, Lucia pointed to another violent crisis in her life that propelled her into the drug market: the killing of a friend whom she considered a brother and who lived with her family. The friend worked for her uncle, as did everyone else in Lucia's social circles. But he was caught stealing from the faction, and the uncle ordered his assassination. "That really got to me because we had a very strong bond," she reflected. "Then I started selling drugs, doing wrong things… I thought I could bring him back or that *it would change something*."

In conclusion, in girls' survival narratives, early experiences with violence set up the context for their entrance into violent drug markets. These stories contextualize girls' lives in spaces where men – be they relatives, police officers, or faction leaders – are always strong ("triple the strength of a woman," as Vivi said), sometimes treacherous ("a monster," "a devil"), and often armed. At the same time, girls also describe witnessing other women cowering under men's terror. In these stories, the narrators seek to, as Lucia put it, "change something."

3.9.2. Accessing the Means of Violence: Girls' Violent Strategies in Drug Markets

In girls' survival narratives, *violent crises* are often a turning point, pushing them to work in the drug economy. More than the financial freedom which came with economic capital, joining a faction granted girls *access to the means of violence* in their communities: firearms (and the skill to use them) and, more importantly, peers willing to fight for them. In Bourdieusian terms, these means of violence can be defined as capital, material (e.g., guns), embodied (e.g., the skills to use guns), and or social (reliable allies) resources which individuals use to increase their position in the field.

In their narratives, girls mobilize *violent capital* in self-defence, acts of defence, or as a form of preemptive security, instilling fear in others. Vera illustrates the power that came with being a faction member: "I didn't like to be *less* than anyone. I wanted to have power, wanted people to fear me." Given most girls' early victimization experiences and gendered vulnerability, it is not hard to see why.

Inside women: Safety from gendered violence

Girls' gendered vulnerability at home was often contrasted with their sense of equality in the drug market field. In their narratives, girls compared the negative nature of their gendered experiences in the domestic realm, where they suffered and witnessed gendered violence, and the perceived gender egalitarianism of drug markets. Recall Vivi again, who suffered an attempted rape at home. When retelling her experiences in the drug market, she made sure to stress the inexistence of sexual violence in the *boca*: "*I once slept with six men in a bed, and none tried anything*. If you show respect, you will be respected." Vivi is not alone in hinting that factions protect girls from sexual violence. For Fernanda, the drug market field elevated her from a condition of girlhood to personhood.

> *The treatment of girls who are in [the faction] and those who are out is different. When a pretty girl walks by the boca, the boys tease her. I don't like it, I think it's really disrespectful. But they would never dare to do that to me. For me, they had respect. But for other girls, they didn't. […] They treated me like a normal person, like one of the guys.*

In a sentence, Fernanda summarized what scholars argue to be gender's core structural feature: the denial of personhood to women. At the same time, she described a crucial interaction between the meso-level field of drug markets and the macro-level structure of gender. For Fernanda and some other girls, drug fields have an internal logic that makes faction affiliation more important than the broader gender structure. The "us" vs. "them" logic that helps reinforce factions' identity against rival groups and the police is so prominent in the drug field that suspends, in girls' views, their subjugated status as girls.

Emilia echoed this sentiment: "I was very respected. But I only had this respect because I was with them, otherwise… sheesh, forget it." Importantly, girls did not claim that men in the drug trade are *not* sexist, but that their status as *inside women* shielded them from the worst of it. Some girls highlighted the rule prohibiting dating within faction ranks as one of the reasons why "respect" reigned between the genders. "People knew how to differentiate *[between personal life and business],*" Gabi explained. "The bosses enforced it. They did not let girls *[who were not part of the faction]* hang around the boys. It's too distracting."

In this context of gender 'suspension,' normal teenage activities become possible. Sam, another *boca* manager, painted a happy picture of the drug market field, a working and social community where girls are free from men's advances:

> *There was a lot of respect [for girls]. The guys sometimes fought among themselves, but the girls, they respected, they were not… forward. It was forbidden to use drugs and to date your coworkers. Sometimes, we had a day off, and we would have a barbecue, and everyone would chat, dance, and laugh. It was so much fun.*

Sam's narrative is as revealing of the drug field's logic as it is of girls' situations outside of it. Her linking boys' containment to simple "fun" activities, such as chatting, dancing, and laughing, suggests that when boys are "forward," as Sam puts it, these activities do not occur so easily.

In sum, drug market fields' rules, such as the respect for "inside women" and the prohibition of intra-faction dating, decrease girls' sexual objectification. As a result, not only are girls able to occupy a position of power and respect in the field, which are usually denied to them elsewhere, but also to experience normal teenage activities without being harassed. In the encounter of neoliberal economic precarity, violence exposure, and gender subjugation, drug markets' masculine violence exerts a paradoxical field effect: the suspension of gender and the promise of personhood. However, as I will show in upcoming sections, such a promise is neither made to all girls nor does it come without its costs.

Reclaiming power: Loyalty and revenge in drug markets

Violent capital not only protects girls from violence but also enables them to enact it at will. Access to the means of violence – including guns and loyal peers – offered girls not only security from gendered violence but also a way to enact revenge on those who wronged them, within and outside the realm of drug markets.

Let's go back to Fernanda, the *boca* manager and natural-born sociologist. Despite her masterful assessment of the relationship between economic precarity and girls' work in drug markets, she did not indicate financial need as the motive for her own engagement with the local faction. In fact, she was vague about her reasons for joining *tráfico*. At first, she told me she "got in with the wrong crowd because there was nothing to do at home." But as her story progressed, I learned that Fernanda was being abused by an older cousin who lived with her family. "He ended up dying," she mentioned, almost casually. "I think it was some sort of divine retribution for all that he did." I asked if she wanted to tell me how he died. "I might have told the guys *[at the boca]* what he was doing," she shrugged, nonchalant as ever. "The next day, his body was lying in the street."

With her violent capital, Fernanda knew the extent of her peers' loyalty and needed only to mention what her cousin did to obtain her revenge. Recall also Lucia, whose life was upended by her uncle, a powerful faction leader. Lucia climbed the ranks of the faction and became an

influential manager with devoted subordinates. Once her uncle was incarcerated, she was able to avenge her aunt and her friend. The man owed money and drugs to higher authorities in their organization and to other factions across the state. Lucia, who knew the ins and outs of the city's drug market and "was not afraid of him," facilitated the take-over of his drug sales points. "Then he lost the city," she explained, meaning his monopoly over the drug sales in the town was broken. "Afterwards, they *[the state faction leaders]* gave the city to me, and I put all my people to work."

Gabi also orchestrated a mutiny against a faction leader because of his despotic ways. While she did not recount being a particular victim of his violence, she said the man was unfair and overly violent with his employees. As discussed in Paper 1, Gabi took control of the assassination when the men who were with her refused to pull the trigger. She calculated that the risk of leaving the leader alive was too great: "He would come for us if he survived," she explained, "so I took the gun and shot him twice in the face." Like Lucia, Gabi enjoyed loyalty and respect from the men who worked with her, even after her arrest: "They help me and my parents, send them money to come visit me and to buy groceries. They know that I was with them in their moment of need, so they are here for me," she reflected.

Make money, not war: Managing war and peace in drug markets

While girls' gendered crisis drives them to the drug market field, their gendered *habitus* helps them navigate it. In their tales, girls who were *boca* managers commanded loyalty from male peers for a specific reason. Similarly to what they described in relation to money, these girls also capitalized on their ability to *rationally manage violence* in drug markets. Their prudence, maturity, and level-headedness regarding finances – the product of gendered socialization in an economically precarious setting – extended to their uses of violence. While girls did not shy away from using force, as the revenge examples above showcase, they saw themselves as the ones responsible for keeping unnecessary violence at bay, holding the fort from boys' petty fights, rivalries, and gossip. In other words, these gendered characteristics of girls' *habitus* provided them with a *pacifying capital* in the hyper-masculine drug field. As less violence translates into safer economic transactions, girls' *pacifying capital* represented an important resource for the field.

Girls' saw their empathy and ability to "get along with everyone" as valued in the field. "There were a lot of fights and shootings, but I was not involved," Tania recalled. "I got along with every faction, mine and the rivals. I kept out of gossip, which is what causes problems." Ursula, who worked distributing drugs for multiple factions, recounted a common conversation she would have with neighbours: "They would ask me, 'who do you work for,' and I would say, 'I don't work for this person or that, I get along with everyone.'" Lucia claimed it was her empathy and kindness, a stark contrast to her uncle's tyranny, that led her to take power in her town:

> *No one could do anything against me. If you sent someone [to kill me], they would not do it because of how I am: honest, truthful, helpful… Anyone who came to kill me, sent by my uncle, could not do it, because they would start to like me. Because I was a friend to all. Then, they would start working for me and leave him behind.*

However, Lucia did not rule based only on empathy. In her story, it was her sharp business mentality that led her to curb violence amidst the men under her influence. Men's counter-productive thirst for violence exasperated her: "There were too many petty fights. I would think 'ugh, why can't we sell drugs and chill?' I wanted money, not war." Lucia's retelling of when she de-escalated a conflict between her subordinates and a man from her neighbourhood is revealing:

> *One day, there was a fight, and people were saying that a man I had known since I was a kid had attacked some folks who worked for me. While I was trying to figure out what happened, my people were already getting the guns, saying there would be war, that they would kill even the man's dogs… That night, there was a party, and I did not want to miss the party because of war. So, I investigated and found out it was a lie, the man did not attack them, they hurt themselves to pin it on him. I said: "I'm not missing my party tonight over your petty war, call it off!". The men who worked for me were angry. But I said: "I'm in it for the money, not for war. If we kill ten people today, we won't be able to sell drugs, and there will be no money." Because the police will be coming and going. Eventually, they would see I was not one of those people who only wanted war and blood. I wanted money. I would call everyone, talk to them, dot all the i's… they knew I always spoke the truth.*

Lucia shows how girls' gendered habitus becomes a *pacifying capital* in a field ruled by men's violence. In her tale, she successfully prevented an armed dispute that could have led to many deaths in her community, including the killing of a man she knew since she was a child. However, Lucia framed her intervention not in the name of peace or mercy, but of profit: *violence is bad for business.* Even Lucia's personal reason for stopping the violence was not emotional, but casually hedonistic: she wanted to go to a party. This description is similar to others in the sample. Recall, for example, Sam's dispassionate defense of the girl who snitched on her, casually dissuading the boys from killing her and her family. In her case, she intervened to prevent the enactment of a crucial field rule – the punishment of 'snitches.' Therefore, girls employed the language of (drug) market rationality to navigate between *violence* and *care*, sometimes finding cracks in drug market logics to curb violence in their communities.

Girls' violent capital allowed them to find safety and protection from gendered violence and to intervene in the general violence in their communities. These two strategies sometimes meet in unexpected ways. Fernanda was responsible for intervening in the community's cases of domestic violence in the name of her faction:

> *Someone would call me and say, "Fernanda, I need your help." Because even though I am young, I have a very adult mind. "Fernanda, this guy hit me, and so on." And then I would say: "ok, where does he live, tell me everything." Then I would take the person to a safe house, give them water with sugar… Then I would call the guys on the radio and say: "you have to figure this out: a fight between husband and wife at house number X." Then they would go and fix it. They would beat the guy, depending on what happened. If it was just a discussion, they would go there to solve it. If it was something more, like he battered the wife, she is black and blue, she has broken bones, than it is more serious. The person might be expelled from the vila.*

Fernanda herself was incarcerated not for a profit-seeking act, but for a caring one: her friend, a young man, owed the faction money and was at the end of his rope. He was going to be killed if he did not pay. Fernanda joined a car robbery to help him secure the money quickly. I asked her if she could not have helped him in another way, given her influence in the faction. "No," she shrugged. "If you owe, you have to pay." Some market rules could not be bent, not even by girls'

influence and empathy. During the robbery that would save Fernanda's friend's life, he was killed by the police.

In sum, girls' *violent capital* gained from their work in the drug market field allowed them relative power to manage violence in their communities – to wield it for their protection or revenge or to curb it for the sake of their communities. These violent strategies, however, have violent ends.

3.9.3. The Price of Power: Downsides of Girls' Violent Strategies

In girls' survival narratives, drug markets offer them *violent capital* to escape gendered violence *crises* at home and reclaim power amidst state and community violence in the streets. Those who worked in high-level positions as managers found safety among loyal peers, protection from men's advances, and means for mobilizing violence in their communities, be it for waging war or establishing peace. Yet, enlisting in what the girls call "the war" has a violent price. By escaping the violence of the family via violent criminalized strategies, girls were subjected to the drug market field's inner disputes, which involved inter and intra-faction violence and police brutality.

Girls narrated being constantly on edge, waiting to be attacked by rivals or police. The omnipresence of faction violence followed girls everywhere: in their schools, their homes, and even their spaces for leisure. Recall Vera, the right-hand of a powerful faction leader. She had to quit school because there she would be an easy target for the faction rivals. Due to her high standing in the faction, Vera witnessed and suffered many instances of violence. "I saw so many people dying in front of me," she recalled. Her house was once invaded by faction rivals. She was able to jump from the window and escape, but when she came back, there was a message written on the walls, in blood: "You're going to die."

Likewise, Sam explained that the "war" between factions became so intense that she had to carry firearms everywhere, even to the shopping mall. Karine was shot in the arm by a rival when he tried to take over her *boca*: "I thought, 'oh my God, I'm going to die now,'" she recalled, but the assailant was shot by her associates and ran away. Emilia summarized the feeling of constantly waiting to be attacked from all sides:

> *It was rough. There was a faction war, and I did not know the face of the boys from the rival faction. They could be anyone. They could come up to me and shoot me, and I would not even know. We always had to be careful when outside. I would go to sleep and wake up with the fear that the police were knocking on our door or that the rivals were coming to do something to us.*

Girls' exposure to violence did not come only from rival factions but from their own factions' inner rules. Despite girls' generally positive portrayals of faction life, their tales reveal a more nuanced picture of an often-tense field. "They *[the faction]* protected the *vila*," Bibiana considered. "But there was also death. There was violence if people owed money or crossed the line, that is, if they robbed in the *vila*." While girls were nonchalant when discussing these life-or-death field rules, they were aware that stepping out of line could be deadly. Tania recounted an episode where the casual business environment of the *boca* was interrupted by violence: "There was a moment when a big guy *[a leader]* was giving the orientations via phone *[from the prison to her]*. And he was giving a whole speech. But I was very tired because I had not slept. I had picked up some weapons somewhere. So, I closed my eyes, and they shot me right by the foot. Just to scare me," she explained.

Some girls were also expelled from their neighbourhoods due to drug market field violence. Recall Val, who lived in a shelter with her siblings and started a job at a lower-level position, doing small drug sales and petty thefts. One night, wandering the streets, Val accidentally witnessed a gruesome execution by a powerful faction. She was then "marked to die" and could not return to that city area. Also, recall Lu, who, like Val, lived on and off the shelter system with her siblings. After engaging in armed robberies and being connected to homicides in their neighbourhood, Lu and her mother were expelled from their *vila*: "My mom lost everything because of me," she lamented. Once she is released from incarceration, Lu's family will be forced to move again: "everyone in the *vila* wants to kill me now," she explained.

Police violence also concerned girls, although less so than faction-related violence. While girls reported being safe from gendered violence in the *boca*, their work in drug markets made them targets of gendered police violence. Karine explained: "They *[the police]* would slap us, called us whores, ask what we were doing at the *boca*. […] I was battered with a broomstick once; I was tortured by them multiple times." Lucia recalled: "One of the last times the cops hit me, I

was pregnant. They slapped me because they found a gun in my house. Then they saw the pregnancy test, and their eyes widened. They told me not to tell my mother, or they would beat me more."

In conclusion, facing widespread gendered, state and community violence, girls seek to reclaim *violent capital* for themselves within the drug market field. This violent capital – i.e., access to guns and reliable allies – provides them with a sense of security and the ability to harm those who wronged them. Paradoxically, within the field, girls wielded their gendered *pacifying capital* to manage and curb violence in their surroundings, which increased profit and protected their communities. Yet, while girls enjoyed the empowerment they felt within the field, they were also exposed to severe risks, such as police brutality and faction violence, causing constant uncertainty about their safety.

3.10. In Search of Love: Emotional Crises, Emotional Strategies

Although girls who were managers described factions as spaces free of sexual violence and even from heteronormative pressures, that was not the reality for all interviewees. In fact, girls' field positions, expressed by their rank within factions, deeply shaped their gendered experiences and intimate relationships within the drug field. Managers often left dating and intimate relationships in the background, bringing business discussions to the forefront of their tales. In contrast, girls who occupied lower-level positions in the field identified more strongly with the roles of girlfriend and wife. While the position of powerful manager and girlfriend sometimes coexisted in girls' lived experiences, their narratives overwhelmingly emphasized one or the other aspect of their engagement with the drug economy. Vera, for example, was both a manager and a wife; her narrative, however, highlighted her work and her search for power and financial freedom much more than it focused on her relationship with her ex-husband.

In this section, I analyze girls' narratives about their romantic entanglements with faction-involved men. I call *emotional crises* girls' retelling of the romantic feelings that led them to the drug field, and *emotional strategies* the ways in which they navigate romantic relationships with criminalized men as a means to achieve security and love, which I call *emotional capital*. To navigate their search for love in the drug field, girls gendered habitus provided a *reproductive capital*, essential for the men with whom they were involved. While some girls mobilized

managerial capital in their engagement with the drug market field to search for economic freedom and pacifying capital to secure power, I show how others mobilize *reproductive capital* in their search for love.

It is important to note that *emotional crises* emerge in tandem with *economic* and *violent crises* in girls' narratives. Feelings of loneliness and vulnerability, for example, permeate girls' retellings of family violence. Olivia married a powerful faction leader while running away from sexual violence at home. At 11, Ursula jumped at the opportunity to leave her violent home and move in with a boyfriend who showed her love. She would later leave this boyfriend to date faction-involved men after a significant event in her life: losing custody of her child, which "turned her head" away from domesticity.

Girls also described feelings of entrapment and boredom as reasons to look for love in the drug field. Recall Hilda, who quit school to care for her mother. According to her tale, her feelings of isolation contributed to her entering a relationship with a boy who was involved with the local faction. Julie, who also quit school – in her case, due to a violent crisis: death threats from a faction – attributed her seeking of "troubled" boys to her feelings of restlessness and boredom.

3.10.1. Social Reproduction in Drug Markets

To deal with emotional crises, girls resorted to emotional strategies. In narratives of *emotional strategies,* girls entered the drug market field by becoming romantically entangled with faction-related men. These relationships provided them with a sense of emotional security, companionship, pleasure, and the romantic status that powerful partners in the drug field could provide. In this involvement, girls' gendered habitus provided them with a form of *reproductive capital*, mobilized to provide shelter to men in hiding, raise their children, and provide emotional solace and intimacy to incarcerated or otherwise emotionally vulnerable men. However, just like emotional crises are not isolated, neither are emotional strategies. Girls' recourse to romance is also a strategy to seek violent and economic capital, as it provides them some financial security as well as protection from violence.

The work of social reproduction is key to girls' roles as good girlfriends and wives of faction-involved men. Olivia became a stay-at-home wife to her husband, a much older and powerful faction leader. She adopted his son and raised him after he was incarcerated. She also visited her

husband in prison, providing him with affection and intimacy. Hilda quickly moved in with her boyfriend after their first date and quickly started helping his mother with household duties. Julie sheltered more than one runaway boyfriend in her home, at great risk to herself:

> *There was this boy, he had killed someone… I don't know the details. Then he went to my house. My mom didn't know, and I kept him away from her, afraid that she would find out. I knew he had done it, but not that there was a warrant out for him. Then, after a week, I found out about the warrant and said: "Get out, or I'll become your accomplice."*

Girls also provided emotional support for boyfriends and male friends. Julie recounted how she would spend "all Christmas and New Year's Eve" on the phone with incarcerated men, "cheering them up." Ursula was proud of her ability to juggle multiple *boca* manager boyfriends and, therefore, work in multiple factions: "While I was with one, I was with three more," she laughed. She sold small quantities of drugs for them around town. But unlike other girls who were managers themselves, Ursula did not reap great profits, living always on the edge of extreme poverty. Yet, in her narrative, her participation in drug markets, even if marginal and via intimate relationships, granted her a sense of power and strength. Recall that not being a victim of male violence like her mother was a central element of Ursula's story.

Like managers, girls who engaged in reproductive labour also sought safety and protection in drug markets, although through opposite means. For managers, there was safety in knowing that they could not be objects of men's sexual and romantic attraction. For girlfriends of faction-involved men, a sense of security came from being shielded from the harsh realities of the *boca*. "They would not let me *enter [in the faction, i.e., work in positions of higher authority and responsibility]* to protect me. Because they cared about me. One of them would not even let me smoke!", Julie recalled fondly.

3.10.2. The Price of Love: Women's Economic Exploitation and Intimate Partner Violence in Drug Markets

Despite its gains, being a girlfriend or a wife in a faction is an unforgiving job. Girls' survival narratives reveal that the inner dynamics of drug markets can heighten women's structural oppression at home and in the streets, producing particular forms of economic exploitation and

intimate partner violence. Lucia contrasted her experience with the emotional and economic exploitation that other women were subjected to in drug markets: "There are a lot of women, but… they're all idiots," she declared, with a tone between annoyance and pity. She explained how young women were tricked into working for factions in the hopes of marrying a powerful man:

> *They [the faction] found girls from other cities and put them to work in the bocas. They [the man] said they would marry them. They got into their little heads. Then the girls, being silly, would go and sell drugs for them. But the bosses have wives. I would always tell them: "every boss already has a wife." Then the wives would find out and beat them up, sometimes they got arrested… oh, they're so stupid.*

Lucia further described how men use romantic relationships to extract work and money from women. She recalled one time when a man asked her to hide drugs for him: "They pretend to date you to make you work for free," she explained. In Lucia's perceptive analysis, one hears echoes of Julie's tales of hosting men at home and spending night shifts on the phone, all for free and at great risk to herself. Lucia continued: "Then the women work, work, work and give them all the money." Again, here one can imagine Ursula's motorbike running up and down the hill with packages of crack-cocaine, her cupboards still empty.

Still, for all of Lucia's annoyance at the "silly" women around her, there were also moments of sisterhood and solidarity in her tale:

> *There was a girl that I took home with me. I felt sorry for her. She sold, sold a lot of drugs, got some money, and sent him everything. She could not even get her nails done, the poor thing. She had nothing. She sent everything to her preso ["incarcerated man"]. He said he was gonna marry her, but he already had a wife. Then I felt sorry for her, brought her to my house, and had her stay there until she could go back to her hometown. There was another girl, she was my friend, she had recently given birth to a little girl. I felt sorry because all her husband did was extract money from her; he made her sell it and got the money. She could not even buy clothes for the baby. Then I brought her to my house; she stayed with me for a long time. Later, the little girl died, and I paid for the funeral. The man had taken all her money.*

Economic exploitation, free domestic labour, and emotional deception are not the only dangers to girls who enter intimate relationships in the context of drug markets. Recall what I have termed *violent capital* – firearms and loyal peers – which girls sought for protection and power in the drug market. Their faction-involved boyfriends have them, too, and often on a larger scale. In a context in which some men have a supply of guns and subordinates willing to use them, intimate partner violence can become all-encompassing and inescapable.

Some girls navigated the looming threat of feminicide in their daily lives. Olivia, who married a powerful faction leader, was left to care for their son alone once he was incarcerated. She eventually started working as an escort to survive. But her then-husband's peers found out and threatened to tell him if Olivia did not help them with a robbery. She knew for certain that he would kill her if he knew. Julie was casually warned by her incarcerated boyfriend: "You already know, if I hear you are with someone, I'll have you killed." Threats like this were occasionally acted upon. Lucia's power and influence did not deter her ex-boyfriend, who set an ambush to try to kill her when she ended the relationship. But her position did save her: Lucia found out about the plan and sent her men to ambush him first.

Besides murder threats and attempts, girls also faced captivity at the hands of their partners. Three girls out of the 20 interviewees directly involved in drug markets reported a common experience: spending long periods in captivity in their abusers' homes or *bocas*. Recall Hilda, who thought she had found some respite from her responsibilities as a caretaker while dating a boy from her neighbourhood. She expected to only spend a few days in his house, but at some point, realized he would not let her leave. Trapped, she was battered, forced to use drugs, and eventually compelled to participate in a homicide. Bibiana was also held against her will at her abuser's home. She was incarcerated for starting the fire that set her free: "I'll never depend on a man again," she said, succinctly.

Recall also Ceres, who started selling drugs to help support her niece. Her tale illustrates the power that some men can hold over women in this context. Ceres herself was never a manager and did not hold much authority in the field. She started dating a man with whom she worked at the *boca*. They shared a house that served as a drug warehouse with eight other people. But when Ceres became pregnant, he turned violent and did not let her leave the warehouse*:* "After I got pregnant, I never saw the sunlight again. I had to eat and drink there. I was sick all the time,

anemic. If I left the house and he saw me, he would go crazy. So, I stayed inside for nine months."

Some girls involved with faction men were also under constant surveillance. Men who hold powerful positions in the drug field have not only the means of violence at their disposal but also the means of surveillance. The same lookouts and information networks used in the drug market field against other factions and the police are employed to control women. Vera, the right-hand and wife of an incarcerated faction leader, was required to be on speakerphone with him throughout the day, so he could hear surroundings. She described, exasperated: "He was always on top of me. He would ask me why I was breathing. All the time, I had to be on the phone with him. I could not wear shorts, only pants and large blouses. *He had people following me all the time to see if I had another man*. It wasn't even possible because I was on the phone with him 24/7." Julie recounted a similar episode in which her boyfriend called her to say he knew she was talking to someone in the park at that very moment. She asked how he knew, to which he replied: "Do you think I don't have people watching you?"

Men's surveillance over girls and its potentially fatal consequences extended to everyone around them. Vera recounted an episode in which her then-husband had a man killed for interacting with her: "Once a guy died because he didn't know I was the *[boss']* wife, and he checked me out. Another guy told my husband, and he told them to kill him." Olivia was watched by her husband's associates every day while leaving school. One day, they started a fight and hurt some of her classmates. "I was not allowed to be close to anyone," she explained. "Then I decided to quit school."

Finally, girlfriends or wives of faction-involved men were at constant risk of being used as props in 'faction wars,' whether as bait to attract rivals to an ambush or as tools to instill terror in their husbands. Olivia recounted an illustrative episode: "In the beginning *[when she married him]*, I was afraid all the time. Once, some guys caught me and put me in a car; it was horrible. They dropped me on the road far away. Just to make *him* scared."

In the context of faction wars, girls' relationships signalled affiliation to one side or another. Navigating between factions became a dangerous game. Julie was often caught in difficult situations due to her friendships and intimate relationships with different men from rival factions. She recalled an episode in which she arrived at a party with a boyfriend, and her friends, who

belonged to the rival faction, were there as well. A male friend walked up to her, pushed her slightly, and said threateningly: "Congratulations, we are no longer your friends." Julie and her boyfriend left before the event escalated into a shoot-out.

Julie also recalled a nerve-wracking episode in which she was used as bait to attract rival men to the same place. Two men who belonged to rival factions, her boyfriend and her friend (let's call them Z and J), set a date with her at the same time and place, in a courtyard. There, Julie found herself sitting in between two armed men who wanted to settle a dispute, using her as an excuse:

> *I was sitting there between them, and J said: "You know what? I'm gonna marry Julie," and put his hand around my waist. And Z said: "How come, if I'm married to her?" and also put a hand around my waist. I was shaking in my seat. Then J said: "I really want to shoot someone because of her." I was having a nervous breakdown. Then they laughed. They just wanted to scare me.*

Julie laughed the encounter off, framing it as a scary prank. On that day, the tension diffused and did not escalate into a larger conflict. Still, sometime after, a shoot-out between the two men would leave both on the verge of death, to Julie's despair. "But they both survived," she laughed. "Funny how things are." Despite her light-hearted demeanour when telling this story, Julie lived in constant fear of being the cause of someone's death: "Z was always saying he was going to kill someone because of me." In a sense, faction wars were fought symbolically through her: her body and heart, a territory to be claimed.

The pain of it took a toll on Julie, and eventually, she found happiness and safety in a relationship with a boy who was not involved in the drug market field. Still, that did not end the cycle of violence around her. This resource became so important to her that is framed as the reason to why she committed violence against another girl (see Paper 1 for a detailed discussion).

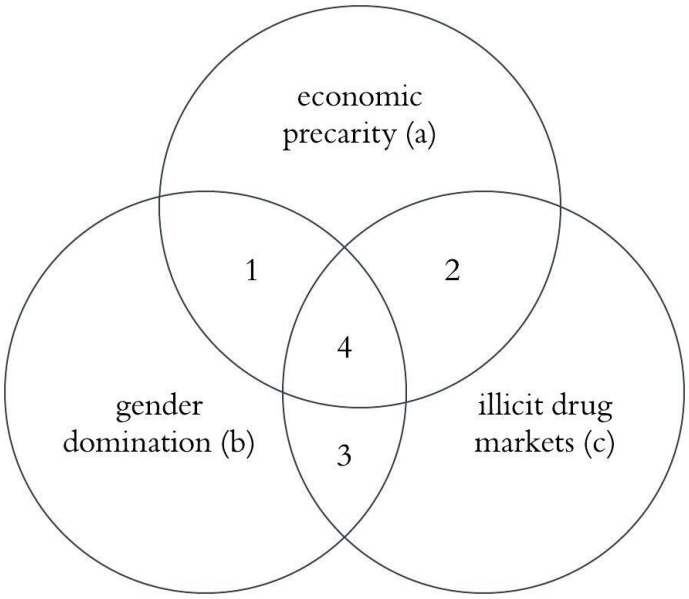
In conclusion, facing emotional crises of neglect and boredom, which are often the result of economic and violent crises, some girls turn to romantic relationships with faction-involved men for love, security, and excitement. In the drug market field, girlfriends and wives use their *reproductive capital*, (i.e. competencies acquired through gendered socialization towards reproductive labour) to provide emotional and domestic support to these men, often risking their

own safety. However, these relationships also expose girls to gendered violence, as the inner dynamics of the drug market field subject girls to new forms of intimate partner violence.

3.11. Discussion: Towards a Criminology of the Law of the Conservation of Violence

In this paper, I have demonstrated how illicit drug markets rewrite the gendered division of labour and power, offering young women financial freedom and protection from violence. These gains, however, come at a high price and ultimately work to further the cycle of gendered, state, and community violence in girls' lives. Throughout, I have argued for the need to theorize the embeddedness of economic precarity, gendered domination, and illicit drug markets (see Figure 3 for a visual representation) to understand the rise of criminalized violence amidst subproletarian communities in the peripheries of capitalism. In the following paragraphs, I lay out my contribution to the study of these intersections.

Figure 3. Intersections between economic precarity, gender domination, and illicit drug markets.



First, scholarship on the impact of neoliberalism and economic precarity in Latin America (a) points to the increase in masculine anxiety over the loss of their economic function after deindustrialization (Auyero and Berti 2016; Davis 2010; Levenson-Estrada 2013; Rodgers 2015, 2017; Valencia 2018) and, in Brazil, to the rise of consumerism as a proxy for citizenship and

social recognition (Feltran 2014; Pinheiro-Machado and Scalco 2023). Both perspectives point to a growing hyper-individualism lying at the core of violent, illegal markets (Valencia 2018; Hall 2012). Yet, when one considers how economic precarity intersects with gender domination (1), different motives to engage in criminalized networks emerge: women's caretaking responsibilities. In this study, girls' narratives show how their entrapment in *care crises* and the insufficiency of formal wages to fulfill their caring needs are stronger motivators to seek criminalized economic strategies.

Therefore, girls' tales of economic crises complicate arguments that frame neoliberal crime "primarily as a means to a personal end, a way of generating the cash necessary to indulge in their attachment to hedonism and conspicuous consumption" (Hall, Winlow, and Ancrum 2008: 45). Indeed, stories about the joys of consumerism are less prevalent in these narratives than framings of criminalized strategies as means for collective (familial) survival. Consumerism, when mentioned, was often associated with freedom from the domestic sphere and its entrapments – as Miriam dreamed, "I thought I could have my own life." Far from individualistic motives, their rationes for entering the drug market field illustrate Sassen's (2000, 2001) argument that global neoliberalism ought to be understood as the offloading of the social welfare of families and communities into women and girls at the global peripheries.

Second, works on the intersection of neoliberalism and illegal economies (2) showcase the material and symbolic dimensions of drug market fields. Materially, the drug market field can provide its members with extensive *economic capital* due to the immense profitability of drug sales in the region (Feltran 2018) – thanks in part to its location within important cocaine transit routes (Yashar 2018). Recall Gabi, who became a *boca* manager and made 5,000 *reais* a week, outearning 95% of the Brazilian population (IBGE 2016). Symbolically, the drug market field reproduces the neoliberal "logic of business enterprise […] of competitiveness, self-interest, and empowerment" (Ayres and Treadwell 2023: 95) and thus requires actors with risk management and entrepreneurial skills.

It is in this encounter between drug market fields and neoliberal structures that some girls' primary habitus grants them an unexpected advantage (4): their gendered socialization towards responsibility and discipline, driven by early experiences of economic precarity and care work, makes them perfect *managers* for large sums of money and drugs. Girls, then, trade their

gendered *managerial capital* for *economic capital* in the drug market field. Importantly, this homology between women's managerial skills and drug markets' organizational needs has been noted in the literature (Anderson 2005, 2008; Denton and O'Malley 1999; Grundetjern 2015). However, these studies have documented how women build drug market enterprises often *separately* from male-dominated markets; carving spaces where they can deploy gendered skills that, elsewhere, would have gone undervalued. In this study, girls characterize their managerial capital as a quality of a gender-integrated and even gender-egalitarian field. In their experience, girls' essential economic function in the field trumps the "institutional sexism" of organized crime long documented in the literature (Bourgois 2003; Grundetjern 2023; Steffensmeier 1983).

Third, scholarship on drug markets has demonstrated their relative autonomy in regulating rates of criminalized violence in each region (c). Materially, the struggle over the monopoly of drug sales in profitable territories increases the rates of homicidal violence (Lessing 2018; Yashar 2018). This is the case of many girls' narratives, which are set in a decade-long multi-faction 'war.' Symbolically, scholars have argued that drug market fields take the neoliberal maximum 'profit over people' to its ultimate conclusions, normalizing the use of extreme violence to sustain one's place in the field (Levenson-Estrada 2013; Hall 2012; Valencia 2018). Violence is wielded to maintain business relations by eliminating debtors and instilling fear in rivals in competition over territory. Therefore, *violent capital* – the capability, actual or potential, to use violence at will – is crucial for its members (Bourgois 2003; Contreras 2013; also Fraser 2013; Grundetjern and Sandberg 2012; Sandberg 2008).

It is here that the drug market field meets girls' gendered needs for security and empowerment (3). Facing gendered violence at home, state violence in the streets, and faction-related violence in their communities, girls can escape their vulnerability by acquiring violent capital in the drug market field. This search for protection has been documented in the literature on girls' gendered strategies to navigate a hyper-masculine street culture (Jones 2010; Miller 2008; Messerschmidt 2002; Ness 2010). In this study, however, the inner logics of the drug market field, such as peers' loyalty and the prohibition of intra-fraction dating, produce an environment in which girls who achieve the status of managers experience some degree of security and even gender egalitarianism. Additionally, the same violence that is wielded for business can be deployed to dispense justice against abusers or despotic bosses, to girls' benefit.

But in the encounter between labour and power, economy and violence, the drug market field faces a contradiction: the use of violence is necessary to conduct business, but too much violence destabilizes profit maximization, as faction disputes and police incursions interfere with drug sales. It is here that girls' primary habitus meet the needs of the drug market field (3). Socialized in environments in which they always had to navigate violent conflict from a position of extreme vulnerability, girls develop de-escalating and empathetic dispositions. These competencies turn into a *pacifying capital* much needed in the drug market field, through which girls support conflict resolution between factions and community members.

Like girls' mobilization of *managerial capital*, their uses of *pacifying capital* were similarly documented in the literature on women and drug markets, which reveals that women rely on gendered skills, such as trustworthiness, to carve spaces for themselves in criminalized settings (Anderson 2005; Denton and O'Malley 1999; Grundetjern 2015, 2023). In the case of this study, however, girls' empathy is deemed a valuable resource *within* the dominant, male-dominated factions, not separately from them. Against the classic proposition that women are more successful in the least violent and volatile markets (Grundetjern 2023; Steffensmeier 1983), girls in this study attributed their success to the violent context and their ability to thrive in it, waging war or peace.

Importantly, girls' gendered dispositions towards conflict resolution were filtered through field-specific logics. Their narratives showcase the narrow "space of possibilities" (Bourdieu 1983) to talk about violence in the field: the language of market rationality. If violence is to be avoided, that should be done in the name of business, not mercy – lest factions show weakness to their rivals and leaders to their subordinates. Perhaps girls, most of all, need to refrain from demonstrating empathy without good reason. At first sight, the nonchalant tone in which most girls discuss extreme violence reveals the routinization of death in their communities (Levenson-Estrada 2013) and their acceptance of the logics of gore capitalism (Barros 2020; Valencia 2018). However, a closer look at what girls *do*, beyond how they *say* they do it, uncovers a more complex picture: they employ the language of (drug) market rationality to navigate between violence and care, sometimes finding cracks in drug market logics to curb violence in their communities. In that sense, their *pacifying capital*, although gendered and rooted in care, is filtered through the neoliberal logic of "risk management" (Ayres and Treadwell 2023).

Fourth, the encounter between gendered structures and the drug market field (3) also shapes girls' romantic and intimate experiences. The inner logics of the field, coupled with the structural logic of heteronormativity, generate a differentiation between girls who are "treated like a normal person," as Fernanda put it, and those who are girlfriends and wives. Here, the study also reveals a consonance with the extant literature, which has found that women who achieve power in drug markets develop an identity in opposition to those in subaltern positions (Grundetjern and Miller 2019). Likewise, I also found that heteronormativity "constrains and allows agentic navigations within drug markets" (Milagros Early and Grundetjern 2022: 3), as girlfriends and wives of faction-involved men performed reproductive labour in exchange for love and companionship (i.e., *emotional capital*). This strategy to acquire emotional support, however, is short-lived, as the inner logics of the drug market field intersect with gendered domination to produce specific forms of intimate partner violence, including armed surveillance, forced captivity, and the constant threat of feminicide.

Therefore, this study demonstrates how young women's gendered strategies to navigate criminalized settings, such as desexualization and entrepreneurship (see Grundetjern 2023 for a review), share commonalities across the global North and South. I argue that these homologies ought to be understood as "adaptative responses to convergent economic trends," that is, to neoliberal capitalism and its marginalization of subproletarian communities (Fraser and Hagedorn 2018: 48). On the other hand, this analysis also showcases how these homologies are filtered through drug market fields. Certain regions are differently positioned in the transnational cocaine economy and, thus, differently subjected to the profits of cocaine sales and to state repression; both of which shape the toll of violence and competitiveness of a drug market field (Lessing 2018; Yashar 2018). Girls in this study work at the bottom of the cocaine economy, where the stakes, be it profit or violence, are higher. Their stories illuminate the complicated relationship between inequality and violence in Brazil, showcasing how drug markets promise – and often deliver, if temporarily – dreams of wealth and security that far surpass the relative economic and social gains of the last two decades. This is especially true for subproletarian girls, who seek not just consumption but economic survival and protection from gendered violence.

In conclusion, in this paper, I have argued that illicit drug markets offer girls criminalized survival strategies to overcome gendered economic precarity and vulnerability to violence, but these very strategies further expose girls to state, community, and gendered violence. I hope to

contribute to the feminist literature on the victimization-offending-criminalization overlap (Daly 1998; Maher 2000; Richie 1996) by showing how illicit drug markets mediate the relationship between gendered victimization and women's criminalized actions, particularly in the violent markets of the Global South.

Moreover, in simultaneously focusing on *crises* caused by economic and gendered structures and *strategies* formed in the context of drug markets, I hope to contribute to the feminist criminological debate about victimhood and volition (Anderson and Kavanaugh 2017; Maher and Hudson 2007). I do so by contextualizing women's agency – their mobilization of criminalized strategies – as a response to victimization. In so doing, and in emphasizing the *downsides* of these strategies, I hope to avoid the trap of romanticizing women's criminalized strategies and overstate girls' power to change their structural circumstances (Maher and Hudson 2007).

I argue, then, that girls' experiences in drug markets ought to be understood not as a triumph of agency, but as an example of Bourdieu's *law of the conservation of violence* – that is, of structural dispossession producing interpersonal violence (1998). On the one hand, girls see their incursion in drug markets as having the potential to break generational cycles of gendered domination and economic precarity. Some see themselves as succeeding in escaping their mothers' fates of violent victimization, emotional dependence, and financial exploitation. On the other, girls' entrance into criminalized organizations also reproduces cycles of violence in their communities and personal lives. Lucia herself would grow to command the assassination of snitches and debtors, in cases not unlike her beloved friend's death. Vivi, who mourned her brother's closed casket, would one day shoot another woman point-blank, also six times. Of all the images conveyed by the interviewees that illustrate the law of conservation of violence, I think most of Lucia, in all her might, powerless to do anything but to pay for the burial of yet another girl.

4. Between the Home and The Street: The (De)Gendering of Violence in Judicial and Biographical Narratives of Young Women's Crimes

Under Fernanda's watch, the boys catcalled every girl who walked by the *boca*, the drug-sales spot she managed at 14. "It's so disrespectful," she rolled her eyes. "But they would never dare to do that to me." Vivi, 15, was a victim of sexual violence at home but found safety in her dealings in the street: "I've slept with six men in the same bed, they all respected me, none touched me. In the street, if you show respect, you will be respected." When we met, Fernanda and Vivi were incarcerated in a youth detention centre in Porto Alegre, Brazil, charged with violent offences.[21]

M., 17, was accused of drug trafficking in 2017. In the criminal complaint against her, the prosecutor wrote: *She, stably and permanently, personally integrates a criminal organization which uses firearms and engages in various crimes such as trafficking, robbery, and homicide in the city and nearby towns.* The defence argued that M. was forced to participate in the criminal enterprise because it was run by her older brother, a powerful drug trafficker. The judge, however, deemed M. not only independent from her family but a mighty drug trafficker in her own right: *The adolescent gave orders, and they were obeyed. Homicides were treated* [by her] *naturally. It was possible to see her satisfaction with integrating into the criminal organization.*[22]

In 2016, Porto Alegre, the capital of Brazil's southernmost state, Rio Grande do Sul, ranked among the most violent places in the world (Feltran et al. 2022; Ministério da Saúde 2017). State

[21] This paper is based on the original version of a manuscript co-authored with Roberta Pamplona and Luisa Schwartzman, currently under review at *Latin American Research Review* (as of September 2024). I write as "we" because the theorization and framing of the research question was a collective enterprise. In this paper, I kept only the fragments of the text I had written (some of which did not make it to the final submitted manuscript), albeit edited by and discussed with Pamplona and Schwarzman. Previous versions of the Introduction and Sections 2.1 ("The Social Construction of the Public/Private Boundary in Feminist Theory"), 2.2 ("Racializing Danger"), 2.6 ("Good Girls' Homes, Bad Girls' Streets") and 2.9 ("Discussion") were discussed, reviewed, and edited by Schwartzman and Pamplona. Sections 2.3 ("Private Rehabilitation, Public Punishments"), 2.4 ("Theoretical Framework"), 2.5 ("Data and Methods"), and 2.7 ("Mad at Home, Bad in the Streets") were written for this paper and not reviewed by Schwartzman and Pamplona. Any mistakes are my own. I am deeply grateful to Roberta for our decade-long camaraderie, Luisa for her mentorship, and both for their endless intellectual generosity.

[22] This paper draws from two data sources: interviews (2016, 2023, and 2024) and judicial documents (2015-2022). Pseudonyms identify interviewees, and their quotes are between quotation marks. The defendants of the judicial documents are identified by capital letters, and the quotes of the documents are in italics.

actors, scholars, and residents of affected communities attribute the rise in violence to a turf war between local drug organizations, a phenomenon known as 'trafficking war' (Barros 2020; Feltran et al. 2022; Cipriani 2021). The dispute waged across Rio Grande do Sul, escaping the capital and bleeding into smaller cities in the following years (Feltran et al. 2022). Fernanda, Vivi and M. are among the alleged perpetrators. But the victims also fit their profile: criminalized youths living in urban low-income neighbourhoods – known in Brazil as *favelas*, or, in Southern Brazilian jargon, *vilas* (Feltran et al. 2022). The 2016 conflict was merely the peak of a drawn-out clash between criminalized organizations and state forces in the region (Barros 2020; Cipriani 2021). Homicides have been escalating in Rio Grande do Sul for the past decade, and more so in the case of women. Between 2006 and 2016, as the conflict escalated, the homicides of women increased by a staggering 90%, against an increase of 58% for all murders (Ministério da Saúde 2017). But you wouldn't know that from general narratives about violence in 'trafficking wars,' where gendered vulnerability is glaringly absent.

These vignettes illustrate our research puzzle (Otto, Pamplona, Schwartzman, n.d.). Despite the considerable rise in the homicides of women in the region during the escalation of a state and drug-market-related conflicts, narratives about the resultant violence – whether coming from the penal state or the communities most directly affected – frame these acts as rational, market-oriented, and genderless forms of violence. In both judicial documents and incarcerated young women's narratives analyzed for this paper, street crime is the great equalizer: a space in which narratives about victimhood and gender inequality are not warranted**.** Yet, research has shown that drug markets are deeply affected by gendered dynamics (Anderson and Kavanaugh 2017; Denton and O'Malley 1999; Grundetjern 2015, 2023; Milagros and Grundetjern 2022) and reproduce particular forms of gendered violence and economic exploitation (Bourgois 1995; Copes et al. 2021; Maher 2000; Levenson-Estrada 2013; Sitt and Auyero 2018). Why do these dynamics go unacknowledged in stories of drug trafficking-related violence?

In this paper, I theorize gender as a *symbolic system* (Bourdieu 1984) that, intersecting with other axes of domination (Alves 2018; Richie 2012), assigns meaning to spaces (Wacquant 2023) by making gendered dynamics visible or invisible (Presser 2022). In this empirical case, this gendering occurs through the discursive enforcement of the boundary between private and public – or, more commonly spoken in Brazil, the *home* and the *street* (Da Matta 1997). In line with feminist scholarship, I theorize gender as a social structure of domination (Bourdieu 2001;

Connell 2014) reproduced by practices and discourses at the individual, interactional, and institutional levels (Risman 2004). This paper contributes to the literature on the "gender-violence nexus" (Stark 2010) by asking: How does gendered vulnerability come to be said and *unsaid* (Presser 2022) in narratives of criminalized violence?

To answer this question, I analyze narratives constructed by actors whose meaning-making is central to the governance and production of violence: (i) prosecutors and judges who accuse and sentence young women for youth offences and (ii) young women serving youth justice sentences, primarily for violent offences. In both accounts analyzed, a common narrative about place, violence, and gender is reproduced: the home as the space of gendered, exceptional, family-related, and emotional violence, and the street as the space of gender*less*, inherent, market-related, and rational violence. In judicial narratives, the violence of the home (by girls against family members) is characterized as exceptional and pathological, and the violence of the street (by girls in drug markets) as inherent to their dangerous environment and hyper-rational personalities. In criminalized girls' narratives, the violence of the home (against women and children) is experienced as out of place and unjust, and the violence of the street (of 'all against all' in drug markets) is deemed natural and fair. We argue that these spaces are not only gendered but also classed and racialized: the home is understood as a feminized, white, and middle-class space, and the street as a masculine, Black, and precarious space.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 4.1 reviews the feminist literature on the public/private divide to establish it as a relevant ideological force in determining social understandings of violence. Section 4.2 discusses the role of anti-Blackness in shaping the social imaginary and security policies oriented towards the 'street' in Brazil. Section 4.3 reviews the literature on women's penality to argue that the gendering and racialization of *space matter* to women's criminalization. Section 4.4 lays out the theoretical framework for the analysis, and Section 4.5 summarizes the data collection and method of analysis. Sections 4.6 and 4.7 present the analysis of criminalized girls' and judicial documents' narratives. Finally, Section 4.8 concludes the paper with a discussion of its contributions and recommendations for future research.

4.1. The Social Construction of the Public/Private Boundary in Feminist Theory

The imaginary divide between gendered and non-gendered violence is present in institutional and personal narratives as well as in social sciences scholarship (Hearn et al. 2022; Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004; Walby 2012). This fragmentation mirrors Western thought's enduring private/public binary (Wilding 2010, 2012). But while feminist scholars have wrestled for decades with the question of "what is gendered about gender violence," their analyses have not entirely escaped the public/private dichotomy (Jakobsen 2014). Unsurprisingly, feminist sociologists and criminologists have focused on the forms of violence against women historically understudied and associated with the private realm, such as intimate partner and sexual violence (Frazer and Hutchings 2020). In this process, gender has been more widely conceptualized as a variable (e.g., what is the victim's and the perpetrator's gender?) rather than as a theoretical question (e.g., what the meaning and purpose of a violent act and how are they related to the performance of gender, see Bumiller 2010; Parreñas, Hwang 2023). In so doing, the field has underemphasized how gender operates not only as a material structure but also as a *symbolic system* (Bourdieu 1991) that gives meaning to violence.

While public discourse on violence has often made distinctions between "domestic" and "street" violence (Wilding 2012, 2014), scholarship on violence has attempted to blur this boundary. Violence scholars have called for "integral violence studies" (Davenport 2021; Walby 2012), that is, for research that theorizes violence "in a more inclusive, comprehensive way" (Hearn et al. 2022), accounting for the interconnected aspects of different forms of harm. Nonetheless, most of these studies assume the existence of the home/street divide but do not investigate *how these* categories are constructed. We argue that sociologists ought to return to feminist theory to understand how gendered social structures like the public/private divide operate in giving meaning to violent acts.

The critique of the distinction between the public and private space is at the core of Western feminist scholarship (Gal 2002; Pateman 1987). The emergence of the doctrine of the "separate spheres" in nineteenth-century Europe, directly connected to the development of the bourgeois liberal state (Pateman 1987), assumed that "the social world is organized around incompatible moral principles that are conventionally liked to either public or private: community vs.

individual, rationality vs. sentiment, money vs. love, solidarity vs. self-interest" (Gal 2002: 78, see also Hartsock 1995: 72). Feminist theorists have long discussed the material and ideological consequences of this divide.

In her critique of social contract theory, Pateman (1987) argued that the apparent "individualism and egalitarianism" of liberal theory, to which the idea of "separate but equal" public and private spheres is central, obfuscates the reality of the domination of women by men. In hiding the patriarchy embedded in liberalism, the public/private divide severs (women's) reproductive labour from (men's) productive labour. Reproductive labour refers to both the processes involved in the biological reproduction of humans (sexuality and the bearing and raising of children, the care for elders and the sick or disabled) and the daily maintenance of the working force (feeding, clothing, cleaning, and providing intimacy and emotional solace). Women are allotted the work of social reproduction "in addition to whatever other subsistence or income-earning activity they may engage in" (Luxton 2006: 25).

Not surprisingly, challenging the public/private divide has been central to feminist attempts to change legislation (Higgins 2000). As Gal (2002) suggests, the criminalization of marital rape and domestic violence, a process through which a private matter becomes a public issue, is perhaps the best successful example. Yet, changing what is considered private or public does not destabilize the divide itself. The perceived divide between public and private space endures, still shaping how people and institutions think about gender, work, and violence. Gal (2002) argues that the distinction is ideological: "Public and private do not simply describe the social world in any direct way; they are rather tools for arguments in and about that world" (2002: 79). To apprehend how these categories inform practices and beliefs, we ought to understand it as an ideology that "characterizes, organizes, and contrasts virtually any kind of social fact: spaces, institutions, bodies, groups, activities, relations" (2002: 80-81).

Feminist work has continuously theorized the consequences of the public/private divide for women's care work (Armstrong and Armstrong 2005), everyday practices (Bobel and Fahs 2020), politics (Fischer 2020), parenting (Park 2018), trauma (Rajiva and Takseva 2021), and, most notably for this paper, the relationship between gender and violence (Segato 2018; Wilding 2010, 2012, 2014;). However, little research has been conducted on *how women* articulate the private/public divide in their self-perception, nor how institutions map their practices onto this

dichotomy. In this paper, I investigate how the gendered meanings attributed to the home and the street shape (i) criminalized narratives of violence – be it suffered, witnessed, or perpetrated – and (ii) judicial narratives on women's violence and lawbreaking.

4.2. Racializing Danger: The Spaces of Violence in Brazil

Brazilian anthropologist Roberto da Matta (1997) offered an influential theory about the public and private spheres in the country. In the book *A Casa e a Rua* (1997), he argues that the "home" and the "street" are two central cultural categories that help to understand how Brazilians navigate social life, guiding how one behaves in particular situations and relationships. According to his formulation, to Brazilians, the home is understood as a highly hierarchical and informal space defined by personal relationships and where conflict is avoided. In contrast, the street is where relationships are impersonal, where the laws of the market reign supreme without regard for people's rights or humanity, and where hierarchies from the home can be escaped or contested.

While Da Matta's formulation succeeds in describing Brazilians' understandings of the private and public sphere, scholars have argued that the theory is overly culturalist and lacks a structural analysis of gender, race, and political economy (Souza 2014). While he acknowledges that the home can only be defined in relation to the street, highlighting the relational character of the two spheres that feminist theories have insisted upon (Pateman 1987), he does not consider the division between home and street an ideological component of the sexual division of labour. Feminists would put simply that the hierarchy of the Brazilian home is *patri*archy. As for public space, critics have argued that the Brazilian street is not seen as individualist and treacherous due to the country's "culture" (Souza 2014) but to the sustaining legacies of slavery and capitalism: "the Brazilian neoliberal city stands as a zone of economic exploitation and racial annihilation" (Alves 2018: 41).

Indeed, in this paper, I argue that social framings of the street as dangerous cannot be understood outside of racialized dynamics (Otto, Pamplona, Schwartzman, n.d.). The social construction of the 'street' as a Black and dangerous place in Brazil is an example of this process. In the Americas, the legacy of colonialism and slavery has shaped the meaning of the public/private divide through racialized and classed dynamics. Black feminist scholarship in the United States has emphasized the ways in which the boundaries between "private" and "public" spaces are

blurred in Black women's lives (Richie 2012). Similarly, in Brazil, racial discrimination, economic marginalization, and spatial segregation continue to influence Black women's experiences of violence (Carneiro 2023; Gonzalez 2021; Jorge 2024). This violence manifests in multiple ways, including harmful practices in public health institutions (Caldwell 2017), police violence and its effects – particularly the grief caused by losing loved ones to state violence (Carneiro 2023) – and intracommunity violence in the *favelas* (Perry 2013; Wilding 2014). Furthermore, the stigmatization of *favelas* reinforces stereotypes of *favelada* women (whether Black or non-Black) as domestic workers, cleaners, or sex workers, which normalizes both racial and class oppression (Jorge 2024, Otto, Pamplona, Schwartzman, n.d.).

Racialization in Brazil goes beyond individual characteristics: Blackness is associated with certain activities (e.g., drug trafficking), spaces (e.g. *favelas*), and class fractions (e.g. the urban subproletariat), regardless of the racial categorization of actual individuals. Research in Brazil has shown how legal responses to violence are shaped by the meanings attached to urban spaces (McCallum 2005: 102, Sansone 2003; Vargas and Alves 2010; Schwartzman 2019). Fischer's historical analysis of criminal records (2004) reveals that categories associated with poverty have long carried racist connotations, used by state actors to describe both Black and white individuals who are criminalized. In essence, urban spaces deemed "dangerous" are socially constructed through a language of poverty that is inherently racialized. This is true even when residents of these areas do not universally identify as Black, as poverty and Blackness are often equated in the national imagination (Fischer 2004; Vargas 2018). Ethnographic studies confirm that discourses linking poor urban areas to Blackness persist, even when they do not explicitly reference racial categories (Alves 2018; Sansone 2003). As a result, the "street" in Brazil is symbolically racialized as a dangerous Black space.

This racialization of danger shapes the urban space. Stories of urban violence are part of everyday life in Latin America, rewriting the conditions of citizenship in most countries (Rotker 2002). Residents commonly list insecurity and fear of violence as their primary concerns (Beraldo et al. 2022; Caldeira 2001; Téllez Acosta 2015), revealing how "the street" becomes a social problem in itself. In large Brazilian cities, the economic elites are secluded in hyper-securitized gated communities (Caldeira 2001), while *favela* inhabitants bear the brunt of state and drug-related violence. After centuries of racist economic exploitation and segregation, the favela became synonymous with crime and danger (Alves 2010; Vargas 2018). While the favela

is a space of housing, commerce, and community, these neighbourhoods are not seen by the state, the media, and non-residents as proper homes: they are "symbolically constituted as spaces of crime, of anomalous, polluting, and dangerous qualities" (Caldeira 2001: 79). Poor urban spaces, where Black residents are disproportionately concentrated, experience heightened criminalization and surveillance by authorities. Dutra's (2019) investigation into police perceptions of racial profiling in Rio Grande do Sul found that officers rarely explicitly cite Blackness as a reason for stopping individuals. Instead, they use indirect references to "neighborhoods" and "clothing" associated with Blackness to justify their actions. These communities, then, are subjected to the more damaging effects of urban violence, including the police's disproportional use of lethal force (Misse 2019). The symbolic framing of these spaces as dangerous and violent justifies the state's decision to kill certain people in the name of self-preservation "because the territories they inhabit always-already signify violence" (Ferreira da Silva 2014: 213).

If danger is racialized, so is violent victimization. Between 2013 and 2016, the homicide rate in Rio Grande do Sul, the setting of this study, rose from 39.9 to 62.7 per 100,000 residents, an increase linked to escalating drug trafficking conflicts (Feltran et al. 2022). Among Black men aged 15 to 29 – the demographic on the front lines of these conflicts – homicide rates nearly doubled, rising from 217.9 to 417.3 per 100,000 (Feltran et al. 2022). Similarly, the homicide rate for Black women increased by 110% between 2007 and 2017, compared to a 51% increase for women overall (Cerqueira 2019). In Porto Alegre, the state's largest city, over half of all homicides recorded between 2016 and 2017 occurred in just 12 out of 94 neighborhoods, with four neighborhoods accounting for 25% of the cases (Martins 2018). These areas are among the city's most socioeconomically marginalized and racially segregated. For example, in two of the four, over 38% of residents identify as Black, a significantly higher number than the citywide average of 20% (Observatório POA 2024).

In sum, the social imaginary of the Brazilian street is rooted in a racialized *territorial stigma*: "a discourse of denigration of the urban poor that falsely spatializes and ethnicizes the […] predicament of the urban precariat" (Wacquant 2023: 59). This stigma not only legitimates the unequal deployment of security forces by the penal state but also "trickles down the urban ladder" (2023: 13), shaping the sense of self of these communities' residents. Therefore, in this

paper, I analyze how representations of the street, in contrast with the home, shape narratives of violence by criminalized girls and legal actors.

4.3. Private Rehabilitation, Public Punishments: Gender, Space, and Penality

The scholarship reviewed thus far has established that different gendered and racialized meanings attributed to the home and the street shape broader understandings of crime and violence. Particularly relevant here is the work on violence against women in Latin America (see Fregoso and Bejarano 2010 for a review), which demonstrates how gender disappears in narratives about street violence. Wilding (2010) notes that the emergence of a "new violence" in the region after the 1980s – whose discursive and political focus is organized crime – conceals the gendered dimensions of urban violence (see also Wright 2011). Theorizing the killing of women as a feature of narco-state violence in Mexico, Segato argues that "femicides, although they take place in the midst of […] para-state wars, *never manage to emerge from the private realm* in which they are confined in *the imaginary of judges, prosecutors*, the media, and public opinion *[emphasis mine]*" (2018: 204). In Brazil, scholars have demonstrated how the distinction between domestic' and urban/drug-related violence shapes categorizations of feminicide and homicide by police officers (Pamplona 2020) and legal actors (Fachinetto 2012), both of which do not attach gendered meanings to women's murders that occur in the context of illicit drug markets. We know less, however, about how these categories frame the *criminalization of women*, not solely their victimization.

I argue that the public/private divide also shapes women's penality. Since the modern advent of the prison (and before that, see Federici 2014), women have been punished for *failures in the home,* as wayward mothers and hysterical wives (Bosworth 1999; Rafter 1990), or for transgressions *into the street*, as vagrants and sex workers (Hartman 2019). Notably, women's deviance has been historically connected to mental illness (Ussher 1991, 2006). Therefore, scholarship on the history of women's criminalization has focused on the explicitly gendered dimensions of their punishment and discourses about wayward and mad women (Smart 1976).

Women's punishment throughout the 19th and 20th centuries has been characterized as particularly disciplinary and paternalistic (Hannah-Moffat 2001). If modern penality had the goal of transforming "the soul of the condemned" and fashioning them into "docile bodies" (Foucault

[1975]1991), for women, this meant imposing idealized versions of white femininity through rehabilitation (Rafter 1990). In the 1990s, the Americas saw a diminishment of the rehabilitative/disciplinary ideal in favour of the incapacitation of 'risky offenders' (Garland 2001; Wacquant 2001), leading to various consequences for criminalized women (McCorkel 2013). On the one hand, women's incarceration rates skyrocketed worldwide, with most criminalized women falling prey to the transnational War on Drugs (Sudbury 2005, McKim 2017). In Brazil, Souza and Siquinelli (2019) argue that the aim of women's penal control went from "reforming fallen mothers" to "governing the wives of crime," with women being framed as supporting players in the drug economy. According to these approaches, mass incarceration would work to reduce gendered paternalistic approaches to punishment since the goal has become incapacitating the largest number of people, not reforming them. On the other hand, scholars have documented how traditional penal welfarist approaches found a longer life in women's penal institutions (Kruttschnitt and Gartner 2005) and how the historical paternalism towards fallen women enmeshed with tough-on-crime policies to create hybrid approaches focusing on women's "risks and needs" (Hannah-Moffat 2006; Haney 2010).

Racialization plays a crucial role in shaping which women are deserving of the reformatory and which are sent to the warehouse. Fallen mothers, hysterical wives, and, more recently, victims of the opioid epidemic (Hansen, Netherland, and Hezberg 2023) are representations of fallen *white* womanhood. Images of dangerous Black women are not as charitable (Collins 1990; Gurusami 2017; Roberts 1997, Richie 2012;). Investigating changes in a women's prison after the rise of the War on Drugs, McCorkel (2013) found that staff experienced the new inflow of Black women into the institution as a fundamental transformation in the prison, which went from being populated by "good girls to real criminals" (2013: 70).

In sum, a mad vs. bad dichotomy endures in women's penality, through which women are framed as either (white) mentally ill victims or (Black) dangerous rational criminals (see Weare 2016; Law, Mario and Bruckert 2020 for a review). But while racialization plays a crucial role in this categorization, so does space: white women's crimes are perceived to happen at home, and Black women's crimes, in the street. In this paper, I also ask how the gendered and racialized meanings attributed to the home and the street shape *judicial framings* of women's violence.

4.4. Theoretical Framework: Symbolic Systems and *Unsaying* Gender

I have established that the public/private divide shapes how people and institutions think about crime and violence (Otto, Pamplona, Schwartzman, n.d.). But how can one map its effects and theorize its workings? Building on the tradition of feminist theorists' critical engagement with Pierre Bourdieu's work (see Adkins and Skeggs 2005 and McNay 2008 for a comprehensive review; and Paper 1 for a discussion), this paper theorizes the home/street divide as a *symbolic system* that exerts *symbolic violence* through the *unsaid* (Presser 2022).

Symbolic systems are cognitive structures that "make people see and believe, confirming or transforming visions of the world" (Bourdieu 1991: 170) not through force but through a "knowledge effect" (1991: 127). They shape individuals' beliefs and practices by conferring the "immediate meaning of the world" (1991: 166) and rest on a foundation of shared belief and consensus. To say that the home/street divide is a symbolic system is to argue that these categories are deeply embedded in peoples' minds, regardless of their position in the social space. In this sense, I theorize that both criminalized girls' and judicial documents' narratives are informed by this symbolic system, albeit possibly in different ways.

Symbolic systems are produced by those with *symbolic power*, who have "the capacity to produce, diffuse, and inculcate […] cognitive categories of perception" (Wacquant 2023: 67). In this study, the legal actors who write judicial documents are endowed with this "performative power," which promulgates "self-realizing categories" (2023: 67). Legal actors, for example, produce the category "criminal" by enunciating it. Regarding the home and the street, I follow Wacquant's proposition that *place* is crucial to symbolic systems: "Representations of space are produced, diffused, and harnessed in the field of power by bureaucratic […] agencies" (2023: 70-71). As such, I theorize that legal actors also produce the categories of the *home* and the *street* alongside other institutions.

Symbolic systems exert *symbolic violence*, a form of power that "manages to impose its meaning as legitimate by concealing the power relations which are the basis of its force" (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990). For the public/private divide, these hidden structural forces are gendered vulnerability and economic exploitation (concealed by representations of the home) and the racialization of urban marginality (concealed by representations of the street). In this study, I

theorize that the home/street divide invisibilizes and thus legitimates these forms of domination, becoming embedded in criminalized people's self-perceptions and worldviews.

To investigate symbolic systems and their resultant symbolic violence is to look for the unseen, per Bourdieu's lesson: "The visible, that which is immediately given, hides the invisible which determines it" (1990: 181). Therefore, I mobilize Presser's concept of the *unsaid* to analyze the "phantom text" of narratives about women and violence (2022: viii). This approach is particularly fitting to analyze criminalizing discourses, as they "assign blame, minimize harm, and formulate the bases for its *[penal harm]* legitimacy" (Presser 2022: vii). Since I begin by asking how and why gendered vulnerability is excluded from accounts of 'street' violence, I follow Presser's call to consider "what is getting smuggled into the text […] but also what is not getting in: missing perspectives and contexts" (2022: 24).

In the following sections, I examine what is *said* and *unsaid* about gender and violence in both sets of narratives to (i) learn how gendered symbolic systems shape narratives of gender, violence, crime, and responsibility across actors and institutions and (ii) theorize how interpersonal and state violence is made legitimate through symbolic violence.

4.5. Data and Methods: Contrasting Narratives on Women's Criminalized Violence

Please see section 1.2. of this dissertation's Introduction for a detailed account of data collection.

4.5.1. Analysis: Finding the Plot

In this paper, I conduct a comparative narrative analysis informed by the tradition of narrative criminology (Fleetwood et al. 2019; Presser 2009; Presser and Sandberg 2015,). Narrative criminology is concerned with "how whole lives and histories of (individual and groups) are summoned in claims about the enactments of the (ir)responsible self" (Presser 2022: 26). Because discussions of agency and morality are central to stories about crime, they provide the perfect setting to investigate how gendered vulnerability is framed in different contexts by different actors.

I consider criminalized girls' biographical interviews and judicial documents as *narratives* because they recount events that unfold over time (Labov and Waletzky 1967; Ricouer 1983),

center around a moral disruption (Bruner 1990) and convey a moralizing message about legitimate and illegitimate courses of action (Presser 2022). Indeed, both samples fit neatly into Smith's definition of narrative:

> *Narratives allocate causal responsibility for actions, define actors and give them motivation, indicate the trajectory of past episodes and predict consequences of future choices, suggest courses of action, confer and withdraw legitimacy, and provide social approval by aligning events with normative cultural codes (2005: 18).*

In this paper, I look for the elements laid out by Smith to identify the *plot of* both sets of narratives. While narrative analysts commonly identify typologies, recognizing the uniqueness of each set of stories (as I do in Paper 1), here I extract "the most general storyline that can be recognized" (Frank 1995: 75) in each sample and define that as the *general plot structure.*

My analysis is concerned with what is said and unsaid about gender in narratives of criminalized violence. *Plots* can illuminate this question by revealing the sequential, causal, and moral storyline socially available to narrators: A happened (the violence) because of B (motivation/cause), leading to C (consequence), and therefore D (moral of the story). In that sense, plots reveal "systematic relationships concerning protagonists and antagonists in terms of their relative polarization and potential for moral transformation" (Smith 2005: 23) and the "culturally approved […] designations of moral value" (Presser 2022: 29).

To find the plot of each sample of narratives, I conducted a multi-stage coding process. First, I coded each narrative inductively, coding for objective experiences (i.e., mention of intimate partner violence) and subjective assessments (i.e., whether intimate partner violence is framed as unjust). After reading all narratives for each sample, I identified the general plot structure. I found that the home and street were central to the structuring of both sets of stories. I then returned to each individual narrative and coded them according to the hypothesized plot structure (i.e., in girls' narratives, 'acts' and 'crises' were coded) to assess whether individual narratives matched the general plot structure.

Finally, to investigate the *unsaid* (Presser 2022), I compared both samples' general plot structure and individual stories' elements to identify which experiences and assessments are present in one

set of stories and missing from another. The following sections describe and analyze the general plot structure of narratives by criminalized young women and legal actors.

4.6. Good Girls' Homes, Bad Girls' Streets: Young Women's Narratives of Violence

This section analyzes personal narratives by 34 young women between 13 and 20 years old, all serving youth justice sentences in Porto Alegre in 2016, 2023, and 2024. Among the 31 interviewees who were incarcerated in a youth justice facility, 16 were charged with homicide, nine with robbery, two with robbery-murder,[23] two with drug trafficking, two with assault, and one with kidnapping. The other three interviewees were serving Assisted Liberty sentences, two for theft and one for assault. In terms of violent experiences, 18 out of 34 reported suffering or witnessing violence against women and children at home, and 24 out of 34 reported suffering or witnessing interpersonal, drug-market related, and state violence in the street. Interviewees lived in marginalized communities across Rio Grande do Sul under economic precarity and amidst conflicts between state forces and drug organizations.

Of all participants, 20 were classified as white and 14 as Black.[24] Overall, I found no discernible differences in the narratives by Black and white girls. Narrations of precarious economic conditions, exposure to violence in the "home" and the "street," discourses about gender (or the assumed lack thereof) in relation to violence, and participation in criminal activities were similar across racial lines. Only one interviewee explicitly discussed race and experiences of racism in her narrative: Carol, who recounted being wrongly accused of homicide, stated, "They think that, because I'm Black, I do these things *[crime]*." This quote suggests, in line with studies of Black criminalization in Brazil mentioned earlier, that Black young girls may be more likely to be targeted by the youth justice system. However, this study's sample is not large enough to allow

[23] Homicides and robbery-murder counts include those categorized as "attempted," in which the victims survived.
[24] Skin colour variations and racialization dynamics are entangled in Brazil and profoundly impact racial classification (Schwartzman 2019). Brazilians who are Black (*negros*, that is, of African descent) are institutionally categorized (and self-identify) as either *pretos* or *pardos* (black or brown) based on their skin colour. Light-skinned people of African descent are classified as *pardos*, and dark-skinned people of African descent are classified as *pretos.* In this study, women classified as either *pretas* or *pardas* are considered *negras*, i.e. Black. The racial classification of interviewees from 2016 comes from the youth detention center's files. I made the racial classification of interviewees from 2023 and 2024, following the patterns observed from the 2016 classification (as I did not have access to the files). There are limitations to this method of classification, notably the lack of information on participants' self-identification. However, I chose not to ask interviewees about their racial identity so as not to influence them to discuss race in their narratives, as I wished to assess if racialized experiences appeared spontaneously in their tales.

for broader comparisons between the experiences of white and Black girls. In my analysis, I consider that, regardless of individual racial classification, interviewed girls inhabited social spaces marked as Black and poor (the drug traffic, the *vilas*, the criminal justice institutions).

Girls' narratives share a general plot structure. For each space, home or street, they attribute different meanings to violent experiences. Unlike legal actors, who separate stories of violence into two categories, girls' narratives tell a story that passes through the private into the public space and then back to the private space again. It is through the transitions between the home and the street that they make sense of the violence they suffered as victims and the violence they committed as perpetrators.

I identify three acts in all interviewees' stories. The first act of each story begins in the home, a place marked by gendered power hierarchies. Then, a crisis propels the narrator to the 'street,' where the story's second act plays out. In the street, narrators find opportunities to escape the entrapments of the domestic sphere, encountering financial freedom, power, romance, and adventure. A 'wakeup call' - usually their incarceration - leads the narrator back home in their third and final act (see Table 5).

Table 5. General plot structure of girls' narratives

Home	**Crisis**	**Street**	**'Wakeup call'**	**Home**
Caretaking responsibilities	Economic need	Freedom to pursue economic opportunities	Incarceration	Return to caretaking responsibilities
Violence against women and children	Sexual, family and state violence	Power to escape and avenge gendered violence	Police or drug-market related violence	Motherhood, marriage, legal employment
Violence is exceptional, incomprehensible, and unjust		Violence is natural, rationalized, and fair		Refusal of joy and community

4.6.1. First Act: Gendered Labors and Victimization at Home

The first act of most narratives establishes the narrator's moral worthiness by positioning her in the private space before their fall from grace. Their traditional gendered roles as caretakers are emphasized: "I always took care of my siblings. I fed them, bathed them, cleaned the house… People looked and said: 'what a good girl!'" remembered Lu. "I lived with my son, my mother and my disabled brother and helped with everything," said Vivi, incarcerated for armed robbery. Indeed, caring for disabled family members is a recurring responsibility that befalls young girls in this sample. Ceres, serving an Assisted Liberty sentence for stealing cleaning products, recalled: "When I was 10, my grandma had a stroke, and I had to take care of her; I changed diapers and cooked for her." Hilda, incarcerated for being forced by her then-boyfriend to accompany him in a homicide, quit school at age 12 to take care of her mother when she lost the ability to walk.

Early stories of the home have two main contours. A minority of girls speak of an idyllic and family-oriented early life. Bibiana, incarcerated for killing her abusive boyfriend in a fire, thought fondly of her grandfather's home by the sea, where she grew up before being abandoned by her family. Often, girls recounted "having everything they wanted" in their childhood to absolve their parents of guilt over their fate. These tales of care and joy mark the contrast between girls' idealized home life and the events that led them to the street.

Most stories of the home, however, are not as joyful. Many girls narrate unjust experiences of violence against women and children at home, which were met with fierce resistance. All young women perceived this form of violence as the greatest injury. "My father abused us, he did us a lot of harm. But now that we are grown, we hit him back," Lu recalled. Val, incarcerated for robbery, talked about her stepfather's abuse of her mother: "If I could hurt him as much as he hurt my family, I would." Ursula, incarcerated for killing a young girl who threatened her marriage, prophesized: "I will *never* be abused by a man like my mother was." Despite having committed violence against a child herself, Ursula was also adamant in saying she would never lay a hand on her daughter (unlike her mother, who spanked her). Notwithstanding the ubiquitous presence of domestic and sexual violence in girls' stories, these events are always signified as exceptions, the incomprehensible breaking of a rule: the safety of the home. Patricia

was sexually victimized by her stepfather and wondered: “I just *don’t understand how* my mom let this happen.”

In sum, in this first act of the general plot, the home is a space of rigid hierarchies, be it marked by care work or violence. The private sphere is conceived as a place where one proves herself as a caretaker, whether by domestic labour or active resistance to violence. Ana was an accomplice in the murder of her abusive father: “It was my mother or him, so I chose my mother.” Hortencia calmly stated: "If my stepfather lays a hand on my mom, I'll kill him." Violence in the home, then, is seen as completely unacceptable, except for protecting others from injustice. While these girls do not always attribute women’s victimization in the home to their gender, they acknowledge that violence stems from power imbalances in the family, portraying women and children as the victims of men’s violent whims.

4.6.2. Second Act: The Freedom of the Street

In the second act of the shared plot, a crisis propels the narrator to “the street.” The street here signifies the place of drug trafficking, robberies, thefts, ‘bad’ friends, and parties – all the “wrong things.” The reasons girls recount for “going to the street” vary, but most narrate a significant event that propelled their movement toward criminalized settings.

For some girls, this crisis is economic. The drug economy and its affiliated activities, such as robberies and carjackings, deliver wages unlike any other job available to the interviewees. The street is a place of financial freedom, brimming with opportunities: “I thought I could take care of myself, *have my own life*, support myself, buy whatever I wanted,” Miriam considered. Unlike the hierarchical home, the street is where one can “make it on their own,” as Val reflected. Ceres left home with her sister and niece due to their stepfather’s abuse and saw herself as the household provider at 13: “During the morning, I would do the wrong things *[trafficking and robbing]*, then I would come home and give my sister money so that she could cook us a meal." Likewise, Bibiana and her little sister were left to fend for themselves when their mother passed away, and their grandfather moved to another state without them: "I started selling drugs because I was alone and nobody wanted to help me, not even the government."

For other girls, the crisis that leads to the street is caused by violence, as Lu’s story exemplifies: “*[After the abuse]* I got to know the world, got to know the street. Then my head was turned. I

was robbing people, carrying a gun." The street is the destiny of narrators who suffered traumatic encounters with violence in the rigidity of the private sphere, offering resources to escape and sometimes avenge the entrapments of the home. These resources often come from friends and intimate partners with local power in criminalized networks. Helena decided to leave home and "see the world" after witnessing her stepfather's abuse of her mother, soon marrying an older man involved in drug trafficking. Olivia ran away from home after being sexually assaulted by her brother and married a powerful local drug trafficker. Fernanda joined the local drug economy after enduring abuse from a relative. She gained not only safety but revenge: her male peers killed her abuser after she told them what had happened in her home. In an extreme example of this dynamic, Isabela recounted that she suffered an attempted rape by a family friend and was not believed by her rigid parents. In escapades around town, she met an older partner who helped plan and carry out the murder of her family. The street is where the debts of the home are paid.

In other examples, the crisis is an invasion of public violence into the private sphere, whether from the state or drug trafficking disputes. Norma thought of her fate as intertwined with her father's, who was murdered in a local dispute when she was a child. The homicide she committed - unbeknownst to her, against the daughter of her father's killer - was seen as divine retribution. Beatriz lost a brother to a stray bullet months before she "started partying." In Vivi's case, the police executed her brother during a robbery: "He surrendered, but the cop shot him six times […] I was really affected. I got confused, got messed up, and turned to the street." In some cases, the idealized home is disrupted by the other arm of the state: Helena, Val, and Patricia "went to the streets" when they lost custody of their children to Child Protective Services.

In these stories, the street offers girls the tools to overcome their powerlessness. The street is the space where the gendered rules of the home can be broken, especially for those who climb the ranks of criminalized organizations. Some girls openly articulate the gender egalitarianism they experienced in drug markets, as opposed to their domestic life. According to Vivi, who was sexually abused at home: "The drug dealers kept everything organized, stable. I slept with six men in a bed, and none tried anything. If you respect, you will be respected." Gabi stressed: "We had more power than the boys. The bosses trust us better." Emilia, incarcerated for drug trafficking, echoed: "I was accepted as a manager, it was good. They see that we are level-headed, responsible." Tellingly, Fernanda stated about her time selling drugs: "They treated me

like a *normal person*. Like one of the boys." The street is framed as a place where girls can escape gendered vulnerability and be recognized for their intelligence and strength.

Another characteristic of the egalitarianism and loose hierarchies of the street is seen in tales of intimate partner violence. If interviewees' recollections of violence at home are of an unequal power dynamic between men and women or adults and children, the same is not true for their stories of male violence in the street. Violence ranging from slaps to threats at gunpoint is often framed as "fights" in which girls and their (usually much older) boyfriends are in equal standing. Comparing herself to her mother's victimization history, Miriam laughed: "He doesn't hit me, I'm the one who hits him." Julie giggled when she recalled her boyfriend pointed a gun at her for opening the door of his house in her pyjamas. Often, girls recounted taking their boyfriends' violent and controlling behaviour in stride, almost as a joke. Octavia also laughed recalling how her 29-year-old husband forced her to move in with him: "I wanted to stay with my mother, but he would not let me. He would say: 'if you leave through this door, you won't come back.'" Vera shrugged remembering she was forced to be on the phone with her incarcerated partner around the clock, so he could monitor how men talked to her. In these stories, the street grants girls a sense of power and autonomy that prevents them from seeing themselves as victims of male violence, like they and their mothers were at home.

The intimate partner violence of their relationships in the street is not the only violence taken in good stride by the narrators. If violence in the home is unacceptable for all young women interviewed, the violence of drug markets (e.g., disputes over territory and supply, the killing of 'snitches' and debtors), as well as fights over reputation or heterosexual relationships, are perceived as a natural occurrence in the street. Fatima, incarcerated for a homicide in which she was forced to participate, narrated herself as a simultaneously meek, dutiful wife and daughter at home and an efficient and daring fighter in the street, with no apparent contradiction. Narrators spoke of their violence against other women and girls in the street as calculated risks and pragmatic choices made to maintain the stability of their intimate relationships. Vivi, for example, shot her boyfriend's ex-girlfriend point blank. "In the end, it wasn't even worth it," she shrugged, as the woman survived. Julie, who stabbed an acquaintance who was hitting on her boyfriend, justified: "She was no saint."

As previously discussed, girls experience domestic violence against women and children as profoundly unjust and emotionally traumatizing. On the other hand, violence that takes place in the street, in the context of drug-market relations, is framed as natural, fair, and emotionally neutral. Gabi calmly described her part in the homicide of her former boss: "In the most important moment, the boys chickened out and just shot him in the arm." She rolled her eyes, emoting her impatience at the time: "I told them: 'I can't *believe* this is happening. We have to kill him, not hurt him.' Then I took the gun and shot him twice in the face." Lucia, a powerful drug trafficker in her hometown, was incarcerated after one of her male friends 'snitched' on her. I asked her if he wasn't afraid to cross her. "Oh, he knows what will happen to him," she sentenced somberly. Sam, another powerful drug manager, conversationally recounted an offer made by her peers: to kill the entire family of the girl who snitched on her, including grandmothers and babies.

This is not to say that the narrators approve of extreme and unjustified acts of violence. Their approach to violence in the street is practical: force is justified only to maintain the fragile stability of business and interpersonal relations. Girls attributed excessive cruelty to men and considered themselves responsible for keeping the business afloat without unnecessary bloodshed. Sam casually denied her peers' offer: "There was no need for *all that,*" she reasoned. Vera wondered if her ex-partner had "psychological problems" due to his pleasure in killing. Lucia was at her wits' end with her male subordinates' lust for violence: "Ugh. They just want their little wars. Why can't we just sell drugs and chill?" Notably, men's excessive violence here is not framed as immoral or unjust. Instead, it is perceived as unpractical, going against market rationality.

In sum, the participants conceived the street as a space where gendered rules change, power dynamics are inverted, and the once unacceptable violence can be rationalized according to market rules. In these stories, the street is where girls can escape the entrapments of traditional girlhood, such as vulnerability to violence and the financial constraints of precarious (paid and unpaid) care work. This is the allure of the street, which "pulls us in," as Gabi says.

4.6.3. Third Act: Redemption in Returning Home

But the street is fundamentally untrustworthy. In this shared plot, the street always fails to deliver its promises: boyfriends cheat, friends betray, money fades, the cops break down the door. In the third and final act, most young women find redemption in returning to the private sphere and the roles attributed to them: care for family members, childbearing, marriage, and 'legitimate' – and often precarious – employment. "I'll leave here and rent a house for my mother and me," Lu hoped, "I'll take her away from the *vila*." Fatima had run away from her controlling husband and violent father when she was forced to commit a homicide. She knows better now: "I'll go back home, go back to church, get married in a white dress."

Other young women talk about finding legal employment in the future. A minority of girls referred to work as fulfilling a dream: Gabi wants to be a journalist; Sam, a nurse. Val dreams of becoming a family court judge to help institutionalized children like herself. More often, however, the young women talk about working precarious jobs with the sole goal of supporting their families. "I'll work in a market with my aunt […] to raise my daughter and take care of my mom," Ursula envisioned.

Motherhood, actual or potential, is frequently cited at the end of each tale. All nine interviewees who are mothers centre their children on their redemption journey. Many others foresee children in their near future. Octavia wants to have a child and "have her own home" once she is released. Débora found out she was pregnant during the detention center's routine health check. The path of her motherly redemption leads straight home: "I'll give her *[the baby]* the future I never had."

In their final act, girls not only return home but swear off the street and all its pleasures and dangers. Many will go so far as to say they will not "leave home" anymore. Cutting ties with friends is a central theme at the end of these stories. Abandoned by her friends upon her incarceration, Miriam found peace in the rigidity of the home: "Now that I'm here, I know my *friends from the street were* not real friends. Only my family supports me." Similarly, Carol promised: "I'll go home, study, stay away from friends. We don't really have friends, only God." Norma recalled her mother's warning: "Friends will only lead you to the wrong path." Débora echoed: "I lost my mind when I went to the street… Now I won't go out, won't play, won't have friends anymore."

4.6.4. Curtain Call: The Failures of the Home and the Dangers of the Street

The constraining plot structure of girls' stories showcases how "people choose stories, but they have less choice about the principles that set their choosing" (Frank 2010). I argue that the home/street dichotomy operates as a gendered symbolic structure that outlines the meanings of violence in different spaces, creating the "space of possibilities" (Bourdieu 2000) for girls to make sense of violence and criminalization. Girls frame violence in the home as exceptional and out of place and violence in the street as natural and rationalized. Their narratives demonstrate how the home/street divide exerts *symbolic violence* by concealing and legitimating power relations.

The representation of the home as the space of ideal womanhood constrains the narrators from associating moral worthiness–and the possibility of redemption–with gendered care work. It is the home that makes or breaks girls' sense of worth: it is a failure of the home to protect them (or *their* failure to protect the home) that launches them to the street, and only a return to the home can redeem them (for a detailed discussion, see Paper 1). But in focusing on *the failures of the home*, these tales also invisibilize broader social structures such as patriarchal domination, economic precarity, and state neglect.

This is not to say, of course, that girls are not aware of economic, gendered, and state violence. They are acutely so and discuss them in their narratives. However, when asked to *reflect* on the *causes* of their criminalization, structural forces lose ground to individual failings. For example, Fernanda reflected on why she 'went to the street': "It was a bit of carelessness from my family. I was too loose." Recall that Fernanda recounted suffering from male violence at home. Similarly, Ceres said she started trafficking because "no one ever told me 'no,' so I did what I wanted." The fact that the state told Ceres and her family 'no' repetitively and that Ceres hardly ever did what she wanted, having worked since she was 12, is obscured from her reflection.

Second, the representation of the street as "always-already" dangerous and treacherous is a form of symbolic violence that shapes girls' narratives in multiple ways. On the one hand, it obscures the gendered nature of girls' violent encounters in the street. While participants recounted finding autonomy and reclaiming their agency in criminalized settings, these perceptions also invisibilize their victimization, leaving the narrators to blame themselves for their circumstances.

On the other hand, the inherent danger of the street constrains girls to point out their own communities, not broader social forces, as the main culprits of the street violence they suffer and witness.

In lieu of economic precarity and state violence, *evil* is provided as an explanation for street violence by many participants. Diana reflected on violence in her neighbourhood: "People are just bad. They are thugs, they weren't raised right. They don't want to change, that's how it has always been." To avoid victimization and criminalization, "you should not get involved with the wrong people," Fernanda cautioned. Lucia, with her years of experience working in the drug economy, said about the increasing violence of drug markets: "People just want to be the boss of everyone. They're crazy." When I asked what could change in her neighbourhood, Hilda declared: "People should be less evil." In so doing, girls unwittingly reproduced the *territorial stigma* (Wacquant 2023) imposed on their communities.

Again, this is not to say that these young women were not aware of economic and state violence. However, when making explicit claims about the *causes of violence*, they resort to individual and community-level explanations. Their narratives showcase their belief that experiences of violence can be more cohesively understood and morally redeeming through a particular framework – the home/street dichotomy – that obscures the structural forces around them. Their narrative choices demonstrate how symbolic violence, enacted via dominant symbolic systems, operates as a *theft of imagination*, constraining "spaces of possibilities" (Bourdieu 2000) for meaning. This gendered symbolic system, therefore, constrains what *can be said* and what *goes unsaid* (Presser 2022) about women and violence in the home and the street.

4.7. Mad at Home, Bad in the Streets: Judicial Narratives of Young Women's Violence

I now turn to another sample of narratives about women's criminalized violence: 40 court cases of young women (13-19) sentenced for youth offences in Rio Grande do Sul between 2015 and 2022. All defendants were found guilty and incarcerated at the same youth detention centre where interviewees were housed.[25] Among the cases, 14 were drug trafficking charges, 10 were

[25] There is no overlap between defendants and interviewees; that is, I have not analyzed interviewees' court cases nor interviewed any defendant.

homicides, nine were robberies, and seven were robbery-murders. Of all defendants, 22 were classified as white, 13 as Black, and 5 cases had no racial classification.[26]

Each court case contains two legal documents: a *criminal complaint* signed by a prosecutor and a *sentence* signed by a judge. The criminal complaint describes the act allegedly committed by the defendant, makes a legal argument about how the act should be criminally categorized, and requests the defendant's incarceration, making an argument about her personality and lived circumstances to claim she poses a risk to society. The *sentence* comprises three stages: the report of the proceedings, the "analysis of materiality and authorship," and the determination of punishment. First, the document presents a report of the prosecutors' charges, the defence's arguments, and the testimonies of police officers, witnesses, family members, victims, and the defendant. Second, the judge draws from the evidence presented to argue for the "materiality" (that the offence happened) and "authorship" (that the defendant committed it), considers the defence's demands (i.e. for absolution), and rules the defendant guilty. Finally, the judge makes an argument about the need to incarcerate the defendant, discussing her personality, lived circumstances, the gravity of the offence committed, and the goal of punishment. [27]

The circumstances in which defendants are arrested, and the offences for which they are criminalized do not diverge from the interviewees' experiences. In fact, they are often variations of similar stories, which allows me to analyze analogous events (the homicide of a violent partner, the work of a manager of a drug organization, the theft of supplies from a supermarket) from different narrative standpoints. However, if the events described in both sets of stories are alike, the meanings attributed to such events differ greatly. Unlike biographical narratives of criminalized people, which might contain multiple "narrative needs" (Bruner 1991) – justification, redemption, self-reflection, etc. – these judicial documents have a clear and singular intent: to argue that a young woman did something out of her own free will, without coercion, that she poses a threat to others and is therefore deserving of punishment. For that reason, they are particularly fitting to investigate how gendered meanings are attached to violent events.

These judicial documents share a *mirrored* plot structure: they either describe crimes 'of the home' or crimes 'of the street.' The space in which the crime is framed shapes the description of

[26] Defendants' racial classification, when available, is stated in the criminal complaint.
[27] Because all the cases analyzed led to a guilty verdict, this is the formula of all sentences.

the defendants' personality and motives (pathology or rational choice), the nature of violence in this space (exceptional or inherent) and the appropriate goal of punishment (rehabilitation or incapacitation). See Table 6 for a summary of the plot.

Table 6. General structure of judicial documents' mirrored plot

	Home	**Street**
Cause of crime	*"Exalted emotions"*	*"Easy profits"*
Explanation of girls' deviance	Psychiatrical pathologies	Rational choice
Goal of punishment	Rehabilitation	Incapacitation
Narrative about violence	Violence is out of place	Violence is inherent

4.7.1. "Exalted Emotions" at Home

Five out of 40 court cases describe violent crimes allegedly committed by defendants against family members or intimate partners in the home. Despite their reduced number, it is possible to determine that these cases share a clear common plot in stark contrast with cases set 'in the street.' These are the longest documents, with extensive police investigations, medical reports, and multiple witnesses' testimonies. In this small sample of narratives, racial categories are less homogeneous: all five defendants in "home" cases were classified as white, while defendants in "street" cases were more evenly distributed across racial categories (with 17 classified as white, 13 as Black, and 5 with no classification). It is important to note that Black girls remain overrepresented as 37% of all "street" cases since only 20% of the population of Rio Grande do Sul identifies as Black. While this sample is particularly small to make causal claims, the overrepresentation of white defendants in "home" cases signals the traditional divide in women's penality, in which white women are framed as mentally ill victims and Black women as cunning criminals.

The cases set in the home describe the defendants' relationships with families and victims in length, focusing on the emotional aspect of the crime. T., 14, was accused of trying to kill her aunt by running her over with a car. In the criminal complaint against her, the prosecutor wrote: *She reported trying to kill her aunt because she felt hatred towards her.* In the sentence, the judge echoed: *The adolescent affirmed she intended to kill her aunt and father because she hates them*. Her emotional state when arrested was also noted: *She was nervous.* R., 18, was accused of

sexually assaulting and trying to kill her godmother's child, a toddler. Her sentence read: *She claimed she was very angry because she was unjustly accused by her godmother of stealing money.* J., 17, was accused of coordinating her male ex-partner's murder. According to the proceedings, she went to his house accompanied by two male friends, who stabbed him. Both criminal complaint and sentence noted that *"the exalted emotions stemming from the breakup led to the outcome 'death*.'"

Similarly to girls' tales of domestic violence, judicial documents also frame defendants' violence in the home as out of place. The domestic realm is discursively constructed as always-already safe, violence being an exceptional disturbance. Hence, these cases fall under the mad woman paradigm (Ussher 1991) of traditional women's penality, positing the defendants' mental health as an explanation for the absurdity of girls' violence against their families. In R.'s sentence, for example, the judge noted: *In the reports of various health professionals, all attest that the adolescent […] was, at an early age, diagnosed with multiple intellectual development disorders, and subsequently, with non-specified psychosis, with the possibility of developing schizophrenia, on top of cognitive delay and depressive episodes.*

In T.'s case, her use of psychiatrical medication was mobilized both by the defence to claim she had no control over her actions (*The adolescent did not know why she wanted to run over her aunt and attributed it to a reaction to her medication*), and by the judge to assert her responsibility and sound-mindedness (*She was not having a mental breakdown, given that she was taking her medication as prescribed*). The prosecutor and judge both argued that incarceration was necessary to reach a definitive diagnosis: *The adolescent will be able to receive psychiatrical treatment during incarceration* (criminal complaint); *a psychological and psychiatrical evaluation, contemplating risk evaluation, treatment indication, and psychological testing is extremely important for determining the adequate treatment* (sentence).

While R. and T.'s mental health is compounded, respectively, by an "*unhealthy*" family environment and too-lenient parents, pathological explanations are also mobilized to make sense of violence emerging from presumably ideal families. F.B., 14, was accused of planning the murder of her older cousin, who was her landlord, to avoid paying rent. Her "*emotionally and financially structured*" life, with a father who paid for private school and a mother who tried to "*steer her in the correct path*," are mobilized to argue that something must be inherently wrong

with her. Without a diagnosis, the judge floated the possibility of psychopathy: *Although it is not possible to test the personality of the adolescent, considering the brutality of the crime and her lack of regret, it would not be false to [...] believe in the existence of serious psychiatrical and psychological disorders.*

In line with the epistemological premise of penal welfarism (Garland 2001), framing violence as *exceptional* lends itself to focusing on rehabilitation as the goal of punishment. In these narratives, defendants can be *fixed* through treatment during incarceration. It is telling that these are the minority of cases in which judges justify incarceration by focusing more on the 'needs' of the defendant than on the risk they pose to society. Regarding the goal of F.B.'s punishment, the judge stated: *It is to allow the youth a re-education and the return to social life by strengthening family ties without neglecting the necessary psychiatric and psychological treatment.* About R., the sentence argued: *There is a pedagogical necessity* [of incarceration]*, given that only her removal from the family environment, which has not proven healthy, will allow her to become stable.* Likewise, T.'s sentence read: *The adolescent presents an unstable and violent personality, making evident the need for rigorous state intervention to promote her re-education and resocialization to adequate living among society.*

It is important to note that these judicial discourses are not lenient. The defendants are framed as fully responsible for their "*brutal*" actions, despite their alleged mental disorders, and receive the maximum punishment. Here, the 'mad woman' discourse frames the home as an always-already safe environment, where acts of violence by women can only be understood through psychosis. As I will discuss at the end of this section, this framing invisibilizes the structural character of violence against women and children in the domestic realm.

4.7.2. "Easy Profits" in the Street

The plot of judicial documents set 'in the street' stands in clear contrast to the plot of those set 'in the home' – an inverted mirror where emotion becomes rationality, and mentally ill defendants become hyper-rational criminal masterminds. These narratives stress the defendants' autonomy and freedom of choice in criminalized settings. As such, they reproduce a similar understanding of the street as interviewees: a ruthless but egalitarian marketplace where ambitious and cunning women can thrive and are not vulnerable to gendered violence.

In many of the cases set in the street, defendants are accused of committing crimes alongside adult men. This is especially true for robberies, robbery murders, and drug trafficking. Despite the defendants' self-described minor role in most of these events, the judicial documents frame them as equal co-conspirators, if not the commanding voice, in these crimes. A., 15, was accused of the robbery-murder of a ride-share driver. She was accompanied by three adult men, one of whom was her stepfather. The criminal complaint stated: *The defendant and her accomplices, with shared wills and joint efforts, previously organized, always sharing tasks and helping each other materially and morally […] tried to kill the victim.* D., 19, was accused of participating in a robbery-murder with two adult men. Her criminal complaint read almost the same as A.'s: *She idealized, with the accomplices, the entire criminal action, having adhered psychologically to the goals of the other accomplices.* These passages establish the defendant as autonomous, powerful, and, therefore, equally responsible for the crime.

In drug trafficking cases, the documents reproduce the "responsible manager" discourse found in interviewees' narratives (see also Paper 1). They frame defendants as the masterminds behind drug trafficking enterprises, often ruling from the shadows. Recall M., 17, whose case was discussed in the introductory vignette of this paper. Per the prosecutor's description: *She, stably and permanently, personally integrates a criminal organization which uses firearms and engages in various crimes such as trafficking, robbery, and homicide in the city and nearby towns.* M. was described, in both criminal complaint and sentence, as the "*right hand*" of her incarcerated brother, the leader of the criminal organization: *The adolescent has an important logistic function in the organization […] being the external contact outside of prison. She receives her brother's orders, passes them on, and oversees their execution.* The defence argued that M. was forced to participate in the criminal enterprise since her powerful brother ran it. The judge, however, deemed M. a mighty drug trafficker in her own right: *The adolescent gave orders, and they were obeyed. Homicides were treated* [by her] *naturally. It was possible to see her satisfaction with integrating into the criminal organization.* Importantly, M.'s intelligence was used to cement her autonomy and reinforce her freedom of choice: *The adolescent has a degree of comprehension of the crime itself, as well as the capacity for organization, leadership, and intelligence.*

Tellingly, their importance in a criminal enterprise is emphasized even when defendants are arrested in positions traditionally understood as subordinate in criminalized settings (e.g., as

mules or baits). In two separate cases, B., 16, and E., 17, were accused of transporting drugs across municipal lines by bus. Both defendants claimed they did not know they were transporting drugs; they received an offer to transport a bag and did it for the money. Nonetheless, their sentences extrapolated their role: *Well, the adolescent was carrying one kilogram of cocaine, drugs that, if sold, would amount to R$50,000-100,000. Therefore, there is no doubt that the defendant, although an adolescent, already has the trust of bigger traffickers […] not being believable that a drug trafficker would task this mission to a random person* (E's sentence).

P.B., 17, was accused of homicide alongside an adult man. According to the proceedings, she was used as bait to lure the male victim to a house. She was ordered by the crime coordinator, a powerful drug trafficker, to maintain an online relationship with the victim. P.B.'s defence claimed she was coerced and did not know the men's intention to kill the victim. In the sentence, however, this thesis was refuted: *The adolescent's actions were definitive for the event of death. It is implausible the allegation that she did not know his intention, given that she knew this was an individual involved with drug trafficking and part of an extremely violent criminal organization. […] The defendant knew of everything and helped her accomplices decisively.*

H., 17, was accused of participating in a robbery that involved hostages with two adult men. She was left behind to be arrested at the end while the men escaped. H. claims she was a hostage herself and not a participant. In her sentence, the judge understood that: *The execution of the crime was premeditated, and there was a perfect division of tasks, with the defendant watching the hostages, which allowed her accomplices to subtract the goods and guaranteed the success of the enterprise. […] The adolescent is not a naïve ingénue; very much the opposite.* Again, the insistence on the gender egalitarianism of these criminalized acts (e.g., the "perfect division of tasks" between men and women) works to frame defendants as fully autonomous.

Common to these cases is also the assertion that the defendants "mock" the criminal procedure. As noted in M.'s sentence: *The police officer's testimony exposes the mockery of the defendant, who claimed she will always allege being a drug user, not a drug trafficker, and that nothing will happen to her because of her condition as a minor.* P., 14, charged with drug trafficking, was arrested while preparing drugs for sale. In the criminal complaint, the prosecutor stressed: *The adolescent explained what she was doing with shocking ease, saying that "this is not drug trafficking" because the trafficker is the person who sells drugs and that she did not do. […] She*

was calm and confident that "nothing would happen" to her. Defendants' knowledge of the law (e.g., that drug users cannot be incarcerated) is mobilized here as a testament to their intelligence and, therefore, independence and lack of "naïveté."

The framing of defendants' criminalized acts as rational choices is also produced through a focus on girls' nerve and greed. "*The defendant's audacity*" is brought up in multiple documents, as well as their "*lack of limits*," framing defendants as outrageous and daring in their pursuits of "*easy profit*." The criminal complaint against B stated: *It is important to note that the adolescent is 16 and does not work […] she has no limits nor responsibility, and thus hopes to make money the easy way: not working, she decided to sell drugs.* The criminal complaint against M. contrasted youth working in drug economies with 'legitimate' workers: *We must repudiate […] youths enjoying their impunity in liberty, while the honest, dignified, and working citizens who refute delinquency as a means of life […] remain hostage.* More succinctly, E's sentence read: [If not incarcerated] *the adolescent might proceed in her escalating delinquent path in search of easy profits to tend to her needs.* However, said "needs" are never discussed in the documents, as I will argue in the following subsection.

As discussed earlier in this section, the violence of the home is framed, in these court cases, as individualized: crimes in the family are portrayed as exceptions that can only be made sense of through the defendants' madness. The crimes of the street, on the other hand, are often contextualized by prosecutors and judges as part of a broader picture: the expansion of dangerous drug organizations across the state jurisdiction. In the criminal complaint against M., the prosecutor stated: *In the social milieu, drug trafficking has been a factor of disturbance to the public order, given that the economic values involved are immensurable, and so is the violence that stems from the illicit market.* Likewise, in B.'s case: *This criminal practice directly targets society, which is at the mercy of drug traffickers who seek easy profit […] Drug trafficking is also the propelling engine of so many crimes.*

As such, not only girls' individual characteristics but also their environment – as narrowly perceived by legal actors – are at play in narratives of the street. These judicial tales make an argument about the street as a space that is violent, disorderly, and polluted (Caldeira 2001). As the criminal complaint against F., accused of stealing products from a supermarket, noted: *This act fits into the imaginary roster of delinquent acts responsible for the true panic that spreads*

across our society, in which there is a unanimous opinion that the streets are not safe, whether in the morning or night […] these acts are putting at risk our society, given that they are gradually altering our customs and restricting the liberty of law-abiding citizens.

Since the street and those who labour in it are portrayed as inherently dangerous and beyond reform, it is no surprise that the documents frame the goal of punishment as the incapacitation of 'bad' defendants rather than the treatment of 'mad' ones. M's sentence was clear on that point: *The removal of the adolescent from circulation is crucial.* B's sentence noted the role of drug trafficking in fueling crime to argue for incapacitation: *It is clear that drug trafficking […] propels many other crimes, like theft and robbery, which is another reason for the defendant to be incarcerated, protecting the public order.* Likewise, in E.'s sentence: *Segregation aims at neutralizing the delinquent will of the defendant and ensuring a strong state response to the danger and audacity demonstrated by the defendant.* The need to demonstrate the state's will to punish is also mentioned in F.B.'s sentence: *The justice system's credibility will depend on the speed and strength of the punishment […] incarceration is necessary to guarantee public order.*

In sum, in cases set in the street, defendants are portrayed as powerful and cunning players in criminalized organizations, standing on equal ground with adult men. Their crimes are framed in a wider context of drug trafficking expansion, which paints the street as inherently violent and girls' actions as the result of rational choices made to acquire easy money. Girls' personalities, especially their intelligence and courage, are mobilized to dismiss claims that they were coerced or subjected to any form of gendered vulnerability that might absolve them. In the next subsection, I argue that this framing invisibilizes the gendered violence girls are exposed to in the street and legitimizes penal harm against them.

4.7.3. The Unsaid of Women's Penality: Obscuring Gender Vulnerability

Judicial narratives of girls' violence 'in the home' and 'in the street' stand in sharp contrast to one another. Still, they share one key feature: both are plots in which defendants are not subjected to gendered violence and precarity. To establish defendants' full autonomy and culpability, the social forces that structure their lives go *unsaid* (Presser 2022). This obfuscation becomes more evident when I analyze these judicial narratives vis-à-vis interviewees' biographical narratives.

Table 7 compares the key plot elements of both sets of narratives. In judicial documents, girls' experiences in the home (i.e., the burden of care, economic precarity, victimization to family and sexual violence) and their reasons to 'go to the street' disappear. What remains visible is the nature of violence in different spaces and the connection between 'the street' and economic pursuits.

Table 7. Key plot elements in interviewed girls and judicial documents' narratives

Key elements in interviewed girls' narratives		
Home	**Crisis**	**Street**
Caretaking responsibilities	Economic need	Freedom to pursue economic opportunities
Violence against women and children	Sexual, family and state violence	Power to escape and avenge gendered violence
Violence is exceptional, incomprehensible, and unjust		Violence is natural, rationalized, and practical
Key elements in judicial documents' narratives		
Home	**Crisis**	**Street**
Caretaking responsibilities	Economic need	Freedom to pursue economic opportunities
Violence against women and children	Sexual, family and state violence	Power to escape and avenge gendered violence
Violence is exceptional, incomprehensible, and unjust		Violence is natural, rationalized, and practical

A methodological caveat is necessary here. By comparing judicial narratives with interviewees' stories, I do not mean to suggest that the experiences of defendants and interviewees are interchangeable, nor that I know the 'truth' of defendants' experiences. I intend to search for the unsaid (Presser 2022) to investigate how gendered vulnerability comes to be silenced in narratives of violence. To reflect on what is hidden from one plot, I consider what is visible in

another. As Presser posits, to consider the unsaid requires “a bold attitude toward presences and absences” (2022: x). Interviewees’ tales invite us to imagine what is missing from judicial documents’ narratives.

The judicial documents’ plot structure lacks a central element of girls’ narratives: the crisis, that is, the contextualization and explanation of why girls resort to criminalized actions. Recall that E.’s sentence stated: *The youth might proceed in her escalating delinquent path in search of easy profits to tend to her needs.* While judicial documents do not indicate what these needs might be, interviewees’ narratives do. These unsaid needs could be the fulfilment of caretaking responsibilities, protection against intimate partner violence, or escaping sexual and family violence. In silencing defendants’ gendered needs, judicial narratives invisibilize violence against women and the feminization of poverty, thus legitimating penal harm (Presser 2022).

If defendants’ needs go unsaid in judicial documents, still they haunt them, bleeding through the cracks of legal language. Take the criminal complaint against F., 17, accused of stealing from a supermarket. It provides a list of the stolen products: *One package of colouring markers with seven units, one package of coloured pencils with seven units, one package of coloured pencils with eleven units, one package of sliced salami, two packages of orange cake, two packages of mozzarella cheese, all property of Supermarket X.* One is left to imagine the burdens that led a young woman to steal school supplies and food.

But Ceres might give us an idea. When interviewed, she was serving a sentence for stealing cleaning products from a supermarket to aid her sister in raising her niece. Both under 15, the sisters ran away from home to escape their stepfather's abuse and raised the baby by themselves, living alone in a shack. Ceres decided to engage in criminalized acts out of desperation: "Who was I gonna ask for help? We were going to starve." In silencing the burden of care that befalls young women, judicial narratives invisibilize the feminized economic precarity that structures their lives.

Judicial documents are also silent about defendants’ vulnerability to sexual and family violence, another major crisis in girls’ narratives. Given how prominently gendered violence in the home figures in interviewees’ stories, it is telling that no judicial case out of 40 speaks of it. But there are, again, hauntings. P., 14, accused of drug trafficking, had run away from home to live with her friend, an alleged drug trafficker. Her sentence briefly noted: *The mother explained that the*

adolescent does not get along with her husband. Her husband is not the father of the adolescent. Not another sentence is spared on the subject. Recall also A., 15, accused of collaborating with an adult man in a robbery murder *"with shared wills and joint efforts."* That this adult man was her stepfather is a minor detail. One wonders the degree to which A. could be said to freely "share the will" of an armed adult man who lived in her house with her mother and siblings. In these passages, one hears echoes of Fernanda's story, who sought revenge against her older cousin, or Olivia's, who ran away from home to escape her brother's abuse.

Some forms of gendered violence do not just haunt these narratives, leaving in blanks for the imagination to fill. They are explicitly stated but still go unremarked. Recall J., 17, accused of conspiring to have her ex-partner, an adult man, killed by two of her friends. According to the proceedings, J. went to the ex-partner's house to reclaim the custody of their child, who lived with him. In J.'s testimony, she describes suffering intimate partner violence: *He said, "let's get back together," then he wanted to lock me up in the house, then he said, "I'll kill now, since you don't want to be with me."* The testimony by the other men involved in the murder also stated: *The adolescent was being threatened by the victim and was afraid of him since the victim had already been aggressive towards her.* These testimonies were mobilized to argue that J. *"was aware of the possibility"* that going to her ex-partner's house could lead to a lethal altercation and was, therefore, guilty of coordinating the murder. J.'s experiences of being threatened and abused were described as *"exalted emotions"* within the relationship. In other to legitimate penal harm against women resisting intimate partner violence, the structural character of gendered violence is erased.

Not only the gendered violence of the home goes unsaid in judicial documents. Girls' vulnerability to violence in the street also goes unremarked. There is a narrative cognitive dissonance here, given the effort put into portraying the street as dangerous. Recall the cases of B. and E., accused of transporting drugs by order of drug traffickers. Both sentences suggest they could have checked the bags and decided not to carry them had they noticed the drugs. The sentences also stated how much each bag was worth: E. was allegedly carrying between R$50,000-100,000 worth of cocaine; B., R$800,000.[28] For all judicial narratives of how vicious

[28] In July 2024, this amounts to approximately US$9,000-18,000 and US$ 140,000.

criminalized drug organizations can be and how willing to kill for profit, not a thought is spared about what could happen to E. and B. had they abandoned their mission midway.

Similarly, recall P.B., 17, who served as bait for the homicide of a man coordinated by a (adult, male) drug trafficker. Her defence claimed coercion, given the power of the crime's coordinator. The judge refuted the claim, saying P.B. testified she still "*greets the drug trafficker in the street*" and thus did not fear him. Like in B.'s and E.'s sentences, it was suggested that P.B. could have done something to prevent the murder. However, tales from interviewees' narratives caution us about what happens to snitches. As Lucia somberly put it, they "know what will happen" to them. One interviewee was "marked to die" for merely witnessing an execution by accident. Giulia took a shark loan from the local drug organization and was "greeted" every day by the men who threatened her life. What fate would await B., E., or P.B. if they dared to fail?

It is not the case that prosecutors and judges are not willing to imagine, to expand on the information available in the proceedings. Judicial narratives are, in good part, exercises in imagination. But if these narratives are willing to extrapolate defendants' power (e.g., assuming that teenage girls who work as mules or sexualized baits are powerful drug traffickers), they are less inclined to imagine their vulnerability (e.g., assuming that they could be harmed if fell short of their mission).

One final court case illustrates the depth of this refusal. Y., 16, was accused of drug trafficking. According to the proceedings, she was tailed by police officers and stopped in the street. What followed is unsaid. We know only the outcome: *The police officers found 15 packages of cocaine inside the vagina of the defendant.* The defence argued that conducting a so-called 'intimate search' of a 16-year-old girl in the middle of a street was illegal. In the sentence, the judge refuted this claim: *In truth, it is not sufficiently clear how the intimate search was conducted. But there is nothing in the proceedings stating that it was conducted irregularly.* The judge refused to imagine the act of state-sexual terror that might have happened to Y.

But then, who could imagine such a thing.

The discussion in this section is not an effort to determine what judicial documents *should* say nor to establish the *actual truth* of defendants' lives. Rather, it is a theoretical argument about what judicial narratives *do* when they say and unsay things. I argue that judicial narratives, while

simultaneously portraying the street as always-already dangerous, invisibilize defendants' vulnerability to state and drug-market-related violence. This is true even among defendants arrested in positions known to be gendered and particularly vulnerable, such as mules and sexualized baits. In these narratives, young women are agents of danger but never prey to it. I argue this silencing (i) reproduces social understandings of the street as *genderless*, (ii) invisibilizes women's vulnerability to violence by criminal organizations and state forces and, consequently, (iii) legitimates the penal harm carried out against women and girls by the transnational War on Drugs.

4.8. Discussion: Gendered Symbolic Violence Across the Home and the Street

In this paper, I argue that an analysis of narratives about violence constructed by different social actors (here, *criminalizing* legal actors and *criminalized* girls) can illuminate the role of gendered symbolic systems in structuring representations of violence. In that, I follow Bourdieu's argument that "narratives about the most personal difficulties, the apparently mostly strictly subjective tensions and contradictions, articulate the deepest structures of the social world and their contradictions" (Bourdieu 1999: 511). Whereas studies have shown how gender roles attributed to victims and perpetrators define narratives of gendered violence, I emphasize how representations of gender and their relation to the urban and private space also profoundly impact how violent dynamics are perceived and categorized (Otto, Pamplona, Schwartzman, n.d.).

While the symbolic boundary between the home and the street prescribes a division of reproductive labour, this separation has racial and class consequences. First, as long argued by intersectional feminists (Crenshaw 1991, Collins 1998), the imaginary victim of private violence is a white middle-class woman. The imaginary victim of public violence in Brazil is a "bandido," an imaginary Black man who is involved in crime and resides in a *favela*. The gendered aspects of "street" violence against Black working-class women, who are caught between these two frames, are obscured. Similar to what Richie (2012) has noted in relation to Black women in the United States, Brazilian women who inhabit impoverished, racialized, and criminalized spaces experience a "violence matrix" where multiple forms of violence (intimate, household, community, and state) overlap (Richie 2012, Smith 2016). The ideological force of the public/private divide obscures this matrix in narratives of violence in Brazil.

In sum, I found that the home/street divide operates as a gendered and racialized symbolic structure that outlines the meanings and causes attributed to violence in different social spaces Otto, Pamplona, Schwartzman, n.d.). In both accounts analyzed, a common narrative about place, violence, and gender is reproduced: the *street* as the space of genderless, market-related, and naturalized violence, and the *home* as the place of gendered, emotional and exceptional violence. In our empirical case, these representations both allow and constrain actors to narrate violence as caused by emotions and pathologies (in judicial documents) and domestic hierarchies (in girls' narratives) *or* by the rational and egalitarian logic of drug markets (in both accounts).

Therefore, the home/street divide is a symbolic system that frames i) the violence of the home as the result of individual emotional reactions that can be resisted and reformed and ii) the violence of the street, i.e. the space of criminalized organizations, as the result of rational choices that are inherent to this space and, thus, inevitable. As a form of symbolic violence, these framings are incorporated and reproduced both by legal actors and criminalized young women, showcasing how this symbolic system spans across actors and institutions. This symbolic violence works both to obscure and legitimate forms of state and interpersonal violence against women.

By construing domestic violence as individual acts caused by uncontrollable emotion, both sets of narratives invisibilize the structural character of gendered violence (Bourdieu 2001; Connell 2014; Risman 2004), failing "to account for the macrostructures that connect and constitute the experiences of women across time and space" (Parreñas and Hwang 2023: 940). In judicial documents, this silencing works to establish women's guilt and legitimize penal harm against them. For criminalized girls, it obscures the "matrix of violence" (Richie 2012) that connects their gendered victimization to other forms of structural violence (e.g., economic precarity and racialization), leaving them to blame themselves and their families for their predicaments and constraining their political imagination. In so doing, this paper answers the call of feminist sociologists to return to a conceptualization of gender as structure (Risman 2004; Parreñas and Hwang 2023) after decades of an overreliance on micro-level interactional approaches to understanding the relationship between gender, violence, and criminalization (see Miller and Carbone-Lopez 2015 for a critique of this approach in feminist criminology). I suggest that the concept of *gendered symbolic systems* and a focus on the *unsaid* can contribute to this analytical project.

In the introduction of this paper, I asked why gendered vulnerability goes unsaid in narratives of drug-trafficking-related violence (Otto, Pamplona, Schwartzman, n.d.). We believe the primary answer lies in the symbolic framing of the street found in both sets of narratives. First, representations of the street as a ruthless and hyper-rational marketplace invisibilize the structural character of urban marginality in Brazil. Black and white interviewees and defendants experience what Vargas (2018) described as "the collateral effects of a transhistorical, society-sanctioned, institutionalized logic of antiblackness" (Vargas 2018: 4). Because negative hegemonic representations link poor areas to Blackness and crime (Nascimento 1978; Vargas 2018), these spaces are the object of state violence in the form of policing and penality or state neglect in the form of economic precarity and 'trafficking wars.' In this context, judicial discourses about "rational choices" legitimize the penal harm carried out by the transnational War on Drugs.

In both sets of narratives, the street is a "racialized zone of non-being" (Alves 2018: 8) whose inhabitants' deaths "do not unleash an ethical crisis because the persons' bodies and the territories they inhabit always-already signify violence" (Ferreira da Silva 2009: 213). This framing also construes the street as a genderless space, invisibilizing women's vulnerability to violence by criminalized organizations and state forces. In judicial narratives, it works to responsibilize women and girls for their criminalized actions and legitimate their incapacitation since the violence of the street cannot be reformed. More striking, however, is the incorporation and reproduction of this logic by the criminalized girls themselves. In framing the violence they suffer and perpetrate in the street as a natural occurrence caused by the local community (the bad friends and evil neighbours who lead them astray), they reproduce the symbolic violence that makes "the *favelado* a killable object" (Alves 2018: 4). As such, this paper contributes to scholarship on how representations of geographic locations impact understandings of violence (Griffith 2013; Vargas and Alves 2010; Schwartzman 2019) and follows Wacquant's call (2023) for expanding the empirical documentation of *territorial stigma* across different actors and institutions.

This paper contributes to narrative criminology by suggesting a more thorough focus on social structure via Bourdieu's *symbolic system* and *symbolic violence* and Presser's *unsaid*. As Smith noted, too often, narrative analysis becomes "an invitation for the exploration of the particular," foregoing "the structural properties of narrative – the robust cultural architectures that […]

impose upon event understandings" (2005: 19). This is particularly concerning to narrative *criminology*, as the very act of silencing about the social structures that shape "crime" legitimates penal harm (Presser 2022). This paper contributes to this endeavour by analyzing and comparing two sets of narratives by storytellers who are expected to be on opposing sides of struggles over crime and justice, i.e., the criminalized and the criminalizers. Their alikeness is a testament to the ideological power of symbolic systems; their differences illustrate how the *unsaid* can legitimate harm. In so doing, this paper suggests an analytical approach to answer Maruna and Liem's call for a narrative criminology of differences and generalities in "story patterns of different groups" (2023: 140).

Finally, this paper's findings contribute to research on gender and violence that aims to understand "how domination and symbolic violence are reproduced in everyday interactions, social practices, and institutional processes" (Thapar-Björkert, Samelius and Shanghera 2016: 145). The home/street divide is but one of the symbolic systems that regulate understandings of gender and violence, albeit the central one to this study's data and context. Future research ought to investigate what other symbolic systems shape the gendering and *de*gendering of stories of violence. In addition, future studies could investigate under which conditions *symbolic revolutions* (Bourdieu 1991) are able to transform gendered symbolic systems and, consequently, framings of violence. The recognition by the interviewed girls of the unacceptability and illegitimacy of domestic violence is the fruit of one of such revolutions, and its importance cannot be understated. On the other hand, feminist scholarship ought not to lose sight of the enduring character of symbolic violence, which clouds *narrative spaces of possibilities* for reflection and revolt.

5. Conclusion

One final story illuminates the overall argument I have attempted to make in this dissertation. Recall Lu, who cared for her siblings at home and in the shelter system. Her story is an example of (i) how gendered, state and community violence intersect with economic precarity in the lives of girls at the peripheries of capitalism and (ii) how these struggles lead them to criminalized survival strategies that ultimately deepen their marginalization, further exposing them to violence.

Lu lived with her siblings and mother, who worked informally as a cleaner, in a *vila* in Porto Alegre. The family's financial struggles were compounded by domestic violence. Lu's father, unemployed and suffering from drug addiction, battered her mother and the children. Lu was despondent as she described terrorizing violence: "When we were sleeping, he would set fire under our bed. When it was winter, he would splash cold water in our beds." When Lu was ten years old, her school denounced the family to Child Protection Services and the siblings were sent to a shelter. Having lost custody of their children, Lu's mother "got depressed and stopped working," sinking deeper into economic precarity.

Lu and her siblings experienced violence and mistreatment in the shelter system and would often "run away to the streets." In one of those times, she suffered through an extremely traumatic ordeal: Lu and her younger sister were kidnapped and sexually abused. Lu did not explicitly associate the violence she suffered at home, at the hands of the state, and in the street as a motive for engaging with criminalized organizations. However, after recounting these multiple violent experiences, she said: "Then, I started doing the wrong things, robbing, carrying a gun."

In Lu's narrative, the structural violence of economic precarity – manifested through her mother's informal labour and her father's unemployment and drug addiction – intensifies the domestic abuse faced by her mother and siblings. This domestic violence propels Lu into contact with state violence within the shelter system, as well as exposure to sexual violence in the streets. Ultimately, Lu turns to criminalized violence for survival, committing armed robberies for the local faction. Through her engagement in this criminalized field, she acquires economic and violent capital – fast money and a gun always in reach. However, this entanglement with criminalized violence quickly came back to haunt Lu and her family: they were expelled from

their neighbourhood under death threats due to her involvement in robberies and homicides. “My mom lost everything, again, because of me,” she lamented.

Lu’s suffering is not only material but also subjective. Incarcerated for killing her cousin when he tried to stab her, Lu could forgive herself. She believed her past actions – the robberies and trafficking – were to blame for her predicament, as they caused her to have a gun in hand at the time of the attack. This very gun, of course, might have saved her life. But Lu is one of those girls whose extreme vulnerability is not enough cause for redemption. In her heart and in the eyes of the state, which sentenced her for homicide, self-defence is an insufficient excuse. Lu, like many other girls, is guilty of surviving.

Lu's story, like the other narratives in this study, exemplifies Bourdieu's concept of *the law of conservation of violence:* "All violence is paid for… the structural violence exerted by the financial markets, in the form of layoffs, loss of security, is matched sooner or later in the form […] crime and delinquency, […] a whole host of minor and major everyday acts of violence” (Bourdieu 1998: 40). In other words, these stories reveal how the structural violence of economic precarity and gender domination intersect with the dynamics of illegal drug economies to (re)produce patterns of interpersonal and state violence at the peripheries of capitalism.

5.1. Contributions

In this dissertation, I strove to construct a nuanced picture of how gender domination, economic precarity, state violence, and illicit drug markets meet and entangle in the lives of girls working at the bottom of the cocaine economy in the deep south of South America. In so doing, I hope to contribute to theoretical debates about the social conditions that enabled both the mass incarceration of women and girls and the rise of criminalized violence in the global peripheries of capitalism since the 1990s.

Across the three papers, I have argued for the need to theorize the embeddedness of gendered domination, economic precarity, and the consequences of the War on Drugs (i.e., the emergence of potentially violent and profitable markets and their repression) in the Global South. In the following paragraphs, I highlight my key contributions to feminist criminology; neoliberalism, criminalization, and violence; and narrative criminology.

5.1.1. Feminist Criminology: Rewriting the Space of Possibilities

First, this project contributes to feminist criminology by addressing the persistent tension between agency and structure in the field (Anderson and Kavanaugh 2017; Maher and Hudson 2007; De Coster and Heimer 2017). Micro-level studies analyze how women perform gender in everyday interactions but, in so doing, risk overemphasizing strategic behaviour, thereby neglecting broader systems of gendered domination. Structural approaches concentrate on women's victimization but struggle to explain contexts where women take on leadership roles or act creatively – that is, outside the bounds of traditional gendered norms – in criminalized environments. I contribute to this theoretical debate by analyzing the experiences of girls who are simultaneously victimized by gendered, state, and community violence *and* take up violent roles in criminalized settings, such as managing finances and killing detractors.

Across the three papers, I propose that social contexts in which economic precarity and state, gendered, and community violence are ever-present reconfigure gendered norms and expectations, offering women and girls a wider "space of possibilities" to engage in criminalized violence. This reconfiguration, however, is constrained within the bounds of broader gendered and economic structures, such as women's *duty to care for others***.** While feminist criminologists have long found *care* to be a framework through which women make sense of criminalization (Fleetwood 2016; Miller et al. 2015), my findings reveal the *flexibility of the gendered imposition of care*, which can be extended to make sense of girls' uses of lethal violence and their ascension to the highest ranks of criminalized organizations. Paper 1, for example, argued that girls could morally make sense of their uses of lethal violence (and be free of the gendered guilt of being a woman who killed) in cases in which they were protecting loved ones. Paper 2 showcases how the criminalized strategies available to girls in drug markets are themselves gendered, as they become useful to their factions by mobilizing skills learned in their caretaking roles, such as discipline and conflict resolution. While this encounter between women's gendered competencies and drug markets' business needs has been documented in the literature (Anderson 2005, 2008; Denton and O'Malley 1999; Grundetjern 2015), my findings reveal a more gender-integrated drug market (as Papers 2 and 3 showcase), in which girls' economic functions to temporarily trump the "institutional sexism" of organized crime (Bourgois 2003; Grundetjern 2023; Steffensmeier 1983).

However, in focusing on the gender egalitarianism that girls claim to find in drug markets and their reported sense of freedom and power therein, I risk falling into the voluntaristic trap of overstating women's power to change their structural circumstances (against which Maher and Hudson 2007 and Miller and Carbone-Lopez 2015 warn us). I thus propose that women's criminalized strategies must be analyzed in tandem with their experiences of violent victimization, economic dispossession, and criminalization – both the previous experiences that led them to engage in criminalized strategies and the consequential fallout of these strategies.

In conclusion, with this dissertation, I hope to contribute to the literature on gender, crime, and violence by proposing that women's criminalization should be analyzed as a cyclical process through which structural violence at the macro level (e.g., economic precarity and gendered domination) transmutes into criminalized violence at the meso and micro level (e.g., drug market-related homicides), fueling state violence (e.g., incarceration) and further reproducing structural violence.

5.1.2. Neoliberalism, Crime, and Violence: Collective Survival, Individual Guilt

In this study, I contribute to debates about the relationship between neoliberalism and rising criminalized violence (Wacquant, 2009; Currie, 1997; Hall, 2012). As a transnational political project, neoliberalism has material and symbolic effects. Materially, it entails economic deregulation, the erosion of public goods, the retraction of social security nets, and the weakening of labour movements while expanding penal systems across the Global North and South (Harvey 2005; Wacquant 2023). Symbolically, it is held together by narratives of "technical efficiency, fiscal integrity, and individual responsibility" (Wacquant, 2023: xi). Critical criminologists have highlighted how these transformations erode social solidarity and foster alternative markets where individuals pursue status and material gain, often through violence. Masculinity is central to these analyses, which argue that deindustrialization compels young men to seek power in violent subcultures (Bourgois 2003; Hall 2012; Young 1999).

However, much of this literature overlooks women's experiences within similar contexts, failing to account for the distinct ways women engage with criminalization (Wacquant 2023). In this dissertation, I address these gaps by examining how gendered domination intersects with economic precarity to shape women's participation in criminalized drug markets. First, my

findings reveal that girls' motivations to enter hyper-violent criminalized networks often stem from caretaking responsibilities rather than individualistic desires. This complicates prevailing arguments that neoliberal crime is motivated by personal consumption or hedonism (Hall 2012). Instead, I argue that girls' criminalized activities are better understood as collective survival strategies for families, aligning with Sassen's (2000, 2001) argument that global neoliberalism displaces social welfare responsibilities onto women in the global periphery.

Second, I argue that material and symbolic dimensions of illicit drug markets reproduce neoliberal values such as competitiveness, self-interest, and entrepreneurialism (Ayres and Treadwell 2023). However, this reproduction is filtered through gendered logics. Materially, drug markets offer significant economic opportunities to a population that lacks access to stable employment and livable wages. Symbolically, these markets require actors to adopt neoliberal principles of risk management and market rationality. Girls' gendered dispositions, developed through years of caregiving and violent conflict resolution at home, are repurposed, allowing them to manage finances and mediate disputes to the benefit of their businesses. However, this rationality also constrains them, as the language of market logic limits girls' expressions of empathy and care only to contexts where de-escalating violence serves economic goals.

Third, I argue that both criminalized girls and criminalizing actors share the symbolic framing of illicit drug markets as a ruthless but egalitarian marketplace where self-interested and risk-taking entrepreneurs engage in violence for 'easy profit.' This framing, through which drug markets are understood as the quintessential "neoliberal zone" where the free market reigns (Alves 2018), invisibilizes women’s gendered vulnerability and the collective nature of their survival strategies, thus legitimating their exposure to state violence in the form of policing and incarceration (Presser 2022).

In conclusion, with this dissertation, I contribute to the literature on neoliberalism, criminalized violence, and criminalization by (i) integrating a gendered perspective that emphasizes collective survival, not individual gains, at the core of neoliberal criminalized violence, (ii) analyzing how the material and symbolic dimensions of transnational drug markets shape the economic adaptative strategies of people living in the peripheries of capitalism, and (iii) considering how the framing of illicit economies as hyper-rational free markets legitimates the penal harm carried out by the War on Drugs.

5.1.3. Towards a Narrative Criminology of Symbolic Violence

> *Perhaps the most nefarious political outcome of the history of economic unequal development has been the symbolic violence effects of the globalized narcotics economy that filled the void of the dysfunctional legal economy. Overwhelmed by a genuine fear of physical insecurity and economic scarcity, both the rich and the poor find themselves blaming their local cultures, their neighbours, their politicians, and themselves for the proliferation of intimate cruelties and corruption that are, in fact, produced structurally by their nation's location in the northward flow of narcotics (Bourgois 2015: 309).*

Fifteen years ago, narrative criminology emerged as a research agenda within critical and cultural criminology based on the premise that stories motivate and legitimize harm (Fleetwood et al. 2019; Presser 2009; Presser and Sandberg 2015). More recently, cautioning against a voluntaristic approach to storytelling-as-agency, Bourdieusian narrative criminologists have argued that individuals' narratives are rooted in social structures through their habitus and are (re)produced via the specific logics of the criminalized fields in which they operate (Sandberg and Fleetwood 2017). However, I have argued in this dissertation that even these studies often emphasize the particularities of localized accounts over their structural components.

Across this dissertation, I propose a structural-constructivist approach to narrative criminology that analyzes narratives to apprehend the material dimensions of criminalized individuals' lives (e.g., experiences of victimization) in tandem with their subjective assessment of said experiences.

As such, I propose that narrative criminology incorporates not only Bourdieu's concepts of *habitus* and *field* but also those of *symbolic systems* and, most importantly, *symbolic violence*. The latter designates the process through which systems of domination gain legitimacy "by concealing the power relations which are at the basis of its force" (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990). Indeed, I argue (in consonance with other scholars, see Burawoy 2019) that *symbolic violence* is the quintessential Bourdieusian concept, the analytical tool that allows uncovering the reproduction of social domination.

I propose that *symbolic violence* is particularly important for narrative criminology. This is especially true if one follows Presser's most recent call to consider "how whole lives and histories of (individual and groups) are summoned in claims about the enactments of the (ir)responsible self" (2022: 26). Following her argument, I argue that critical narrative criminologists ought to ask: how does one become worthy of redemption or punishment, to themselves and to the state? How do gendered, racialized, and economic structures shape designations of guilt and absolution? And finally, how do these designations legitimate state and interpersonal violence? Here, symbolic violence illuminates what is said and what is *unsaid* (Presser 2022) and is thus concealed in narratives of crime and violence.

In this study, I showed how gendered and racialized narratives that frame subproletarian people and spaces as "always-already violent" (Ferreira da Silva 2014: 213) legitimate penal harm against these communities by invisibilizing their vulnerability, exploitation, and dispossession. Additionally, I demonstrated that girls often internalized and reproduced the criminalizing stigma imposed on their communities and themselves, sometimes having no language to account for how wider social forces have shaped their victimization and criminalization. This internalization is another example of *symbolic violence*, which legitimates both state violence against girls and their own feelings of guilt and shame. Symbolic violence haunts the corners of Lu's room in the form of her cousin's ghost.

A final caveat is necessary here. My call for a focus on symbolic violence is not a suggestion to dismiss criminalized people's understandings of their situation simply as products of alienation or false consciousness. The criminalized girls interviewed in this study were acutely aware of the role of gendered vulnerability, state violence, and economic precarity in their lives. However, throughout this dissertation, I have argued that economic, racialized, and gendered structures deeply constrain their *narrative space of possibilities* for reflection and revolt. By focusing on symbolic violence, its workings (the concealment of domination via individual responsibilization) and its effects (the legitimation of domination), narrative criminologists can take up a role in the co-creation of a new narrative of (ir)responsibilization: one that places the responsibility for the disproportional suffering of precarious youth not on individuals and communities, but on global capitalism and the transnational War on Drugs.

5.2. Limitations and Future Research

This study has limitations, most of which stem from the relative homogeneity of the data analyzed.

First, the interview data is homogeneous in terms of participants' criminal justice experiences. The interview sample is composed of girls who had been arrested for offences considered serious and violent, such as homicide and armed robbery. A minority of interviewees had been criminalized for minor acts such as theft or fraud. On the one hand, this sample provides insight into the lives and perspectives of girls who are deeply embedded in criminalized settings, such as violent drug markets. On the other hand, it excludes the broader spectrum of experiences of girls living in similar social environments but who have evaded formal systems of social control or have managed to avoid entanglements with criminalized organizations altogether. Future studies could investigate the experiences of girls in similar settings who have not been officially criminalized and contrast them with those of criminalized girls. Analysis of young women's public social media posts could also provide insightful access to their narrative framings of criminalization and community violence. Finally, ethnographic research in schools or community centres (in the tradition of Bettie 2003 and, more recently, Ray 2017) might uncover the commonalities and differences in the survival strategies employed by girls who avoid criminalization and engagement with illicit economies and girls like the ones represented by this sample.

Second, and relatedly, all narratives collected have been produced in similar institutionalized settings. These narratives are shaped by *responsibilization discourses*, through which girls frame their actions in ways that align with institutional expectations of remorse (O'Malley 1996; Lynch 2000; McCorkel 2013). Their attempts to convey a morally redeemed and rehabilitated self can illuminate the gendered constraints imposed on criminalized girls, as discussed in Paper 1, and the internalization of territorial stigma, as discussed in Paper 3. However, these institutionalized narratives might obscure girls' expressions of dissent or revolt. Future research could observe the interplay between institutional narratives, such as written reports and staff and girls' interactions during meetings (similarly to McCorkel 2013 and McKim 2017), and girls' self-conceptions throughout their incarceration. Additionally, ethnographic accounts outside carceral institutions

could illuminate how girls narrate their experiences to peers, which could reveal alternative understandings of their agency and resistance to criminalization.

Third, the interview and judicial documents samples are homogeneous regarding gender. This is, of course, a methodological and theoretical choice already justified in the introduction of this dissertation – although I do not believe one *needs* a justification to study women. That being said, a comparison between the narratives of criminalized young men and women in similar positions and environments might illuminate how gendered pathways for survival are produced within criminalized settings. While studies on criminalized violence and marginalization often include some women's perspectives (Bourgois 2003; Contreras 2013; Levenson-Estrada 2013), their samples are overwhelmingly composed of men, and their interactions and interviews with men are often longer and more nuanced. As such, they struggle to establish comparisons between gendered experiences. Future studies could investigate how experiences such as economic precarity and family violence are differently framed in criminalized men's and women's narratives.

Fourth, the interviews and judicial documents analyzed here are set in the context of relatively homogenous drug market dynamics in Rio Grande do Sul. This study focuses on a specific network of drug markets characterized by high levels of violence and instability. While homicidal violence peaked between 2016-2017 and subsequently declined, lower but still significant levels of violence have spread across smaller cities in the region. The violent logics of these local drug markets – such as the killing of debtors and informants, as well as the occasional invasion and takeover of territories – remain consistent across the state. Yet, volatility and widespread community violence are not innate characteristics of drug markets.

A counterexample within Brazil could provide an insightful comparison: the rise of the PCC (*Primeiro Comando da Capital*, “First Command of the Capital”) and the subsequent decrease in homicidal violence in the state of São Paulo. Emerging in the early 2000s, PCC began as a prisoners’ rights movement and evolved into what is considered the largest and most powerful faction in Brazil. PCC is known for its monopoly over São Paulo’s drug market and its unique organizational structure, which is depersonalized and diffused. Rules are created through deliberative councils within prisons and disseminated across communities under PCC rule. Among these rules is the prohibition of unjustified violence, including robbery murders and

violence against women. The enforcement of this "honours code" has been associated with a significant decrease in homicides in São Paulo (Biondi 2016; Feltran 2020). A comparative analysis of women's roles in different drug markets could challenge assumptions that violence is an inherent feature of drug economies. Further, a systematic comparison of organizational dynamics and networks, considering events such as the rise and fall of faction wars (in the tradition of Smith 2019), could reveal how organizational differences shape women's participation, leadership, and victimization across diverse criminalized contexts.

Finally, this study focuses on a contemporary period marked by heightened volatility in Brazil's drug markets and a penal state that harshly punishes women for their roles in illicit economies. A broader historical perspective, extending back to the early cocaine boom of the 1980s and its subsequent criminalization throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, could illuminate how the criminalization of women and their survival strategies within illicit economies have evolved across three generations of urban subproletarian families. Future research could expand the scope of this study by analyzing: (i) narratives from multiple generations of criminalized women and community members affected by the War on Drugs; (ii) interviews with legal actors who have advocated for and against increased punishment for drug offences since the 1990s; (iii) legislative hearings surrounding legal changes; (iv) court files from the 1980s through the 2020s; and (v) media coverage of drug market violence. In the tradition of Levenson-Estrada's historical account of the Mara gangs in Guatemala (2003), future studies with a broader temporal scope could better uncover the impact of the legacy of the transatlantic slave trade, transnational neoliberal policies, and the War on Drugs, as well as localized social and legal transformations, on the criminalization of women across the Americas.

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