Traquetos: Colombians involved in the cocaine business in the Netherlands
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Chapter VII
Bad Reputations
Cocaine, Prostitution and Illegal Immigrants

"In general, the tendency for a stigma to spread from the stigmatised individual to his close connections provides a reason why such relations tend either to be avoided or to be terminated, where existing."

E. Goffman, *Stigma*

"I tell people I’m Spanish."

German

During my fieldwork in the Netherlands, I came across many settings in which I could find both Colombian cocaine dealers and prostitutes. In some cases, they were friends or acquaintances. In others, they happened to know the same people or use the same services. They met on the street, at church, telephone kiosks or salsa bars. They even seemed to help each other. These clues could have led one to consider these two heavily stigmatised groups of Colombian migrants as a unified ethnic 'underground pool'. Wilma, working for the Amsterdam police, had few doubts:

"It’s logical that prostitutes and dealers are connected. It is a simple, evident matter."

The fact that some of these people were illegal immigrants increased the temptation of blending all ‘illegalities’ (Foucault 1979: 257) together under the banner of Colombian vice. However, a closer examination revealed a complex, contradictory and often limited interconnection between all these Colombians with bad reputation.

This chapter will analyse the relation and possible overlap of Colombian cocaine dealers with other two groups of Colombian migrants: prostitutes and illegal residents living and working in the areas of Amsterdam, The Hague and Rotterdam. By focusing on their interaction and their views about the other groups, I will discuss their chances of getting involved with, and their reasons for staying away from cocaine dealers.

7.1. Colombian prostitutes and cocaine

7.1.1. The Colombian prostitution circuit

By the end of the 1990s, between 2,000 and 5,000 Colombian women were working as prostitutes in the Netherlands.¹ They constitute not only a large group within the general Colombian community (I estimate between 15% and 30%),² but also, along with Dominican women, the largest group amongst Latin American prostitutes. Smaller numbers from Brazil, Ecuador - especially transsexuals and transvestites - Peru, Argentina and Mexico account for the rest. They concentrate in urban areas of *Zuid Holland* (The Hague, Rotterdam), *Noord* ¹ It is difficult to estimate their actual number since increasing repression against illegal prostitutes have forced them to hide or to move around in the Netherlands and Europe. Most informants in Latino institutions (churches and social services) talked about 2,000 or 3,000, while Polanfa and Janssen (1998: 20) put it up to 5,000, overstating also the percentages of women being trafficked.

² See chapter IV.
Holland (Amsterdam, Alkmaar, Haarlem) and Noord Brabant (Eindhoven), but they are also to be found in Nijmegen, Arnhem, Utrecht and even in smaller towns. Depending on the location, the local policies towards prostitution and their legal status as foreigners, they work in sex-clubs and brothels (Rotterdam and The Hague), windows\(^3\) (red-light districts in Amsterdam and The Hague), private and farm-houses (small municipalities and rural areas) and on the streets (tippel- or tolerance-zones in Amsterdam and Rotterdam).

The first wave of women arrived in the Netherlands during the 1970s and early 1980s, following a first influx of women from South-east Asia. Since both groups were recruited by local proprietors keen to enlarge their sex establishments, many of those women arrived through intermediaries who arranged the trip. Other Colombian women, as most of Dominican women at that time, arrived via Panama or the Netherlands Antilles, where they were already working. Many married a Dutch man to make the move, obtaining the Dutch nationality fairly quickly. In general terms, this first generation tended to work in hotels, clubs and brothels under the strict supervision of pimps or sex entrepreneurs, often suffering exploitative conditions. They gradually became more experienced and independent, some eventually moving out from clubs to the windows of, for example, the Poeldijksestraat and the Doubletstraat in The Hague. In contrast with their Dominican colleagues and the women who later arrived from Africa (Ghana and Nigeria) and East Europe (Poland, Russia, Ukraine and the Czech Republic), this first generation of Colombian prostitutes usually managed to get rid of pimps and build a reputation of independent workers or self-employed.\(^4\) Some came back to Colombia; others married local clients and left 'the life'; others still married their pimps or club managers and started to organise, in the Netherlands or Colombia, the recruitment of new women from Colombia. Finally, some remained active and are still to be seen, already in their forties, working and passing their long experience in the business to a younger generation. Most of these women originally came from urban areas of the departments of Cundinamarca, Antioquia, Caldas, Risaralda, Quindio and the Cauca Valley.

Despite the fact that many of these women were followed by a stable chain migration of close friends and relatives, a new influx of Colombian women intensified during the second half of the 1990s. With fewer opportunities to arrange marriages or get legal permits, these very young women, some under-aged, come mainly from the Cauca Valley region - Cali and surroundings - with a striking number from towns like Palmira, El Cerrito, Pereira and Manizales. Most of them are illegal, and are often helped by the older generation.

From this second generation, some have a boyfriend in Colombia. Almost all have families there, and most have young children who they support through regular money remittances. They usually lie to them about their real source of income, and their families will very often pretend they believe them. Some of the jobs mentioned to cover-up their real profession are hairdresser, cleaner, baby-sitter, hotel employee or photo-model. Other women find a local partner in the Netherlands.

Many of these women have not worked in prostitution before and would prefer another job if they could get one in the Netherlands. Aurelia was a young prostitute from Cali working behind a window at the Doubletstraat in The Hague. I met her through Cabeza, one of the few men around that she respected as a true friend. She closed the curtain and offered us a cup of coffee:

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\(^3\) Window prostitution represents maybe 20% of the total supply in the Netherlands and is particularly popular amongst foreign prostitutes. It consists of a room with a window looking out to the street or corridor, where a woman dressed in lingerie attracts the potential customers. The prostitute pays for the window between US$ 50 and US$ 75 per day for 8 hours.

\(^4\) This image (and self-image) of Colombian prostitutes as rather 'entrepreneurial' was confirmed by every informant in the field including Colombian and Dominican prostitutes, social workers, religious leaders and all Colombians involved with the women. They usually contrast them with Dominican women, with a rural and much poorer background.
"This is temporary, I want something else, even cleaning is fine. The only thing I do not want is baby-sitting, children drive me crazy. I used to work in Cali as a salesgirl, and a good one, eh; maybe I can also sell things here. My sister comes next month and I am looking for a small place for both of us."

She seemed to have strong ethical problems with the job, but other Colombian prostitutes I came across in the same street were not so explicit about this. Some of them were already working as prostitutes in Colombia, and wanted to stay in business as long as they could save money and send it to Colombia.

Although most women come from lower or poor middle classes, most have completed elementary or secondary education. Cabeza explained what he thinks to be the main dividing line between prostitutes:

"The big difference lays in education. Those who studied and have some idea to progress in life, to go further, in general they suffer a lot and they do it only for a period. Others never studied, and they keep staying until they are too old. See, they like that life, they have no problem in saying that they are prostitutes."

Jessica was a nurse in her country and came to the Netherlands thinking that her diploma would be validated here. She also had intended to go further with her studies and training. However, she desperately needed money for her sister, and ended up working in a window. She pays US$ 40 for the room per (8 hour) day, the owner making some US$ 100 per room every day. Many of these rooms are not well kept.

Illegal prostitutes show a high degree of mobility. Some work during some months, spending the rest in Colombia. Others move through different European countries, especially Germany, Switzerland and Spain. Marga:

"Many women go around Europe. They know when it is better to work in each place. Some regard the Netherlands as a relaxed holiday, you see, less money but much better conditions."

They also move around several cities in the Netherlands, either looking for better profits in certain districts or escaping from police raids or exploitative pimps. I further found Colombian prostitutes who exchanged their posts or replaced each other.

Colombian prostitutes were often seen as market spoilers, working for lower rates or without condoms, working longer hours, and accepting unhealthy working conditions. Many women in The Hague accepted work for US$ 12.50, a rate far below the US$ 20 - US$ 25 asked in Amsterdam. In some cases, they needed the first 4 clients to pay their daily expenses, making profits only with the customers thereafter.

Profits varied a great deal regarding individual cases. They ranged from women that after a couple of years managed to buy one or two houses in their Colombian homeland, to those who hardly accumulated anything. Some even worsened their financial situation after contracting debts that they could not pay off. In general terms, they earned far above their potential average income in Colombia. Many sent regular remittances and gifts and spent Christmas and New Year in Colombia.

Cintia comes from a little village near Manizales, and works as an illegal prostitute in the Poeldijksestraat in The Hague. She stays only 8 months in the Netherlands, where she rents a room near the two prostitution streets. The rest of the time she spends in her Colombian hometown with her two small children. As a single mother, the children have to live with their grandmother when she is working in the Netherlands.
"I send money to support my mother and my children, I bought a house for them. You see, it is bad here, but they eat well and wear good clothes."

Cintia is in her late twenties and claims that she knows the 'life'. She seems to enjoy dealing and playing games with her clients. Leticia confirms the claim:

"You should see her talking to those Dutch teenagers, making fun out of them. Cintia likes the job, you see, she got used to it. Only thinking about making more and more money, and the rest is not so important. She is the type of girl that searches for a rich man."

**Traffic in women**

All Colombian women experienced at least one of three forms of traffic and pimping, which included different degrees of coercion, intimidation and exploitation.

The most common form of trafficking involves intermediaries who recruit women and arrange their ticket and initial accommodation. Despite golden promises, misinformation and lack of certainty about working conditions, the women know that they go to work in prostitution. These recruitment groups are usually small, operate on local basis - explaining the presence of many women from one small place - and heavily rely on family ties for promotion and recruitment. The typical procedure is as follows: a person in Colombia, usually a woman, selects some women willing to go to the Netherlands to work as prostitutes. Most of them receive the offer or the information from friends or relatives, to whom they feel loyal and trustful. The selection is based on anatomic considerations and on their reliability to fulfil future obligations (family background, vulnerability, and so on). The informal contract is closed by taking a shark-debt of around US$ 7,500 to be paid as soon as possible with the initial job's earnings. Although not always explicitly stated, all women know that their relatives stay as a guarantee and can be physically harmed if they do not pay or play dirty. Once they have been selected, the person responsible in the Netherlands, usually a man, flies to Colombia and also gives his approval. He then arranges tickets and car transportation from different European airports. He provides them with a room (which they have to pay extra) and a working setting (a window, a brothel or a club), and ensures that they work. Since they are illegal residents, the man does not insure them if they are expelled in the meantime by the police. Expulsion will only mean a new debt added: he will take them back to the Netherlands for another US$ 7,500, and they will accept it as the only way to repay the accumulated loan. In some cases these mediators do little more than arrange tickets and a contact to phone. Once they have paid off the debt, they are considered independent.

Cintia, for example, paid US$ 7,000 to come to the Netherlands to a Spanish man who runs prostitutes from Colombia. The man was imprisoned there for a while, but was soon released since nobody wanted to press charges against him.

Secondly, though much less frequently than often thought, some women are deceitfully brought to the country. They are offered a job as a dancer or waitress by somebody who pays the ticket and is able to get them through the airport. Once there, they are forced to work in a brothel, club or window by taking their money and passport and threatening them. This is not done overnight, but there are usually one or two weeks of 'adjustment' and slow psychological pressure (even from fellow women already working as prostitutes, often the first 'friends' they can rely on). Under strict supervision, she has to work for months or even a year to 'repay' the accumulated debts (ticket, new 'charges' for the guarantee and mediation, and the daily fee for food and accommodation which is comparable to that of a luxury hotel). She usually accepts this in the hope of better times and because she is not prepared to face a return in failure and

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Bad Reputations

These trafficking groups are more distant from the women they recruit, involve closer links with local sex entrepreneurs and often have access to better infrastructure (false passports, corrupted officials, weapons, and so on).

A third form of exploitation refers to more traditional forms of pimping, which can be linked or independent from the former modalities of recruitment. Especially in the beginning, owners or managers of sex clubs and brothels will receive between 20% and 50% of the woman’s profits, providing basic protection, working facilities, and clients. Some independent women working in windows often had a ‘friend’ who helped them to keep an eye on the police, clients and the room owner, and promised them to take them out from the street. Often these men lived from the women’s earnings. Finally, very few cases involving mixed couples - Colombian ex-prostitutes and Dutch sex entrepreneurs - integrated recruitment and pimping in a method according to which the woman was practically slaved.

However, in general terms, the trade and exploitation of Colombian prostitutes refers to the initial phase of their work in the Netherlands and it takes the shape of a cut-throat, though rather consensual informal contract. Undoubtedly, the threat of physical retaliation on relatives if contracts are broken is ever present, but in most cases it remains a tacit rule that is only spelled out when problems arise. Factually or symbolically, physical violence remains, as it was the case in cocaine dealing, as a powerful device to regulate and influence behaviour and choices.

Even for those women who feel exploited and victimised by traffickers, there are many good reasons for not pressing charges against them. Firstly, a lack of confidence in the local or Colombian authorities. Secondly, they do not want to be expelled to Colombia. Thirdly, they fear the trafficker's retaliation against their relatives in Colombia. Fourthly, they usually do not want to accuse their friends or relatives who are involved even if they played dirty. Moreover, for other women, a denunciation would mean revealing the real nature of their job to their families. The fact that the women often know or suspect that they go to work in prostitution, make them feel guilty and regard the situation as their own fault.

**Vulnerability**

Colombian prostitutes complain a lot during their first working year. After that, they either quit in one way or another or they learn the tricks and skills essential to survive the hard reality of prostitution. They get acquainted with fellow women, they learn very essential words to live and work, they get used to the unknown window prostitution system, and they increase their experience in dealing with their clients. These processes are accelerated by three other circumstances: prior experience in prostitution under worse conditions, short-term economic success, and the ability to learn from older prostitutes about how to cope with the job.

In some cases they suffer severe physical problems. They range from physical abuse from clients or boyfriends, sexual diseases, muscular and respiratory disorders, to major complications from ill-treated or ignored existing problems. This later situation has been indeed strengthened by the lack of adequate medical and social services available to them, especially for those with no legal residence permit.

For them, fear for expulsion is always present. Even during periods of relative calm, women are scared about possible police control and they often react in advance guided by the many rumours that circulate within the circuit. A woman in The Hague:

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6 The Dutch police are primarily seen as ‘illegal foreign hunters’ and never as a possible ally. The judicial system is regarded as unjust, in practice more ready to punish their own work rather than the activities of serious criminals. As illegal residents, they feel they have no rights. Finally, they have even less trust in Colombian authorities who are either corrupt or unable to deliver justice.
"The gossip is that on the 31 December there will be a *razzia* in the street, many have already received the letter. For those with no papers things are more and more difficult."

Cabeza has seen many other round-ups before, but regards them as pure 'make-up' operations with little effect in the medium and long run. Cintia also complaints about the regular police raids:

"It is ridiculous. I say, they throw the women out through the door, and they easily enter back through the window. They should give us permits to work and stay, temporary permits, for example for 6 months. They condemn many to live in fear and locked up, for example me. I don't go out very often."

Indeed, by the end of my fieldwork, many Colombian prostitutes had fled the Red Light Districts in Amsterdam or The Hague to work on the street or in private houses and brothels, both regarded less safe than the windows. Finally, some illegal prostitutes would wait hidden in places near the official prostitution zones to be called up by other women or friends who perform as new mediators.

Despite the fact that some of them help each other in terms of accommodation and working facilities, they remain rather isolated and far from institutional frames. Moreover, social exclusion is accompanied by several processes of stigmatisation. Dutch or European women feel contempt for them, claiming that they are unprofessional, dirty and work under the regular tariff. In turn, they accuse them for being selfish and consuming drugs. Colombian prostitutes also look down on Dominican and African prostitutes, feeling less exploited, ethnically distinct, more ambitious and better educated than them. Competition for clients or potential boyfriends can take a virulent form and often constitutes a source of conflict.

These women are further discriminated and discredited by other Colombian migrants. Consular authorities tend to ignore them or express their dissatisfaction. A former consul openly stated that these women were unworthy of being called Colombians. Some ex-prostitutes who stay in the Netherlands rearrange their social identity by changing their name and social environment and breaking with older relations. Other Colombian immigrant women from the same places and social backgrounds but who work, earning less, for example in cleaning, show more consideration and often have more links with them. However, they accuse them of excessive greed and shameful behaviour. Some complain about sharing some of the discredit faced by the prostitute. Sonia:

"If I shop in this area [Haarlem], shopkeepers think that I work in the windows over there when I tell them I'm Colombian. One man started to make obscene remarks. I hate the fact that they believe you are a girl [prostitute]."

Better-off women - with legal status, a job and a Dutch partner - alternate between compassion and subtle disapproval, but tend to have little or no contact with the prostitution circuit. Even in church, they do not mix very much. Finally, Colombian men can afford a

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7 However, some women have regular contacts with Latino institutions from the Catholic church, especially Casa Migrante Amsterdam and the Pastoral Latinoamericana Rotterdam. Other institutions have also tried to help them or recruit them as clients: GG&GD (Health Service), De Rode Draad (Dutch union of prostitutes), Stichting tegen Vrouwenhandel (Foundation against Trafficking in Women),Prostitutie Maatschappelijk Werk (Social Work for Prostitution, Rotterdam), Prostitution Project in The Hague, Foundation A. de Graaf, Funda, Foundation Esperanza, Salvation Army, Humanitas or the International Organisation for Migration (IOM). Unfortunately, illegal Colombian prostitutes often have more contacts with the vreemdelingenpolitie (aliens police) than with any of those institutions.
more comfortable position of 'wise' persons (Goffman 1968: 43), actually engaging in closer interaction with them as friends, partners, protectors, clients or service providers.

7.1.2. Colombians around the women

Colombian prostitutes are vulnerable and remain isolated from mainstream society, but they are not alone. Despite the stigmas attached to their profession and their illegal immigrant status, they are a large group occupying a significant niche and making enough profits to attract other Colombians to their social circle.

Indeed, while they send cash to Colombia, a substantial portion of their income remains in the Netherlands. Next to the money they pay to local operators and entrepreneurs - windows, clubs, and so forth - and the goods they buy locally - supermarkets, transport, accommodation, and so on - some of this income is re-distributed amongst other Colombians. They can either be relatives and friends supported by them, or people from whom they buy services and goods. A short list includes: children and unemployed relatives in the Netherlands, pimps, baby-sitters, window cleaners and administrators, cooks and food sellers, cheap-rate telephone operators, chauffeurs, restaurant and salsa disco owners, drug retailers, and even thieves and shoplifters from whom they buy clothes or jewellery.

Some of the women around the prostitutes are relatives or friends who either follow or precede them as immigrants. Some have lost their job or window, while others have just arrived and are looking for a place to start. The financial help ends as soon as a new job appears, and it is often reciprocated if things go the other way around.

If pimps, intermediaries or sex entrepreneurs are involved, they usually are ex-prostitutes and non-Colombian men. In some cases, these men are or were formally linked to them by convenience marriages, for which the women pay around US$ 5,000. In other cases, they just help them with daily things or keep an eye, for what they get financial support.

Colombian Amparo from The Hague:

“Yes, he is a sort of boyfriend. He had a job and keeps promising that he will take me out from here and take care. But he lost his job and now he is helping me here. You see I have a [false] Spanish passport, but when the people from extranjería (aliens police) start controlling the street, he phones me and I hide inside. He also brings me food.”

Clients

'Colombiana no chicha calichano' (Colombian women do not fuck Colombian men) is a saying that some of these women repeated to me in Amsterdam and The Hague. Their clients were predominantly Dutch, and especially in cities like The Hague, Turks and Moroccans.

They all explained me that going to bed with Colombian men is an unnecessary source of problems: weak and delicate boundaries between partnership, friendship, kinship and commercial sex are broken, creating problems of rivalry or jealousy amongst the women. One woman explained:

"Many of us have families in Colombia. You don't know if he [the Colombian man] is the boyfriend or husband of a next-door girl, or from somebody you know!"

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8 Colombian prostitutes seem to diversify their clientele. Some established prostitutes are able to select, or better refuse, customers. Though difficult to generalise, they often repeat the following scheme: Dutch men are nice but dirty, unskilled for sex - making their work harder - and have a particular taste for 'perverted' practices. Turks and Moroccans, hardly distinguished under the banner of 'arabes', are quicker to handle but they are rude, sexist and not gentle. Surinamese and Antilleans are nice but they prefer either black or white women. Finally, Latino men ranged from 'totally unreliable', 'dangerous', 'unattractive' to the more positive 'romantic and generous' or 'friendly'.

Moreover, some explicitly want to restrict all possible social embarrassment in their hometowns. One Argentinean prostitute did not want to talk with me because she was afraid that I could disclose her identity in Buenos Aires. In my opinion, many could only cope with prostitution as long as they kept some separation between work - usually referred to in negative terms as the 'other', the 'local', the source of pollution and shame - and social life - reserved for 'their own' as a place for expressing their identities as family members, as women, as Latinas, as Colombians, as paisas, and so forth. In this sense, the way in which many of these women talked about job details or referred to working conditions and clients did not differ very much from that of some 'straight' women about their local husbands. Many Colombian women preferred thus to deal with local clients, but to go to the restaurant, the salsa bar or the shopping mall with other Colombian women and men.

However, one woman acknowledged receiving Colombian customers, especially traquetos willing to pay well not only for sex but also for gifts and rumba (dance party):

"See, when he is around he has priority. He pays three times the normal price and he invites me to the restaurant."

Emilio also visited a young Colombian prostitute, but he felt uncomfortable about being 'a friend and a client' at the same time. Explicitly referring to traquetos, he further explained that:

"The big guys do not show up that much with the girls. They go with them, but do not stay in the street. These girls are more used to see Dominicans, Antilleans and Moroccans... and their Dutch managers and their friends."

Even if the men had friendly contacts with Colombian prostitutes, they often desired more 'exotic' local women. Many men vividly referred their experiences with Brazilian, Irish or Dutch prostitutes. Joel had many Colombian prostitutes around, but:

"I like Italian women. I don't know why. I often visit one when I go to the Albert Cuyp straat, I don't go to bed with Colombians and I do not go around the Red Light district."

**Service and good providers**

 Colombian prostitutes attract to their environment other Colombians who make a living selling them particular goods and services. Many of them are young men with no residence permits, some with entire families living in the Netherlands. Since most of the goods and services sold are not illicit, their activities are mainly framed in the informal economy (Castells and Portes 1989). Some of these people, as I showed in chapters V and VI, also sell the same services to drug dealers, performing in this way important bridge functions between the drug and the prostitution circuits. They can function as intermediaries for social interaction, facilitating contacts, passing through messages, gossip, news, and so forth. When these services are spatially located, for example in the case of restaurants, discotheques or telephone centres, they bring together prostitutes and dealers around fundamental activities such as eating, calling abroad or having fun.

Many Colombian prostitutes are willing and ready to buy Colombian food on a daily basis. The few formalised Colombian restaurants in cities like Amsterdam and The Hague target a broader clientele, so these women are supplied by a number of informal teams of

9 These restaurants, some 2 to 5 in each city, are relatively stable if they are not directly involved in drug trafficking. All sorts of Colombian migrants, including prostitutes, go there now and then. Since they are not next to the Latino prostitution streets and do not have delivery services, prostitutes only go there often at night, after or before working.
cooks and food sellers who sell cheaper food, closer to home. While some cook at home and deliver the food to the window or brothel, others improvise temporary informal restaurants in some small flat near the area.

Solano and Jaime sell food in The Hague, making a basic living after long working hours. Jaime lived for a while in Russia, so he also sells bandejas (food trays) to Russian, Polish and Ukrainian women. He explains that:

"The competition is high, there are 4 groups selling food at the moment for lunch, each with two or three sellers. And for dinner is even worse, five or six groups. I have 6 established clients and the rest just knock on the windows and offer the food. (...) Sometimes I start at 9:00 and I finish at 23:00."

In Amsterdam, at least two informal restaurants run by Ecuadorian and Colombian women offer basic dishes mainly to prostitutes and traquetos. The Solano’s brother and his stepson had a little kitchen just a few metres from one of the most crowded streets, and they both delivered and had a couple of tables were the women could eat. Cabeza, for example, learnt to cook in The Hague. He recalls:

"I had just arrived and a nice woman who was cooking and selling food gave me a place to stay. In return, I worked for her cooking and delivering. In that way, I met the people here [in the prostitution street]."

Jaime has a couple of group pictures taken with prostitutes, but he tries to keep his home separated from ‘the street’: he is reluctant to talk about the issue at home and he never lets the women collect the food from his own place.

Some Colombian men also offer the women long distance telephone calls for cheap rates, much cheaper than if they would use their own phones. As explained before, they are usually short-lived illegal operators. While some develop closer ties with the women, others treat them as mere clients.

I also found Colombian men managing and cleaning windows for the room owners, and some women cleaning for the prostitutes. For many years, Cabeza was responsible for collecting the daily rent of eight windows in The Hague. He also had to clean the rooms, do the laundry, and solve daily problems related to the women. In return, he received from the Dutch owner a place to live upstairs and some US$ 450 a month. He had a good relationship with the women, but:

"All are Colombians, Dominicans and Africans. In the beginning, I had more contact with them, but later I decided to restrict it. I don't belong to their world, and in fact I came here to study. I was very naive to believe that I could just come and study here. Instead of doing a Master on food packaging, I am here cleaning windows amongst pimps. (...) With some peladas [girls] we talk about everything, I help them whenever I can. But many stay for a while and suddenly they disappear again."

He still remembered his first impression of the Poeldijksestraat in The Hague:

"From Brussels we took the train to the Netherlands Spoor [The Hague] and we went straight to the street. I was shocked to see all that. Never saw something like that before. I could not even look or talk with the girls, I was really shy, but look at me now!"

Simona used to clean in different houses in Amsterdam. She knew many prostitutes from that period. In The Hague, a Colombian man known as El Brujo (The Witch), made a living by cleaning the windows from evil spirits. He claimed to be gifted, but all people around
considered him a charlatan. After arrival, he used to frequent prostitution areas offering a wide range of services. He was first addressed by a Venezuelan prostitute with cancer. Later, many women went to see him when they considered that their window was salada (cursed):

“They feel that men do not look inside anymore, or they don’t know why they have so few clients. They pay US$ 150 for the arreglo del vidrio (fixing the window).”

El Brujo cleaned up the windows in a ceremony that included the woman, a bucket with water and some small puppets. He did not perform ‘white magic’, and claimed that he only cured and never harmed people. When I left the field, he was starting to make lots of money, also travelling to Colombia with special assignments.

Other Colombians around the women offer them expensive transportation. A Dutch-Colombian couple from The Hague used their own car to transport Colombian prostitutes to/from Frankfurt and Brussels airports. They charge between US$ 200 and US$ 1,000 for the ride, and try to keep the number of journeys restricted. Although these Colombian coyotes are usually independent and work directly with the women, in some cases professional prostitute recruiters also approach them directly from Colombia. However, some do not see anything wrong in competing with serious train or flight companies.

For a while, Emilio travelled to Germany with a friend in his old small car to pick up Colombian prostitutes coming to the Netherlands:

“We just transported them to the Netherlands for some money, you see, no relation with traffic in women.”

Prostitutes with children in the Netherlands also need somebody to look after them. Most of the baby-sitters around the women are Colombian friends or relatives. Emilio transported cash for both prostitutes and traquetos whenever he travelled back, also performing bridge functions between both activities.

As these women also spend money in clothes and jewellery for them and their relatives in Colombia, they are also approached by people - including Colombian thieves or shoplifters - who sell their merchandise at bargain prices, basically clothing, cosmetics, jewellery and home-appliances. Tano described how apartamenteros (burglars) and bambero thieves (people going after jewellery traders) in Amsterdam offer their loot for one third of their market value. Lupo himself use to knock on prostitute’s doors with watches to sell. Emilio’s ties with many Colombian prostitutes working in The Hague became more solid when he started to work for a Colombian woman who was selling clothing and jewellery to the prostitutes. The merchandise was stolen, but the woman kept on telling Emilio that she had imported it from Germany.

7.1.3. ‘We are just friends’: settings for social interaction

Finally, a number of Colombians involved in drug dealing are to be seen around the women. However, in contrast with the former group, they tend to meet them far away from the brothels, windows or even prostitution streets.

Both prostitutes and traquetos frequent some Colombian bars and restaurants in major cities. They gather in separate or mixed groups, and spend above average on food and drinks. Though these places are usually not directly involved in cocaine trafficking, their presence is tolerated and their actual occupations are ignored. In fact, they often keep conversations at social level and do not discuss business matters between each other. Often, gossip about drugs
and prostitution are delicately commented on by those not involved in those activities. A Colombian bar keeper in The Hague explained to me:

"I don’t want to see this place dañado [damaged, spoiled by drugs] as it happened with El Tamal. I don’t mind what people do for living if they are good people. Here we are just friends..."

This friendship is even more noticeable in Latino and Colombian salsa discotheques, around highly valued activities such as drinking, listening to music and dancing. Since many women work on Friday and Saturday nights, Sunday is their favourite day to visit the discotheque. Rotterdam, Amsterdam and The Hague always have one to three places where Colombian traquetos and prostitutes are amongst the most visible customers. Neither traquetos nor prostitutes work there: they consider the discotheque simply as a place to have fun.

In some cases, their interaction goes beyond a casual encounter. In Los Compadres, for example, I met three young good looking Colombian prostitutes who did not dance and looked terribly bored. Every man around was staring at them, but none dared to invite them to the dancing floor. The reason for Cabeza was simple:

“One has a boyfriend in prison for cocaine. The other two entered earlier with some traquetos. These are now gone and do not seem to come back, but, you know, it is better to leave the girls alone.”

Indeed, these women were treated as the untouchable property of absent people who were to be feared. In some other cases, they just exchanged greetings and went on with different groups. Some prostitutes - the older, more discreet and longer established - suggested that they avoided mixing with traquetos altogether. In fact, many of these traquetos were to be found accompanied by Dutch white women. On the contrary, few Colombian prostitutes were accompanied by possible Dutch friends or boyfriends.

In the smaller El Llano Bar, in the centre of The Hague, I could also find many prostitutes and traquetos having fun together. It was a place to go after everything else closed: it really started to get crowded after 4:00 am. Despite the big sign inside forbidding the use of weapons, El Llano Bar was regularly closed down for periodical shootings in- or outside. It was referred by most Colombians as a hueco (hole) or metedero (a small place to get in), notions reserved for places with extremely bad reputation. Many young prostitutes, some clearly under-aged, enjoyed dancing together and avoided contact with the men.

In a less playful mood, Colombian prostitutes working in Amsterdam and Rotterdam are amongst the most regular visitors of Sunday’s Spanish speaking Catholic masses. Father Wim:

“They give more money than the others. You can see there has been a razzia only by counting the Sunday’s donations... (laughs).”

Despite the fact that they usually leave the church rather soon, they still take the opportunity to chat with others, hear the latest news around the Latino circuit, find out about possible jobs or accommodation, or look for help regarding health, juridical and financial..."
problems. After the service, some go out for a drink or a lunch with other Colombians, including _traquetos_.

Another meeting place are the many cheap rate telephone centres widely used to call Colombia. In many cases, they function as a first contact point between newcomers, which further develops into a friendship at the discotheque or at home.

Finally, I found many cases in which Colombian prostitutes hung around _traquito’s_ flats. Andrea is a _caleña_ from The Hague who has lived there for many years with her Dutch husband and 3 children. Showing me a picture, she told me about her sister:

“She arrived on Monday, and she was on Wednesday working in an hotel [brothel]. She was doing fine, but soon after she was expelled to Colombia when the police raided a house and found those _pelados_ [guys] with coca...she was there with them but she wasn't _untada_ ['greased', involved], no, it was just bad luck she was there...or maybe she was lucky because two of them went to jail.”

People like Paisita or Tico also knew some prostitutes who would visit them and engage in rather fluid and ambiguous relationships.

**Exchange**

Despite coming from the same regions, cities or even towns, prostitutes and _traquetos_ are usually neither related by kinship nor belonging to the same social groups. Cocaine dealers belong to a much wider social spectrum than Colombian prostitutes, who can, in general, be considered to originate from a lower social stratum.

They consider each other’s activities as different in nature. Cocaine dealers tend to grant the women a lower moral and social status, considering them very vulnerable, while prostitutes often have strong reservations against ‘real criminals and addicts’ and consider drugs to be a risky business. Moreover, they also know that both activities are subjected to a different social reaction. In three opportunities, for example, I met cases of drug dealing women who would pretend to be prostitutes to receive a milder label as exploited victims.

Of course, they have something in common: they are migrants from the same country who either make or try to make profits above the average by engaging in activities legally or morally questioned by others, including other Colombian migrants. However, this fact cannot overshadow the contrasts mentioned above and it is not enough to create a common identity.

In fact, both groups always stressed the fragile nature of their relationship. Prostitutes and drug dealers do not seek each other as members of a common, abstract 'criminal circuit' - spatially, socially or ethnically clustered - but primarily as the result of a material and symbolic exchange.

For the prostitute, a _traqueto_ can represent at the same time a privileged source of money and wealth; a potential protection against other non-Colombian men around, including clients, employers and boyfriends; a certain social status in front of other women; and finally, in some cases, even a source of fun and pleasure in a highly hostile environment.

Cocaine in itself is out of the picture. Colombian prostitutes usually do not consume illegal drugs. Some have even strong moral opinions about them. Others, the younger ones, would smoke marihuana or take cocaine and amphetamines now and then. Heroin is of course far from their cultural repertoire. Whenever present, illegal drugs are provided by other women or by the many retailers around, including Dominican, Dutch or Moroccan dealers. Colombian _traquetos_ are not sought for their merchandise.

Money, protection, social status and fun: four possible reasons to socialise with _traquetos_. Andrea’s sister ended up working in a sex-club in Valencia, Spain. Somebody helped her to get a residence permit, and Andrea seemed positive about her:
"Her Colombian boyfriend was killed long time ago. She has many boyfriends in Spain, but she doesn't want a fixed one. They buy her many things, gifts and so. But not because she hunts for their money, eh, I think she just deserves it."

Cabeza was there and did not agree. He later said:

"No man, many of these women have a pesos sign in their eyes."

For the traqueto, the prostitute can also mean status and fun. While sex is often absent or a marginal part of the exchange, he can enlarge local social recognition by showing off with her at the restaurant, the shopping centre, and of course at the salsa discotheque. He can first show his financial capacity to her and to other people. Secondly, he can impress others by appearing as a local mafioso, seemingly controlling and consuming local resources, including 'his own' women. Further, while being close to prostitutes, some men can reinforce their male identities and behaviours. As objects of sexist jokes, for example, prostitutes are often present in their daily talks. Moreover, they reinforce some of their latent misogynist images about women. Miguel:

"In Cali we used to be around very expensive prostitutes. With all respect for your mother and your wife, women in this society have become an object to buy and sell, like a car."

And Chino:

"At least these women have the honesty to make it as a profession. Many others pretend they are honest but they are also 'interested' in something material, not in your spiritual qualities."

Some traquetos also took pity on these women. Joel thought that these women suffer for being far from their country and their families, and especially in the hands of exploitative sex entrepreneurs, and he tried to help some of them whenever possible. Finally, in some cases, there is also room for sharing deeper emotions, or problematic situations and conflicts. Of course, a common background and a sense of common hardship can facilitate this intimacy. Again, this intimacy is extremely fragile. Whilst he was living in Amsterdam, Riverito had social contact with Colombian prostitutes. Once in prison, he remembered:

"I knew a woman from Cali, but she never phoned or came to visit me. You know what? It is better in that way. If I phone her, it can mean trouble for her. Besides, I have enough problems myself to receive somebody that comes to tell you this and that. If somebody comes, I don't want to hear more problems."

7.1.4. Prostitutes & cocaine

There are also cases in which prostitutes take an active part in the cocaine business. I could not find prostitutes actively involved in drug smuggling. However, I was told about instances where mulas later turned to prostitution. One informant explained that:

"They only think about money. If drugs are better, drugs. If prostitution is better, prostitution. They know each other, and these women can easily jump. Before, many poor desperate women were working as couriers. That is over now. But some women I knew from those days are now behind the windows."

Rather than showing integration, these cases evidence that prostitution is for some of these Colombian mulas an attractive, less risky and profitable alternative.
I also found cases of Colombian prostitutes receiving cocaine in the post. Willem:

"I used to give language lessons to a Colombian woman, here in this street. I phoned her once and her son told me that she was in prison because she had received from Colombia a mail package with cocaine. Just a small quantity, but it was enough. The police had her telephone tapped, so she may have done it before. But it is the only case I know."

Other informants in The Hague referred similar cases: the prostitutes would use a friend or a boyfriend, usually an old Dutchman, who would unwittingly receive the package at his address. One prostitute told me however that neither the police nor their clients are so stupid to be fooled like that. In the only case she knew, the client was in fact the actual cocaine importer.

A less risky task that prostitutes can perform is carrying important messages between cocaine exporters and importers. They are usually not involved in the operation and limit themselves to handing over the message. A friend or acquaintance in the Netherlands would tell her to phone a person in Colombia who would give her a message for him. In some cases, they are completely unaware of the nature of the message, they are just doing it as an easy favour with no costs or consequences. The following story shows how these messengers can indeed get into trouble.

For two years, a Colombian woman was working as a prostitute in The Hague with varying fortunes. She went back to Colombia and soon after she decided to return to the Netherlands. Before leaving, somebody she did not know asked her to deliver a letter, a small piece of paper, to a friend in Amsterdam. In codified language, the message confirmed the precise arrival time and place of a cocaine shipment. She entered as a tourist through the Frankfurt Airport, where the German police asked her some questions, inspected her belongings, found the message and got suspicious. They eventually let her through, but probably discovered more than she thought and informed the Dutch and Belgium authorities about her and the possible shipment. Once in the Netherlands, she handed over the message with no further problems and stayed for another six months working as prostitute, this time in Amsterdam. In the meantime, the cocaine import operation, planned via Belgium, had to be postponed. The importers realised that the local police had a tip, which in fact matched with the information seen before by the German police. The prostitute, unaware about the situation, became the main - and only - suspect in the case.

The woman had earned enough from her job and decided to return to Colombia. In 1996, she was detained in Barajas while taking a flight. She spent one year in prison in Madrid before being extradited to Belgium for trial. Some people tried to help her from the Netherlands. A Dutch priest visited her in her Spanish prison, but restricted himself to his pastoral mission. The woman was finally extradited to Belgium, where she spent another year in remand. Due to the lack of evidence, she was finally released. Back in Amsterdam, she met a Spanish man with whom she married. The priest describes the wedding party in these terms:

"I was invited. I arrived there and looked around. The place was full of mafiosi, in every table there was at least one of these people! I later told her to stay away from them if she did not want to have more problems. She replied, apologising, that they were invited by those who organised the party, not by herself."

As frequent travellers, some prostitutes were also involved in cash transportation. They can do it as a favour or charge up to 5% if the quantity is large. However, smuggling cash is again a risky matter for these women. Germán:
"My wife’s cousin has been working for years in The Hague. Two months ago, she went back to Colombia, only for holidays, and the second day she was robbed. They entered her house with guns, tied everybody up, and took the money. She said that there was only US$ 1,000, but I know that she had more than US$ 50,000 from other people."

In fact, Germán himself does not really believe her. She might have been robbed or might have faked everything to keep the money. Whatever the case, she is certainly in trouble with the man who sent the cash.

Cocaine importers and distributors also use prostitutes as flexible unskilled employees, for example to make cash transfer remittances. Both Joel and Blanca involved prostitutes for sending money to Colombia. More than a real engagement in the business, these women are in many cases friends and acquainted who do the job as a - returning - favour, as a once-off activity, or to gain the good will of a generous traquito.

In one case, a woman was involved as wholesale distributor. Jaime:

"Yes, I know a Colombian prostitute that was involved in distribution, kilo level. She maintained both things separated. I believe that prostitution was secondary for her. A sort of front-store."

Still another case of interwoveness between the prostitutes and traquetos can be found at street retail level. At the entrance of the Doublestraat in The Hague, some Dominican dealers were retailing small quantities of cocaine and heroin, either by gram or by 1/5 gr. balletjes (small balls or packages). The police regularly raids the street, so some Dominican dealers used to keep small amounts of merchandise hidden by some prostitutes working nearby. In return, dealers would either give them money or gifts, and protect them if necessary. This practice, however, seemed to be restricted to Dominican retailers. Cabeza:

"There is a huge difference between Colombian traquetos and these Dominican dealers around here. Colombians come, talk with the women but they don’t stay nor sell drugs here. The Dominicans are a truly street gang, they are very violent, see, believe me, they controlled for a while the street, threatening, stealing and raping newly arrived Dominican women. I am glad the police finally intervened. Some girls convinced a woman to talk. Now the street is quiet, but you never know... Except for these Dominicans, drugs around here are not sold by Latinos."

Finally, prostitutes may also be involved in facilitating the arrival of traquetos. During a football match in Rotterdam Zuid, I met a traquito who was living in Amsterdam. I was surprised to learn that his wife was a Colombian prostitute. Normally, the man would have suffered a loss of face, while the woman would have afforded to quit prostitution. Further inquiries in Amsterdam clarified the picture: she had the Dutch nationality and it was a marriage of convenience. They led separate lives, and only at a later stage did he actually become involved in drug dealing. In another case, a Colombian prostitute helped people from Mocho’s group come to the Netherlands.

Weak business linkages
Almost every informant in the field stressed that these cases of collusion are exceptional: most prostitutes and traquetos regard and keep their respective businesses apart. Even when they come from the same places, have close social contacts, buy goods or services from the same people and are generally stigmatised as part of the Colombian ‘underground’, their activities remain rather independent of each other. Many reasons explain this fact, some of which have been already suggested.

First of all, both activities imply different skills, risks, moral careers (Goffman 1968: 45) and legal frames. Cocaine import and distribution is illegal and prosecuted, it is very risky
especially for roles and positions traditionally occupied by women, and requires differentiated skills such as a violent reputation, discretion and links with the legal economy or with powerful brokers. Prostitution, on the other hand, is tolerated (thus more controlled), it has different risks attached - health related, for example - and requires totally different skills of a physical and psychological nature.

These discrepancies are well acknowledged by both groups. Prostitutes, for example, know the risks of performing as *mulas* and they are not prepared to take them as long as they can work. Nor do they regard drug smuggling as a better alternative to prostitution. Many are truly scared of the drug business and the people involved in it.

Cocaine exporters also consider prostitutes to be extremely vulnerable at airports and borders. They are not only highly visible within their social environment, but also catch the eye of law enforcers and migration officers. Many are refused, detained for interrogation or carefully inspected before being allowed to continue their journeys. In general, *traquetos* treat these women as prostitutes and as such, too close to the police, too unreliable and ‘interested’, and too loud-mouthed.

Even for tasks as cash transportation they are often vulnerable and easy targets for robbery. Everybody knows and expects that they will return to Colombia with money. In many cases they publicly announce their departure and arrival, and it is commonplace for farewell or welcome parties to be organised. They also want to show off what they have achieved, by letting people know how much they earned, through wearing expensive clothes or giving gifts.

The fact that Colombians are not engaged in street drug retail - spatially and socially connected with prostitution areas, organised in smaller economic units, also tolerated, and so forth - also disables a daily link. On the street, many Colombian women are more exposed to Dominican, Moroccan or Dutch drug dealers. In addition, Colombian women do not tend to consume illegal hard drugs. On the contrary, they generally condemn people who *mete vicio* (take drugs).

One important reason for separation is the relatively independent status of Colombian prostitutes. As explained before, traffic in women exists, but is often limited to forms of intermediation and seldom involves sexual slavery. It can be stated that the less these women are trafficked and the less their activity is regulated by local illegal groups, the fewer the chances are of these women to getting involved in other illegal markets such as drug trafficking.

However, even in Colombian related cases of traffic in women, the overlap with the cocaine business is problematic. All informants tended to minimise the link. In some isolated cases, women traffickers also involved in cocaine trade would not mix the actual items traded (Altink 1993: 54). As a prostitute explained:

"Drug traffic is more risky than traffic in women. The competition is cut-throat and the chances for detection are bigger. For the pimps it is problematic if the police finds drugs by the women.”  
(Altink 1993: 54).

The relative autonomy of both circuits is also enhanced by the lack of local *mafias* having a grasp on many illegal local markets. In this sense, Colombians have to talk with different people if they want to sell drugs or women in the Netherlands. The link from ‘below’ (through other Colombian immigrants or particular common settings) is not enough to connect the businesses. In this sense, the Dutch case contrasts with contexts such as Japan, also a well-known target for Colombian prostitutes and cocaine. Salazar (1993: 138-148) vividly describes, for the Japanese situation, how Colombians selling drugs or trafficking in women have to deal with local *Yakuza* groups. While these groups directly control prostitution, they
also grant cocaine distributors a ‘licence’ to sell in their areas of influence. The Yakuza mediation, however, does not neutralise all the tensions explained for the Dutch case. Furthermore, prostitutes there seem to be scared about drugs and drug traffickers look down on the women, feeling disgust for the Japanese pimps and compassion for the women.

7.2. Illegal immigrants and cocaine

A second group that has been easily linked with cocaine traffic is that of illegal Colombian immigrants. It is estimated that 3,000 to 4,000 Colombians live in the Netherlands without any residence or work permit. As explained in chapter IV, these immigrants are mostly absorbed in the informal economy by a local demand for services such as prostitution, housecleaning or baby-sitting.

During my fieldwork, I had different levels of contact with more than 30 of these illegal immigrants. In some cases, I visited their relatives in Colombia, in other cases I shared their daily activities or leisure time, and in other cases I met them as ‘clients’ of one of the three Latino organisations for which I volunteered as a social or cultural worker. Interviews with legal immigrants and social operators who had contact with illegal residents were also an important source of knowledge. While I did not engage in quantitative sampling or analyse police dossiers, I believe this qualitative material can support cautious generalisations. In this sense, they can be coupled or contrasted with the conclusions of earlier research on the relationship between illegality and criminality in the Netherlands (Engbersen et al. 1995; Engbersen et al. 1999).

In chapters V and VI, I already demonstrated that while many of the Colombians engaged in the cocaine business in the Netherlands are well established migrants, others do not even have a fixed address in the Netherlands since they are only involved in a ‘business or work trip’. I explained that certain roles and tasks are more likely to be taken by people with certain skills, gender, social capital and juridical status. Smugglers and ‘envoys’, for example, are unlikely to live in the Netherlands, while some importers or wholesalers have double nationality and many local contacts.

Still the question remains about the risks and opportunities for those Colombians who, having made it to the Netherlands, do not have a permit to stay and work, but who nevertheless remain as temporary or permanent immigrants. In this sense, I explicitly exclude from this group of illegal residents those persons who enter and leave the country as legal tourists (complying with visa requirements) or with false identities, for performing a specific task or job and with no intention of staying in the Netherlands. Mulas who arrive at Schiphol for the first or second time or ‘businessmen’ who sleep in expensive hotels, but actually live in their fincas in Colombia cannot be considered immigrants.

This final part of the chapter will be devoted to analysing why and how some illegal immigrants take part or refrain from participating in drug dealing.

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11 ‘Illegals’ reject the use of the word as a noun, widely applied to them as if they were illegals. The lack of permits to live and work in the Netherlands is mainly experienced as a restriction - of social and economic rights, of future development, and so forth - and not so much as a state of being.

12 This is an unofficial estimation shared by people interviewed in Colombian related organisations, including Casa Migrante, Colombia Komitee Nederland and Casa de América Latina (Brussels). The calculation is based on both quantitative demographic developments of the legal Colombian population as well as on qualitative material gathered in their daily contact with illegal immigrants.
7.2.1. Colombian illegal careers

In their study on illegal immigrants in Rotterdam, Engbersen et al. (1995: 94) identify four types of illegal careers: integrated, stationary, marginal and criminal. The first group, also known in the Netherlands as ‘white illegals’, are long established migrants, usually belonging to the larger ethnic minority groups, and have access to the formal labour market as well as to public services such as health and education. The second group have a stationary position, arrived after 1992, and do not have access to the formal labour market. They rely on informal jobs and on close social networks of relatives and friends. A third group can neither get formal or informal incomes, nor are they helped by their surrounding social network. They become homeless, keep changing addresses or rely heavily on the support of social, private or migrant organisations. They tend to belong to groups with no migration history in the Netherlands. Finally, a last group is also excluded from the formal labour market and engage, for various reasons, in different criminal activities of a predatory or entrepreneurial nature.

These careers are a result of various circumstances and factors that open and close opportunities to different groups.

A first factor refers to the nature and development of laws and policies regarding foreigners. After regularisation in 1975, restrictions for immigrants have only increased, not only expanding the number, but also deteriorating the situation of illegal immigrants. The access to formal labour markets and to basic social services has been blocked, for example, by the cancelling of tax numbers for illegal immigrants (1991), more punishment for employers (1992) or further exclusion from social services and institutions by the Koppelingswet in 1998 (Leun and Botman 1999). In this respect, the sustained group of Colombians arriving during the mid- and late 1990s is, as put by one of them, ‘too late for the party’. While many earlier immigrants managed to get the Dutch nationality - especially through mixed marriages - newcomers have been increasingly forced into illegality. Policy changes regarding the restriction of political asylum did not affect the group: the Netherlands has always considered Colombia to be a democracy and neither in the 1970s nor in the 1980s were Colombians granted the status of political refugees. Furthermore, more work controls in formal factories or firms had a marginal effect: Colombians were already absent from formal primary labour markets or from their rather weak ethnic economy - in contrast with ‘guest-workers’ or ‘ex-subjects’. It is uncertain whether the introduction of a tourist visa for Colombians in 1990 had any real effect on the flux of migrants: while it could have discouraged some potential visitors, the core of a chain migration was only about to start due to the establishment of earlier immigrants from the 1980s. Maybe more influential to their situation was the restriction on marriages imposed in 1994. Before then, an illegal immigrant who met a Dutch partner - and this used to be the case for many Colombian women - could immediately get married and obtain social benefits. The situation radically changed ever since, when complex obstacles were put in place to discourage such unions. Also important is the recent active policy against illegal prostitution in major municipalities. While it can have some effect in the long run, in the short term it has only increased the conditions for the exploitation and marginalisation of Colombian prostitutes.

A second factor is the formal and informal labour market open to the illegal immigrants. I have already outlined the various jobs available to Colombians, especially in the informal economy. While most of this labour force, except for prostitution, is tolerated,
women still have a wider variety of opportunities than men.\textsuperscript{13} Despite all the razzias, prostitution is still an important labour market targeted by Colombian women.

Illegal careers are, in the third place, influenced by the group's access to public and institutional services such as education, health, housing and social security. Illegal Colombian immigrants are entitled to none of these rights. They usually pay between 50\% and 100\% more than legal residents for the rent, and get no social benefits. Many however manage to send their children to primary school (where they are again tolerated) and find a hospital or a kind-hearted doctor ready to treat their most simple complaints.

Another important element to assess the chances of illegal newcomers is their access to social, cultural and financial capital from their own migrant groups. Illegal Colombian immigrants cannot rely on a rather weak ethnic economy to survive. As explained in chapter IV, the Colombian 'community' is dispersed, heterogeneous and unorganised. There are even tensions between different groups, and many legal immigrants (including prostitutes) try to put some distance from the less fortunate. However, most people have some better-off relative or friend from whom they can eventually get financial help, accommodation, tips about jobs or actual contacts to get one. Moreover, most immigrants have completed primary and secondary school, and in many instances some sort of superior education.

Finally, an important factor is the access to specific illegal activities. Colombians, as explained before, have a potential advantage in some levels and tasks within the cocaine business.

These elements combined explain why illegal Colombian immigrants present neither 'integrated' nor 'marginal' careers. There are no 'white illegals' amongst Colombians, since all of them arrived during the 1990s. Earlier illegal immigrants usually became citizens by marrying a Dutch partner, not by working in Dutch factories or enterprises. Illegal immigrants are excluded from the formal labour market. On the other hand, illegal Colombian immigrants do not tend to 'marginalise'. No matter how difficult the situation would be, they usually show excellent skills for survival. They proudly see themselves as entrepreneurial and creative, with mottos such as 'colombiano no se vara' (A Colombian does not get stuck) or 'verraco' (die hard). Some have irregular contacts with private or migrant social institutions (some prostitutes, women with many children, inmates, and so forth), but they only make use of them when needed and do not develop structural dependencies. Most of them have relatives or friends both in the Netherlands and Colombia that prevent them from 'dropping out'. Alcohol consumption (drug dependency is practically non-existent) is also canalised as accepted behaviour and not a source for ostracism. Most people I met preferred to turn back to Colombia than to become a 'desechable' (disposable) in the Netherlands.

While most of them developed 'stationary' careers (including most of the illegal prostitutes), some had the opportunity to get involved in some criminal activities.

7.2.2. Selectivity and specialisation

Illegal Colombian immigrants have very differentiated contacts with the police. Most cases I came across of illegal Colombians detained or deported by the police were prostitutes, people involved in cocaine traffic or people suspected of having links with both circuits. Prostitutes were regularly expelled after razzias, simply worsening their debts and pushing them to return. Illegal traquetos, when caught, regarded expulsion as a safe way out and not as a

\textsuperscript{13} These informal markets are tolerated as long as they remain invisible and have a positive effect on the economy. Illegal immigrants selling T-shirts on the street would be immediately removed and deported, but those cleaning or baby-sitting in private houses can work and not be hassled. The former would be incurring 'unfair competition', the latter would be 'helping to solve a labour force shortage in a context of economic growth' (as posed by economic policy makers).
punishment. A *traqueto* once told me in a joking mood that if they really wanted to deter people they should forbid them to return to Colombia. Solano was expelled only once in 5 years:

"The police knew our faces, we hung around the prostitution streets the whole day selling food. They always suspect you are a dealer, of course. They had asked for my passport many times but were not very pushy, so I kept telling them that I forgot it at home and that I would have it ready the day after. I was finally detained, and I remained in Scheveningen for a week before they threw me out. I was back two months later."

In few other cases, they were caught crossing borders, stealing something or travelling in public transport without a valid ticket. Marta and Horacio were both expelled on two different occasions after they jumped a red light with their scooter. Montes was caught in a supermarket stealing food, but could not be deported since they could not find out his real identity. Finally, Solano's wife was caught while returning from Germany by car.

In 1995, some 88 illegal Colombian immigrants were detained in the 4 major cities (Engbersen et al. 1999: 275). Following their estimations, this suggests a group with slightly less contact with the police than average.\(^\text{14}\)

Most illegal immigrants I met had no contact with the police. Some were 'left alone' even after two or three encounters with them in the context of accidents, street controls or after being the victim of a criminal offence. People living in smaller municipalities or towns, those cleaning or baby-sitting in private houses, or those dependent on legal relatives or friends also had little or no contact with law enforcers. Furthermore, employees of 'non-ethnic' small businesses were never controlled. The police explicitly told Tano, involved in an incident in which a friend drowned, that it was the dead body and not their illegal status that actually mattered to them. He was even escorted home in a police car. Jaime also recalls one of his encounters with the police:

"The man who rented us the former apartment happened to be a drug dealer. We didn't know, but one day the police knocked the door looking for him. Thanks God they were not interested in us. I wasn't there and maybe they saw the children, who knows. It can also be that they were only looking for that specific man. But we were scared and we left immediately."

On a second occasion, Jaime was burgled and the police limited their intervention to the routine procedures. I did not meet any case of illegal work controls, I suspect mainly due to the sort of jobs Colombians perform as informal service providers or domestic self-employed. However, these illegal immigrants feared the police and in many cases tried to minimise exposure. Germán, for example, once told me that:

"I'm not going today [to church] because I heard that the police are controlling in Central Station and I'm not well dressed."

Not all illegal Colombian immigrants had the same chances to be detected or deported. A clear focus on fighting illegal prostitution and drug dealing contrasted with a tolerant attitude towards 'law-abiding' illegal residents. Still, protected prostitutes and discreet professional *traquetos* showed better skills for concealment than visible ones. Some cities tolerated illegal prostitutes, while others engaged in *razzias*. Those who avoided 'hot' places or areas truly believed they had more opportunities to survive. Finally, those involved in

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\(^{14}\) They calculate 40,000 illegal immigrants, from which 4,400 were detained by the police (11%). A very conservative estimation of 1,000 illegal Colombian immigrants for the mid-1990s in the 4 major cities (with illegal prostitution still tolerated in The Hague and Amsterdam), and 88 detentions, the percentage is 9%. \(\)
profitable activities had more chances of successfully coming back than the rest. All these differences show a process of selective criminalisation, which should not be confused with the notion of discrimination (Bovenkerk et al. 1991: 317).

While this point deserves further investigation - not only through dossier analysis, but through the observation of police practices - it is my impression that the bulk of illegal Colombian immigrants detained for 'illegal residence' are either prostitutes or people suspected of involvement in the drug circuit. From those detained for criminal offences, only some were involved in small predatory crime (especially organised shoplifting, theft and burglary, not 'drug related'), but the majority had committed some offence under the Opium Law. Moreover, I hardly heard of cases of detentions during work controls.1

Next to this selective process, and in line with earlier findings for other immigrant groups by Bovenkerk et al. (1991), Bovenkerk (1995c) and Engbersen et al. (1995), illegal Colombian immigrants specialised in certain informal or illegal activities and not in others. Prostitution is, of course, the first and most clear example. The vast majority of illegal prostitutes come or are brought to work as prostitutes. Only very few are illegal immigrants already living in the Netherlands for whom prostitution becomes an alternative option. This reflects a pattern of chain migration, in which connections with intermediaries or women already working is essential to enter.

Most of the thieves I met amongst illegal Colombian immigrants were not pickpockets or drug related thieves, but burglars and organised shoplifters. Although their activities were closer to what De Haan (1993) defines as 'surviving' criminality, some actually seemed to be less marginalised, more profit oriented, switching to drug dealing or other activities if necessary or possible.

The previously explained absence from drug retail selling and problematic consumption is also extensible for illegal immigrants. Colombians are, for example, neither 'drug-tourists' (foreign hard drug addicts) nor do they act as street 'drug runners' or 'drug pushers' as it is the case of some West Europeans, Moroccans and Algerians. Illegal Colombian immigrants tend to perform as a flexible, unskilled, replaceable work force around the import and wholesale distribution of cocaine. In some cases, they can graduate to becoming real traquetos and organise themselves the import or distribution operations.

This specialisation is understandable and it fits into the same set of explanations that I developed for the general group of Colombian migrants. However, there seems to exist specific reasons and chances of illegal immigrants entering the cocaine business or, as they used to say, to remain sano (healthy).

7.2.3. Offers that can be refused

There are three types of illegal Colombian immigrants involved in the cocaine business: the pre-involved, the recruited and the peripheral.

The pre-involved are people who come to the Netherlands already involved or with the intention to becoming involved in the cocaine business. In other words, their situation as illegal immigrants is a result, and not so much a condition, of their illicit activities. This is the

1 In this sense, the situation amongst Colombians differs a great deal from the general findings of Engbersen et al (1995) on detained illegal immigrants. Their sample, formed basically by Turks, Moroccans, Algerians, Surinamese, Cape Verdians and East Europeans, show a 'young, single man' (90% men and 92% unmarried) detained by the following reasons: 47% for illegal residence; 13% for other minor misdemeanours (illegal work, unpaid travel, disturbance of public order and administrative faults); 26% for minor offences; 5% for major offences and 9% for drug offences. From the 40% detained for criminal offences, 47% for theft (28% for burglary, 17 for theft and 2% for robbery), 22% for drug offences and 14% for false documents (1995: 8 and 92).
case of some smugglers (mulas) who decide to stay after their tourist visa has expired, but especially that of those men and women who stay as traquetos involved in import and distribution. In many cases they manage to leave the country for a while and return using safe routes or false identities. Their individual opportunities to enter (and leave) the business have little to do with their juridical status as immigrants. In fact, they regard their ‘illegality’ as an extra factor to take into account in the management of risk. They fear imprisonment, but not deportation. Nor they are concerned about future perspectives in the Netherlands: the quicker they can make money and eventually return to Colombia, the better. They differ in skills, social backgrounds, professionalism, financial capital, expectations and even lifestyles, but none consider legal work as a serious alternative in the Netherlands. Some develop a cynical or ironic attitude not only about the local context, but also towards those who want to follow the ‘long path’. They usually have some close friend or relative in the Netherlands who often brings them over or facilitates their arrival, and are rather quick to develop a social/business network, which includes other legal and illegal immigrants, prostitutes and local entrepreneurs. Joel, Riverito, Pollo and Andrea are good examples of this kind of pre-involved illegal immigrant.

A second group is formed by the recruited. These people are already in the Netherlands when approached and offered the chance to make some money in the cocaine business. They usually come with the genuine original intention of visiting a relative, to do some travelling, to follow a course of study or to start a relationship. Others come with the more clear aim of working hard for one or two years, and making enough money to ‘start up something’ in Colombia. Their plans are eventually truncated and they become frustrated. Some keep searching for a while, but soon realise that few or no alternatives are available. Tano:

“I first tried as architect, but nothing happened. It was difficult to make the decision, but when I saw it, it looked easy to me and not very dangerous. Brother, you have to eat and nobody helps you when you need it, and they helped me.”

Most illegal immigrants interviewed had at least one indirect proposal to get involved in the business. Ana Inés explains that:

“It is very common for traquetos to offer you something when you just arrive. You still have nothing, no job and no friends. They do not fear to talk openly; they know you won’t denounce them. It is a possibility to do some money very quick.”

Indeed, traquetos either exploit the weak initial position of newcomers or they approach them after they have suffered their first setbacks. On some occasions, they just help them with small amounts of money. Twice, Chino received US$ 100 as gifts from a traquito with whom he spoke for 5 minutes. In any case, a degree of loyalty is always guaranteed from the illegal immigrant. He or she can, of course, refuse the offer, but would never denounce him nor talk too much about the matter again.

In fact, the chances of receiving or accepting a concrete offer increase if friends or relatives are already involved. People that got involved also tended to underestimate personal risks. However, they usually become ‘first liners’ as internal couriers, off-loaders, load-keepers, bodyguards or small distributors. They are more vulnerable and exposed than the former group of pre-involved illegal immigrants, facing greater risks of prison or death. For instance, one of the two Colombians killed in The Hague in 1996 in a rip-deal had just arrived and had been recruited by a friend who offered him a good deal. Tano felt lucky about his last days in Amsterdam:
"At certain stage everything started to go wrong. I was about to be caught, but I left just on time. The whole thing was getting messy, no, I saved my ass just on time."

For some, the financial aspect is central. They see an excellent opportunity to earn money for whatever purpose they have: to improve their situation or that of their families in Colombia, to pay off debts or get out of difficult situations. Others become involved in the hope of later finding something ‘straight’. Most of them are young men: for them there are scarcer informal jobs available, they feel stronger social pressures to succeed economically, and the jobs available in the cocaine business are often male oriented.

Finally, another category of illegal immigrants only becomes peripherally involved. They survive in the informal economy, doing or selling things that often put them in contact with the cocaine circuit. They have usually a partner and children in the Netherlands, have some expectation about staying longer, hopefully losing the status of being an ‘illegal’ alien. Even if they run into financial problems, they carefully measure risks in their decisions. If they do some little job for a traquito, they take care that they keep their regular occupation as cleaners, cooks or telephone operators. They regard their marginal involvement as a safe way of making ‘extra’ money, but retain their strong ethical reservations about the cocaine business and their participants in it. Solano is a good example of such peripheral involvement. He helped and translated for traquetos in business deals, and was repeatedly offered to work as a wholesale distributor. He declined:

"I don’t want to live like these duros (tough guys), it’s not just the risks, but I hate their ideology. It’s the law of the jungle, and if you survive, you can go to jail."

This resistance was even more evident in many other illegal Colombian immigrants.

7.2.4. Mutual rejection

Illegal immigrants and traquetos had also reasons to reject each other. I met many illegal immigrants who did not have any link with criminal activities, condemned drug dealing for various reasons, or explicitly preferred to earn less money in informal activities.

There are structural limits to the potential involvement of illegal immigrants. The first one relates to the number of jobs available. Even being highly competitive and dynamic in terms of circulation of human resources, the Colombian related Dutch cocaine market (import and distribution level) can only absorb a small fraction of the 3,000 or more illegal Colombian immigrants estimated to live in the Netherlands. Leaving aside the pre-involved, only some are thus eligible to join as recruited or peripheral. It is important to bear in mind that, in contrast with predatory crime, cocaine traffic is a limited business not open to everybody.

A second limitation is one of gender. Although I have insisted that many roles are open for men and women (including smuggling, import or distribution), certain roles at lower rank, ‘first line’ or street level are often fulfilled by men: helpers, bodyguards, off-loaders, and so on. Since more than half of the group is formed by women, already a large percentage has fewer opportunities to get involved.

Many people who rejected involvement did it actively and explicitly. Some did not experienced moral indignation about the cocaine trade, but were against the risks involved and

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16 This is difficult to estimate. Women constitute 66% of the legal Colombian immigrants. Men have definitively fewer chances of becoming legal residents, but still women have better chances of surviving in the informal economy (including prostitution) increasing the probability for chain illegal migration.
the *traquito* way of life. Germán was offered work with a woman. He had been in a gang in Colombia, but now had three children waiting for him there. He explains:

“I know that sort of life. I have enough problems now, can you imagine if I also have to go to jail, with my children in Colombia!”

He considered the price he was paying already high enough. Cabeza was also frequently invited to enter the business. He claims that he was neither pushed nor threatened, and that he even kept contact with the people after a negative answer. When, after much effort, he was granted a student visa, he said:

“You don’t know how long I waited for this. I could have engaged in those things [cocaine trade], you know, but then, I would have never quit that kind of life.”

Many illegal immigrants were not only surviving or trying to accumulate some money, but they also wanted to have a better quality of life. In Colombia, many faced not only poverty but also personal or political violence, insecurities of all sorts and police brutality. Once in the Netherlands, even if they still did not get any job, they considered their situation as much better than those of the relatives and the pasts they left behind. Jaime, for example, wanted to have a quiet life after having grown up in the Medellín of Pablo Escobar. As long as somebody with this attitude could rely on some financial help from friends and family, they kept an optimistic view about the future. I also met lower middle class immigrants who were fed up of the ‘short-term mentality of Colombians’ and the materialistic culture around the drug business. Horacio survived for 5 years as illegal immigrant:

“Many are not like us. Legal or illegal, does not matter, they want to make money very quick no matter how…”

For some of these immigrants, the whole cocaine issue was experienced as a painful stigma, as a heavy obstacle for personal progress in the local environment. Especially illegal Colombian men who did not participate in the business had to learn to develop a cool attitude about the issue. However, many had paranoid attitudes about the police and the cocaine business. The obeyed the most elemental rules (for example, regarding illegal travel on public transport) and avoided ‘hot’ places like discotheques. In this way, many of them reduced their contacts with other Colombians to small circle of close friends and relatives.

This isolation is an obstacle, not a ground, for further participation in the cocaine business. Indeed, as I suggested before, illegal immigrants have to compete for limited vacancies with better-placed Colombians. Legal residents have a broader social network, more financial and social capital to offer, and, in some cases, know how to get to the ‘right’ people faster. Further, I found cases of false promises made to illegal immigrants. They seem to occupy a lower position than legal immigrants in both legitimate and illegitimate opportunity structures (Cloward and Ohlin 1960: 150).

*Traquetos* are often in search for more skilled or connected people. Illegal immigrants are regarded as unfamiliar with the local codes and language, and are less prepared to react in case of problems. Joel, himself a *pre-involved* illegal immigrant, used to help newly arrived Colombians with money, food or small jobs. However, when he had to take an important decision, he stated that:
"...they [newcomers] are a problem. We had to leave a flat because their rumba [party] was loud and neighbours complained... If I leave, the línea [cocaine line] remains in the hands of Tico, my nephew, who has 'papers' [residence permit] and speaks Dutch..."

Many drug entrepreneurs needed people who could drive, speak, read signs, negotiate with local or foreign individuals or afford a casual encounter with the police without risking everything. Illegal immigrants cannot offer any legal or illegal infrastructure, often a primary target of Colombian traquetos. Recruited illegal immigrants could seldom make a successful career in the drug business, and were continually replaced.