

Understanding the role of women in organized crime

An OSCE assessment



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Foreword

Transnational organized crime (TOC) poses one of the gravest threats to stability, security and economic growth across the OSCE area. In the 2020 **OSCE Tirana Ministerial Council Declaration** on Strengthening Co-operation in Countering Transnational Organized Crime, OSCE participating States (pS) reiterated their “grave concern about the negative effects of transnational organized crime on stability and security, including the exploitation of globalized economies and open societies, the undermining of democratic values and governance and the threatening of the safety and security of citizens, directly or indirectly, as well as human rights and fundamental freedoms”.

Raising gender awareness and promoting gender mainstreaming in the field of TOC represents a priority for the OSCE Secretariat’s Transnational Threats Department (TNTD). Gender-sensitive approaches to preventing and countering organized crime are essential for addressing the gender-specific harms associated with these criminal activities, as well as the underlying drivers of organized crime, and ensuring that prevention and exit initiatives are effective.

To have impact, actions to combat TOC need to be evidence-based. During discussions at the OSCE Security Committee and the Annual Security Review Conference in 2021, OSCE pS identified a systematic lack of understanding, research and empirical evidence on gender components of TOC and the role of women in organized crime groups. To address this gap, TNTD has prepared a comprehensive

assessment on the role of women in organized crime groups based on data provided by criminal justice practitioners and civil society across the OSCE area. With this report, the OSCE seeks to contribute to a better understanding of the gender aspects of organized crime and its actors, including women, and to support evidence-based and inclusive criminal justice and civil society efforts to prevent and disrupt such crime.

This report offers empirical evidence and case studies from across the OSCE area on how women are recruited into organized crime groups, their roles within them, and how and why they exit these groups. It demonstrates that the role of women in organized crime is nuanced. Evidence shows that while women are often exploited and victimized by organized crime groups, they can also be important actors. Yet persistent gender stereotypes mean that women’s agency in organized crime is often not recognized by criminal justice practitioners. Failing to recognize women’s agency in organized crime impedes the understanding in pS of the complexity of the organized crime landscape, and hampers their ability to combat TOC or support women to leave organized crime groups.

With this report, the OSCE hopes to increase awareness of the role that women can and are playing in organized crime groups, both in OSCE pS and beyond. Empirical data such as the information presented in this report have a crucial role to play in supporting the development and implementation of evidence-based and gender-inclusive activities that underpin effective efforts to prevent and respond to organized crime.

Ambassador Alena Kupchyna

Co-ordinator of Activities to Address
Transnational Threats, OSCE Secretariat

Executive summary and recommendations

O SCE participating States (pS) recognized the importance of ensuring that women are included and actively engaged in efforts to prevent and combat transnational organized crime (TOC) in the 2020 **Tirana Declaration**.¹ This both reflected and contributed to the increasing recognition that gender remains an overlooked factor in the local, national, and international policing of TOC. Persistent gender stereotypes contribute to the prevalent notion that women are almost exclusively victims of TOC, with little acknowledgement that they may also be involved as active participants in organized crime groups (OCGs).

OSCE pS identified a lack of research and empirical evidence on the role of women in OCGs at the 2021 Security Committee and Annual Security Review Conference meetings. To address this gap, the OSCE Secretariat's Transnational Threats Department initiated a comprehensive assessment of the role of women in OCGs, based on data provided by criminal justice practitioners and civil society organizations from 14 pS across the OSCE area. This data collection focused on how women are recruited into organized crime groups, their roles within them, and how and why they exit such groups.

This report presents the results of that assessment. The evidence it presents highlights that the situation of women in organized crime is more complex than so far acknowledged. It shows that women hold important agency in OCGs and that they are active across all criminal markets and levels of hierarchy. Yet, it also shows that gendered perceptions mean this agency is often not recognized across the OSCE area. This leads to an incomplete understanding of the complexity of the organized crime (OC) landscape and its actors. This in turn restricts the potential for pS to offer women a path out of criminality.

The data on the role women play in OCGs indicates that women often act behind the scenes, in particular through family and romantic ties. However, this does not make their role less significant or consequential. Greater acknowledgement of women's power and influence in advising or taking decisions will reduce women's ability to act with impunity, undetected by law enforcement agencies or OC prevention and exit initiatives.

Despite evidence of women's active involvement in TOC, women remain largely absent in prevention and exit initiatives. Where they are addressed, it tends to be as the partners of male OCG members, rather than as active agents in their own right.

While criminal justice practitioners and civil society across the OSCE area recognize the need to better tailor prevention and exit initiatives to the specific needs and situations of women and men, this has not yet translated into concrete actions. Only a small number of gender-sensitive prevention and exit initiatives were identified across the OSCE area.

The lack of sex-disaggregated data collection and analysis on OC is a major impediment to more holistic and gender-sensitive responses to TOC. The absence of reliable data allows misassumptions on the prevalence and nature of women's involvement in OC to persist, and contributes to an incomplete intelligence picture of OC actors in the OSCE area. Combined with a lack of procedures to share relevant data where it does exist, this prevents effective evidence-based policy and practice to prevent, disrupt, investigate and prosecute organized criminal activity.

By capturing the potential benefits of a deeper understanding of the role women play in OC, this report underlines the need for a comprehensive and gender-sensitive approach to this complex issue. By acknowledging and addressing the active participation of women, pS can enhance their understanding of the OC landscape and devise more effective measures for prevention and response, ultimately contributing to the achievement of more comprehensive security across the OSCE area.

¹ OSCE, *Ministerial Council Declaration on Strengthening Co-operation in Countering Transnational Organized Crime* (Tirana, 2020). Available at <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/e/5/479768.pdf> [accessed 8 January 2023].



Drawing on the evidence collected for this report, the following recommendations can inform and guide gender-sensitive actions to prevent and disrupt organized crime:



Recommendation 1

Increase awareness and knowledge among criminal justice policymakers and practitioners on the role of women in organized crime.

Actions in line with this recommendation could include:

- Developing gender-sensitive awareness-raising materials that address gender biases regarding organized crime, showcase the dynamics and influence women have in advising or taking decisions in organized crime groups, and highlight the benefits of a holistic understanding of organized crime actors.
- Implementing awareness-raising activities to enhance relevant practitioners' understanding of the agency women hold in organized crime groups across all criminal markets and levels of hierarchy.



Recommendation 2

Enhance the capacities of criminal justice practitioners to employ gender-sensitive approaches to identify, investigate and prosecute organized crime actors.

Actions in line with this recommendation could include:

- Developing comprehensive training materials to support criminal justice practitioners to incorporate gender considerations into their work to identify, investigate and prosecute organized criminal activity.
- Delivering training courses on how to implement gender-sensitive criminal justice responses to transnational organized crime. To be sustainable, such courses should be integrated into wider training programmes.
- Encouraging and supporting on-going platforms for interactive discussions between and within criminal justice authorities and civil society on existing gender biases regarding organized crime.



Recommendation 3

Strengthen gender-sensitive prevention efforts tailored to the specific needs and situation of women and men.

Actions in line with this recommendation could include:

- Developing actions to foster practitioners' understanding of gender aspects of recruitment pathways, with particular focus on risk factors that typically affect women, such as domestic violence and abuse.
- Devising evidence-led practices for the identification of risk factors and how these can be measured, monitored and acted upon through a multi-stakeholder approach to protect both men and women from exploitation and criminalization.
- Raising awareness among women and girls on the consequences of involvement in organized crime, including by drawing on the lived experience of women previously part of organized crime groups.
- Investing in women's vocational and financial literacy skills, especially among those at risk, to promote their employment and economic independence outside of organized crime.



Recommendation 4

Promote gender-inclusive organized crime exit programmes that provide judicial and non-judicial exit routes for men and women.

Actions in line with this recommendation could include:

- Developing actions to increase practitioners' understanding of the gender-specific drivers and requirements for leaving organized crime, as well as the importance of adapting exit initiatives to the needs of both men and women.
- Involving women in both judicial and non-judicial organized crime exit initiatives as independent agents, not only in their role as partners or spouses of male organized crime members.
- Ensuring that exit strategies take into account the possible prior victimization of female organized crime offenders, as for example, in the form of sexual or emotional violence and abuse.



Recommendation 5

Promote the systematic collection and dissemination of comprehensive and reliable sex-disaggregated data and information on organized crime.

Actions in line with this recommendation could include:

- Initiating or enhancing the regular collection and analysis of comprehensive sex-disaggregated data on organized crime.
- Promoting the sharing of sex-disaggregated data among relevant agencies, in line with privacy and data protection standards, to support prevention, disruption and exit initiatives.
- Incorporating sex-disaggregated data on organized crime into wider intelligence-led policing activities in support of evidence-based and gender-sensitive organized crime prevention, intervention and exit efforts.



Recommendation 6

Build effective partnerships to effectively address and combat the role of women in transnational organized crime.

Actions in line with this recommendation could include:

- Establishing multi-stakeholder platforms for the exchange and discussion of gender-sensitive strategies to prevent, disrupt and prosecute organized crime.
- Promoting regional and cross-regional exchange of information, experience and good practices in gender-sensitive responses to transnational organized crime.

The OSCE Secretariat's Transnational Threats Department stands ready to assist its pS – upon request – with targeted capacity-building to strengthen law enforcement and civil society awareness on the complex roles of women in OCGs across all criminal markets and levels of hierarchy.

This could involve assistance to pS in promoting a comprehensive understanding of TOC that acknowledges women's agency and enables identification, investigation and prosecution of OC actors without gender biases and while ensuring respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. The OSCE can also respond to requests from pS to support them to make OC prevention and exit initiatives more inclusive of, and responsive to, the situation and needs of women. Finally, the OSCE can assist its pS in improving law enforcement capacities in the field of sex-disaggregated data collection, analysis and data-driven policing.

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Acronyms

CCE	child criminal exploitation
CL	county lines
CSE	child sexual exploitation
CSO	civil society organization
DNAA	(Italy's) National Anti-Mafia and Counter-Terrorism Prosecutor's Office
EU	European Union
LE	law enforcement
Mol	Ministry of Internal Affairs
MoJ	Ministry of Justice
NGO	non-governmental organization
OC	organized crime
OCGs	organized crime groups
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
pS	(OSCE) participating States
SPMU	(OSCE Secretariat's Transnational Threats Department) Strategic Police Matters Unit
TOC	transnational organized crime
TNTD	(OSCE Secretariat's) Transnational Threats Department
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
UNTOC	United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime
THB	trafficking in human beings

1. Introduction



Transnational organized crime (TOC) poses a grave threat to security in and across the OSCE area and beyond. Effectively combating this multifaceted and complex threat requires unpacking *who* is involved in TOC and *what* they do. Such efforts are, however, currently being undermined by the lack of recognition and exploration of the role of women in organized crime groups (OCGs).

During discussions at the OSCE Security Committee and the Annual Security Review Conference in 2021, OSCE pS identified a lack of understanding and empirical evidence on gender components of TOC and the role of women in OCGs. To address this gap and contribute to a better understanding of the significant and nuanced roles women play in OCGs, the OSCE Secretariat's Transnational Threats Department (TNTD) has collected and analysed data and case studies on the involvement of women in TOC from criminal justice practitioners and civil society throughout the OSCE area.

The findings presented in this report are based on primary data collected in 14 OSCE pS, namely: Albania, Belgium, Bulgaria, Canada, Finland, Kyrgyzstan, Italy, Moldova, North Macedonia, Serbia, Spain, Sweden, Tajikistan and the United Kingdom. Selected case studies provide in-depth examples that supplement the research findings.

This assessment report seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding among pS of the roles played by women in OCGs. It provides an overview of how women are recruited into OCGs, the roles they assume within these groups, and their reasons for exiting criminal networks. It also explores gender-sensitive OC prevention and exit initiatives across the OSCE area, and examines the current availability of data concerning the role of women in TOC and OCGs.

By looking systematically at each stage of involvement in OCGs, this report aims to support evidence-based and gender-sensitive criminal justice and civil society efforts in preventing and countering TOC. Such a comprehensive understanding can inform specialized interventions that provide the necessary support and opportunities to prevent women becoming involved in TOC, and to support them to disengage from criminal activities if they do become part of OCGs. The report also showcases how recognizing the role women can

and are playing within OCGs can enhance criminal investigations into TOC, strengthening efforts to disrupt and dismantle criminal networks.

This comprehensive assessment complements the OSCE's ongoing work on understanding how OC impacts women, particularly the ways in which they are exploited and victimized by OCGs.

Methodology

This report is based on data from 14 OSCE pS, namely: Albania, Belgium, Bulgaria, Canada, Finland, Kyrgyzstan, Italy, Moldova, North Macedonia, Serbia, Spain, Sweden, Tajikistan and the United Kingdom. The selection of pS ensured geographic diversification.

The methodology for this assessment involved collecting and analysing primary data provided to the OSCE by government agencies, criminal justice practitioners and civil society actors for the purposes of this report. Secondary data from official statistics, criminal cases and open-source information related to the involvement of women in OCGs is also incorporated into the analysis where relevant, and contributes to the findings of the report.² Both the primary and secondary data reflect the lack of systematic sex-disaggregated data collection and analysis regarding the role of women in TOC and OCGs across the OSCE area.

The research employed a mixed-method approach. As a first step, a comprehensive questionnaire was distributed to government agencies, law enforcement and civil society representatives in the contributing pS. Once the responses were received, a limited number of follow-up semi-structured online interviews were conducted to clarify data and gather additional insights. Written consent was obtained from all respondents. In line with typical attrition in response rates during research processes, the initial sample was larger than the final analysis.

As such, this report provides an initial overview of the understanding of criminal justice practitioners, statistical data and case studies pertaining to the involvement of women in OCGs across the OSCE area. While the report draws on data and experiences shared by criminal justice actors throughout the OSCE area, the statistical data and criminal cases featured in this report are not representative for all OSCE pS and should not be interpreted as capturing the situation across the entire OSCE area.

² Please note: All sources cited in Chapters 3–8 apart from newspaper articles can be found in the References section. For consistency, newspaper article links are given in the footnotes.

Map 1: OSCE participating States contributing to this report

Source: OSCE (2023).

OSCE participating States that contributed to this assessment

Box 1

The challenges of conducting research on TOC

It is particularly challenging to conduct research on TOC. The concealed operations of OCGs make it difficult to gather accurate and comprehensive information, and attempting to do so can expose researchers and investigators to potential risks.³ These dangers can include threats to personal safety, legal complications and potential reprisals from the criminal organizations themselves. Indeed, the very nature of TOC participation creates significant barriers to understanding and addressing this complex phenomenon effectively.

In the absence of access to members of OCGs, the tools used to understand the diverse roles of women in OCGs have included police statistics, judicial sentences, ethnographic studies and media reports. However, these sources provide a limited picture shaped by their respective perspectives, access and data quality.

³ See for example, Dick Hobbs, "Ethnography and the study of deviance" in *Handbook of ethnography* (2001), and Donatella Della Porta, "Preface" in *Routledge Handbook of Transnational Organized Crime*, Felia Allum and Stan Gilmour (eds), 2nd ed. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022).

2. The policy and research landscape



Discussions of gender have often been missing from the discourse regarding TOC at the legal, policy and research levels. When aspects related to gender are considered, it is typically in the context of acknowledging that women are disproportionately affected by TOC as victims. Initiatives considering how women may be actively involved in TOC as perpetrators are lacking. This limits the development of targeted action to prevent women becoming part of OGCs or to provide for their rehabilitation and reintegration into society.⁴ This situation is slowly changing, however, with the growing recognition by both policymakers and researchers of the need to explore in greater depth how women engage with TOC.

Legal and policy context

The extent and complexity of the threat presented by TOC has long been recognized by OSCE pS. In the Brussels 2006 **Ministerial Council Decision** on Organized Crime, OSCE pS reiterated their “grave concern about the negative effects of organized crime on peace, stability and security”.⁵ They underlined that OC represents a “growing multidimensional challenge to all pS throughout the whole OSCE area”, “undermining the democratic values of our societies and threatening the safety and security of ordinary people directly and indirectly”. At the same time, States have also highlighted the importance of “improvement of data collection and analysis, the national development and use of risk and threat assessments, and the promotion of the exchange of information and best practices” for policy planning in preventing and fighting OC.

More recently, an additional focus has been placed by pS on the importance of acknowledging the ways different groups in society, including women, are affected by and involved in TOC. In the 2020 **Tirana Declaration** on Strengthening Co-operation in Countering Transnational Organized Crime, the OSCE pS recommitted “to maintaining the countering of transnational organized crime among the priorities of the OSCE”.⁶ Moreover, they recognized that “transnational organized crime can have a differential impact on diverse groups within society” and highlighted the importance of meaningful participation of women in the fight against TOC. States also encouraged “co-operation between all relevant stakeholders, including civil society, in order to help build resilient com-

munities, and to develop comprehensive responses to, and preventive measures against, transnational organized crime which take into account the needs, concerns and interests of all groups within society, protect the victims of crime and provide them access to appropriate remedies, while promoting the full, equal and meaningful participation of women in the efforts to counter transnational organized crime.”

At the international level, the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC) does not refer directly to women or gender aspects of TOC. However, **Resolution 26/3** from the United Nations Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice, adopted in 2017, stresses the importance of considering gender in the prevention of, and fight against TOC.⁷ It recognizes that understanding the distinct roles and impacts of gender within criminal networks is essential for developing effective strategies and policies. Furthermore, in 2022, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) published an issue paper entitled *Organized crime and gender: issues relating to the UN Convention against Transnational organized crime* to encourage the international community to include gender in policy-making in the area of OC.⁸

In the field of combating trafficking in human beings (THB), OSCE pS have for several decades underlined the gender specific aspects of trafficking and data collection.

The 2003 OSCE Action Plan to Combat Trafficking in Human Beings encouraged pS to “[collect] separate data related to women, men and children victims of trafficking, and [improve] research into and analysis of subjects such as the character and scale of THB and the trafficking and exploitation mechanisms deployed by the organized criminal groups, in order to develop effective and well-targeted prevention measures on trafficking in human beings.”⁹ They were also urged “to improve research and the system of data collection and analysis, with due regard to the confidentiality of data, and where possible to disaggregate statistics by sex, age, and other relevant factors as appropriate, in order to better assess the

4 Penal Reform International and Thailand Institute of Justice, *The rehabilitation and social reintegration of women prisoners, Implementation of the Bangkok Rules* (2019).

5 OSCE, Ministerial Council Decision No. 5/06 on Organized Crime (Brussels, 2006). Available at <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/3/d/23060.pdf> [accessed 8 May 2023].

6 OSCE, Ministerial Council Declaration on Strengthening Co-operation in Countering Transnational Organized Crime (Tirana, 2020). Available at <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/e/5/479768.pdf> [accessed 8 January 2023].

7 UNODC, *CCPCJ Resolution 26/3 on Mainstreaming a gender perspective into crime prevention and criminal justice policies and programmes and into efforts to prevent and combat transnational organized* (Vienna, 2017). Available at https://www.unodc.org/documents/commissions/CCPCJ/CCPCJ_Sessions/CCPCJ_26/CCPCJ_Res_Dec/CCPCJ-RES-26-3.pdf [accessed 12 June 2023].

8 UNODC, issue paper, *Organized Crime and Gender: issues relating to the UN Convention against Transnational organized crime*, (Vienna, 2022). Available at https://sherloc.unodc.org/cld/uploads/pdf/Issue_Paper_Organized_Crime_and_Gender_1.pdf [accessed 12 June 2023].

9 OSCE, *Permanent Council Decision No. 557 OSCE Action Plan to Combat Trafficking in Human Beings* (Vienna, 2003). Available at [42708.pdf \(osce.org\)](https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/4/2/42708.pdf) [accessed 12 September 2023].

character and scope of the problem and develop effective and well-targeted policies on trafficking in human beings.”¹⁰

The 2017 **Ministerial Council Decision** on Strengthening Efforts to Prevent Trafficking in Human Beings further embedded a gender sensitive approach. In the Decision, pS committed to

“**strengthen education and awareness-raising efforts, including human rights education, and develop and implement empowerment programmes which take into account the particular needs of women, men, girls and boys, in order to enhance the capacity to recognize, prevent and fight human trafficking within communities**

and to “adopt a victim-centred, trauma-informed and, in that respect and in line with Ministerial Council Decision No. 14/06, gender-sensitive approach, that fully respects human rights and fundamental freedoms in all preventive and assistance efforts.”¹¹

Other international and regional instruments also acknowledge the distinct impact of trafficking on women and the specific vulnerabilities of women and children. The Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the UNTOC, recognizes that particular attention should be paid to addressing trafficking of women in prevention efforts and when protecting trafficking victims.¹² At the regional level, the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings, to which 47 OSCE pS are party, establishes the overarching obligation for State parties to promote gender mainstreaming and gender equality throughout the development and implementation of anti-trafficking measures.¹³ Likewise, the EU Directive on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings and protecting its victims also includes gender-specific provisions.¹⁴

More remains to be done, however, to specifically address gender issues pertaining to the roles, expectations and societal norms associated with gender in trafficking in human beings, which can affect both women and men.

International and national research

Academic and policy-led research on women’s roles in OC remains limited, constrained by the lack of political focus on the topic, the absence of universally recognized definitions and difficulties accessing primary and sex-disaggregated data. Nevertheless, growing interest over the past two decades has provided insights into women’s roles as both perpetrators and victims within OC structures across different criminal markets.

Much of this research began at the national level. Since the mid-1990s, studies by Italian women academics and judges have contributed to deepening understanding of the roles women play in Italian mafias.¹⁵ This research has shown that although the organizational and decision-making structures of these criminal groups are male dominated, women play a central role as the culture repositories of clans, transmitting criminal values to future generations.¹⁶

10 OSCE, *Ministerial Council Decision No. 14/06 Enhancing Efforts to Combat Trafficking in Human Beings, Including for Labour Exploitation, through a Comprehensive and Proactive Approach*. Available at <https://www.osce.org/files/t/documents/1/7/23048.pdf> [accessed 12 September 2023].

11 OSCE, *Ministerial Council Decision No. 6/17 on Strengthening Efforts to Prevent Trafficking in Human Beings* (Vienna, 2017). Available at [MC.DEC/6/17 \(osce.org\)](https://www.osce.org/dec/6/17) [accessed 12 September 2023].

12 UNODC, *United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime* (Palermo, 2000). Available at [UNITED NATIONS CONVENTION AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME AND THE PROTOCOLS THERETO \(unodc.org\)](https://www.unodc.org/unodc/treaties/CAT/CAT.html) [accessed 8 May 2023].

13 Council of Europe, *Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings* (Warsaw, 2005): Article 26. Available at <https://rm.coe.int/168008371d> [accessed 4 October 2023].

14 European Parliament and Council of the EU, *Directive 2011/36/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings and protecting its victims* (Brussels, 2011): Article 8. Available at <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32011L0036> [accessed 4 October 2023].

15 For example, Renate Siebert, *Secrets of life and death: Women and the Mafia* (London: Verso, 1996); Teresa Principato and Alessandra Dino, *Mafia donna: le vestali del sacro e dell'onore*. Vol. 20 (Palermo: Flaccovio Editore, 1997); Ombretta Ingrassi, *Donne d'onore: storie di mafia al femminile* (Milano: Bruno Mondadori, 2007); Gabriella Gribaudo, “Donne di camorra e identità di genere”, in *Meridiana, Rivista di Storia e Scienza Sociali, Donne di Mafia 67* (Roma: Viella, 2010), pp. 145–154; Anna Maria Zaccaria, “L'emergenza rosa: dati e suggestioni sulle donne di camorra”, in *Meridiana, Rivista di Storia e Scienza Sociali, Donne di Mafia 67* (Roma: Viella, 2010); Alessandra Dino, “Symbolic domination and active power: female roles in criminal organizations”, in *Women and the Mafia*, Giovanni Findaca (ed.), (New York, NY: Springer New York, 2007): pp. 67–86; Alessandra Dino, “Women and transnational organized crime: The ambiguous case of the Italian Mafias”. In *Routledge Handbook of Transnational Organized Crime*, by Felia Allum and Stan Gilmour, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012): pp. 321–334.

16 Renate Siebert, *Secrets of life and death. Women and the Mafia* (London: Verso, 1996).

At a governmental level, the 1995 edition of the *Annual Report on Organized Crime* published by the Italian Ministry of the Interior focused on women in organized crime, and identified the important role played by mafia wives in money laundering.¹⁷

Other researchers have focused on Chinese crime groups, revealing that in criminal markets that comprise less violence, more women are likely to be involved. Moreover, they have determined that women play an important role in human trafficking networks due to their inter-personal skills being useful for finding victims, establishing contact and trust, managing money from illicit activities, and managing operations and drivers.¹⁸ This research underlined women's agency in criminality in China, finding that women hold important managerial and co-ordinating responsibilities in the trafficking of illicit goods.¹⁹

Another study based on women in Ecuadorian prisons who had been involved in drug trafficking reached similar conclusions.²⁰ It revealed that these women had their own agency, voluntarily engaging in criminality for economic benefit.

This country-specific research is increasingly being complemented by studies at the regional level. Between 2019 and 2022, the UK Department for International Development, the Foreign,

Commonwealth and Development Office and other UK government departments commissioned reports looking into gender and OCGs.²¹ They noted the gendered differences in the role of women and men in OC, the importance of gender dynamics within families and communities, and the impact of gendered norms on OCGs. The 2021 report *Women actors of transnational organized crime in Africa* published by Interpol estimated that while data on women is still limited, 10% of all TOC in Africa is committed by women.²² It found that both social context and business opportunities act as drivers for women to enter TOC.

Civil society organizations are also making important contributions in the field. The Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime concentrated on women in South-Eastern Europe OCGs in its 2022 Resilient Balkans report *Gender and Organized Crime*.²³ The report acknowledged women's agency both in "criminal networks as perpetrators but also as part of communities where their agency can be a positive force for change and resilience".²⁴ Outside the OSCE area, a 2020 report published by the Colombian Observatory of Organized Crime entitled *Women and Organized Crime in Latin America: Beyond victims and victimizers* recognized the varied roles women play in Latin America.²⁵ It highlighted that in the area of drug trafficking, women act as day labourers, coca pickers, cooks, farmers, drug mules, lookouts or *falcons*, chemists, micro-traffickers, trophy wives and logistic co-ordinators, while in human trafficking they work as logistics co-ordinators, traffickers or *coyotes*, leaders, recruiters and ring leaders.

17 Ministero dell'Interno "La donna nella criminalità organizzata" with the section section, part IV: Argomenti di particolare interesse, *Rapporto Annuale sul fenomeno della criminalità organizzata per il 1995* (Rome, 1996).

18 Sheldon X. Zhang, Ko-Lin Chin, and Jody Miller. "Women's participation in Chinese transnational human smuggling: a gendered market perspective", *Criminology* 45/3 (2007): pp. 699–733.

19 Anqi Shen, "Women who participate in illegal pyramid selling: voices from female rural migrant offenders in China", *Asian Journal of Criminology* 15/2 (2020): pp. 91–107.

20 Jennifer Fleetwood, *Drug mules: Women in the international cocaine trade* (New York: Springer, 2014).

21 UK Department for International Development (Enfield, Sue), *Gender and serious and organised crime*, Helpdesk Reports (London, 2019). Available at https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/20.500.12413/14437/561_Gender_and_Serious_and_Organised_Crime.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y [accessed 12 September 2022]; and UK Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office (Jacqueline Hicks), *The role of gender in serious and organised/transnational crime*, Helpdesk Reports (London, 2021). Available at https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/20.500.12413/16554/984_Gender_and_Serious_Organised_Crime.pdf?sequence=1 [accessed 12 September 2022].

22 Interpol, *Women as actors of transnational organized crime in Africa* (Lyon, 2021). Available at [Women as Actors of Transnational Organized Crime in Africa \(enact-africa.s3.amazonaws.com\)](https://www.unodc.org/women-as-actors-of-transnational-organized-crime-in-africa) [accessed 4 October 2023].

23 Fatjona Mejdini and Kristina Amerhauser for Global Initiative, Resilient Balkans, *Gender and Organized Crime*, (Geneva, 2022). Available at <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/GMFA-Gender-and-Organized-Crime-WEB.pdf> [accessed 12 June 2023].

24 Ibid, p. 4.

25 Arlene Tickner et al., *Women and Organized Crime in Latin America: Beyond victims and victimizers*, for The Colombian Organized Crime Observatory (2020). Available at https://insightcrime.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Women-and-Organized-Crime-in-Latin-America-beyond-victims-or-victimizers_InSight-Crime.pdf [accessed 12 May 2023].

3. Understanding gender in the context of organized crime groups



Key findings

- **Women are present in OC in greater numbers than generally perceived or acknowledged. According to available arrest data concerning criminal activities associated with OC, women are involved across all OC markets, with a notable presence in economic crimes and participation in human trafficking crimes.**
- **Gender is rarely seen as an important factor in policy approaches or police operations to prevent and combat TOC. Civil society organizations (CSOs) focus on gender issues to a greater extent.**
- **Contrary to gender stereotypes and perceptions, women are capable of using or ordering violence in the context of OC.**
- **“Female” traits and gender roles contribute to women largely being seen as victims of crime, rather than as active members of OCGs. Evidence shows, however, that women can and do play a variety of active roles in OCGs.**
- **Despite a tendency to view perpetrators and victims of crime in binary terms, there is a well-established “victim-offender overlap” between OC victimization and subsequent offending.**

The data collected and analysed for this report paints a complex picture of the understanding of gender in the context of OCGs. While the limited data available indicates that women are involved in OC activity – albeit in smaller numbers than men – this is not necessarily reflected in perceptions of women’s roles in OCGs. Furthermore, persistent gender stereotypes continue to shape how both practitioners and policymakers assess the role of women in OCGs.³⁶

Prevalence of women in organized crime groups

Reliable data on the prevalence of women in organized crime groups is often lacking across the OSCE area. For this reason, only a partial picture can be gained of women’s involvement in OCGs in terms of their concrete and active participation (see also [Chapter 5](#) below).

Questionnaire answers produced a fragmented picture of women’s involvement in OCGs in terms of their concrete and active participation. When asked about the proportion of men and women active in OCGs, respondents generally agreed that women are less frequently involved, with their estimates ranging from women making up between 5% and 40% of members of the OCGs. For example, one respondent stated

that “the overwhelming majority of members are men. I would say that less than 5% are women”, while another argued that “the largest percentage are men”.³⁷ Other respondents were more precise. One reported that “the participation of the female population in currently active organized crime is 6.8%”, while another indicated that “of the 349 OCGs under investigation in 2021, almost half of them (44%) were exclusively composed by men: the others contained one or more women. Overall, the ratio men/women is 87.5% of men and 12.5% women”.³⁸

Analysis of the statistical data provided in response to the questionnaire, however, suggests women play a more significant role in OCGs – across crime types – than perceived by most respondents.

From the nine pS that provided some disaggregated data, an average of 20% of those arrested for OC are women, with percentages ranging between 11% and 31% (see [Annex 2](#)). Information supplied by North Macedonia for this report indicates that over 16,000 women were arrested for activities across all OC markets between 2018 and 2021.³⁹ [Table 1](#) presents a breakdown of this data by crime field and gender.

³⁶ See for example, Tara Young, “Girls and gangs: ‘Shemale’ gangsters in the UK?” in *Youth Justice* 9:3 (2009), p. 235, in relation to research on female participation in gangs in the UK. She made this point in 2009 but it remains relevant today.

³⁷ Q17 and Q18.

³⁸ Q21 and Q2.

³⁹ Q1–Q28.

Table 1: Men and women arrested in North Macedonia between 2018 and 2021, by field of crime

Crime field	Women (%)	Men (%)
Economic crime	7.3	92.6
Criminal offences against the State	1.4	98.5
Drug trafficking	4.5	95.4
Smuggling of migrants	3.3	96.6
Property crime	5.2	94.7

Source: Data provided to the OSCE for this report (Q19).

Economic crimes typically see a higher proportion of women in the arrest figures. It is not clear if this is because it is easier to imagine women as being involved in financial transactions, making them more visible to investigators looking into such offences, or if there are other explanations.

Reflecting the perception that women have only limited involvement in OC, the questionnaire results indicate that gender is rarely seen as an important factor in policy approaches or police operations to prevent and combat TOC across the OSCE area. Notably, the questionnaire responses from civil society organizations (CSOs) focus more on gender issues than those from law enforcement agencies. This suggests that the gender-specific experiences of perpetrators, victims, witnesses and survivors are reflected to a greater extent in civil society initiatives than policies and actions to disrupt and prevent TOC of law enforcement agencies or ministries (see also [Chapters 6 and 7](#) below).

Box 3

Data on women's involvement in trafficking in human beings

While the agency of women in most types of TOC is often not captured in data, this is not the case regarding THB. Several studies include sex-disaggregated data that indicates high levels of female involvement in OCGs involved in THB.

An analysis published by UNODC in 2020 found that approximately 30% of THB prosecutions and convictions worldwide involve female offenders, while in most countries overall female offending rates for other crimes are below 15%.⁴⁰ Another UNODC report from 2022 indicates striking regional differences: While 85% of convicted THB perpetrators in Central Asia are female, the figure is between 20% and 25% in Western and Southern Europe.⁴¹ This is in line with other data sources. Arsovska and Begum have stated that in the early 2000s, "most countries in Western and Central Europe reported females involved in human trafficking at between 10% and 50% of those investigated/prosecuted".⁴² EU data shows that more than a quarter of people (27%) prosecuted for THB offences in the EU are women, while in Tajikistan, the Ministry of Internal Affairs reported that in the last six months of 2022, 14 women and 8 men were arrested for participation in human trafficking crimes.⁴³



40 UNODC, *Female Victims of Trafficking for Sexual Exploitation as Defendants, A Case Law Analysis* (Vienna, 2020).

41 UNODC, *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2022* (Vienna, 2022). Available at [GLOTIP_2022_web.pdf \(unodc.org\)](#) [accessed 13 September 2023]

42 Jana Arsovska and Popy Begum, "From West Africa to the Balkans: Exploring women's roles in transnational organized crime" in *Trends in Organized Crime* 17 (2014), p. 97.

43 I13. European Council/Council of the European Union, *The EU's work to combat human trafficking* (Brussels, 2021). Available at https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/eu-against-human-trafficking/?utm_source=facebook.com&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=20230609-human-trafficking-feature-story&utm_content=visual-carousel [accessed 12 June 2023]; Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Tajikistan, Report on Combatting Trafficking in Human Beings presented at the "OSCE Dialogue Platform on Counteracting Trafficking in Human Beings (CTHB)" hosted by the OSCE Programme Office in Dushanbe (28 March 2023).



This data reflects the findings of an analysis of criminal cases which has shown that women perpetrators in the field of THB often hold low-ranking positions in trafficking networks and perform activities that put them at greater risk of detection by law enforcement authorities. These activities include advertising services by trafficking victims, recruiting and controlling victims, and collecting criminal proceeds from exploitation (see also [Chapter 5](#) below).⁴⁴

However, there is evidence of a growing recognition that a lack of attention to the role of women in OCGs is impeding effective responses to OC. A report by the Swedish Police Authority published in 2021 underlined that “research into women in criminal milieus has for a long time been – and in some respects still is – a blind spot”.⁴⁵ As a result, “there is currently a lack of data regarding the scale of women’s involvement”.⁴⁶ “Their [women’s] influence has not yet been mapped out and classified, which means that they have been able to contribute to the activities of criminal milieus” without much attention or scrutiny.⁴⁷

The role of gender stereotypes

Both existing research and the data collected for this report underline the impact of long-standing gender stereotypes on the understanding of gender in the context of TOC and OCGs. Established narratives reflect gendered assumptions that women with links to OCGs are primarily family members of male criminals, but their “female” characteristics prevent them from having a criminal role. Such stereotypes impede an accurate and nuanced understanding of the extent to which women actively contribute to the activities of OCGs, as well as the different roles they play within these groups (see also [Chapter 5](#) below). Improved data collection and analysis would help to address this knowledge gap and promote a more holistic understanding of the role of gender in OCGs.

Gender and violence

One particularly persistent way gender stereotypes affect understanding of the role of women in OCGs is the link between TOC, violence and masculinity. Responses to the questionnaire indicate that one of the reasons why women are often considered less involved in OCGs is because TOC is associated with violence, and violence is perceived as a specifically masculine trait. One respondent explained their

view that “men are more prone to risks and violence [...] the gender vulnerabilities of men are risk tolerance, inclination to violence [...] markets with more use of violence are dominated by men”.⁴⁸ Another reflected that “the role of men in OCGs = the highest positions of power: violence, enforcement”.⁴⁹

Evidence shows, however, that women do demonstrate violence in the context of TOC, even if it generally is less direct or results in less serious injury than male violence.⁵⁰ According to one law enforcement agency,

“women (especially younger women) are using more violence than before and are prouder of their criminal lifestyle.”⁵¹

This is in line with evidence from social services that highlight female involvement in violence in the context of OC: “Reports are coming in about girls who use violence or abuse other girls or in some cases are on the fringes of gang environments. Some express [...] concerns about girls [that] seem to be more similar to those about boys [in terms of using violence]”.⁵² More broadly, for example, UK prisons now see greater rates of violence from women than from men, with the rate of assaults in female jails having risen by 21% in 2022 compared to 2021 levels.⁵³

It is important to recognize the complex nature of female violence in OCGs (see [Box 4: The victim-offender overlap](#)). Evidence suggests there is a link between domestic violence suffered and perpetrated by women involved in OC, including using violence as a way to resist a partner who is himself violent.⁵⁴ While violence towards outsiders, other OCG members, or rivals is a behaviour rarely associated with women in OCGs, some respondents noted that women involved in OCGs may use violence in the context of already violent relationships.⁵⁵

44 UNODC, *Female Victims of Trafficking for Sexual Exploitation as Defendants, A Case Law Analysis* (Vienna, 2020).

45 Swedish Police Authority, *Women’s influence on and involvement in serious violence in criminal milieus*, A440.265/2019 (Stockholm, 2021): p. 12.

46 Swedish Police Authority, *Women’s influence on and involvement in serious violence in criminal milieus*, A440.265/2019 (Stockholm, 2021): p. 4.

47 Swedish Police Authority, *Women’s influence on and involvement in serious violence in criminal milieus*, A440.265/2019 (Stockholm, 2021): p. 13.

48 Q4.

49 Q17.

50 Federico Varese, *Mafia Life: Love, Death, and Money at the Heart of Organized Crime* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018): p. 123.

51 Q26.

52 Socialstyrelsen, *Orosanmälingarna ökar – berör var tionde barn* (Stockholm, 2022). Available at <https://www.socialstyrelsen.se/om-socialstyrelsen/pressrum/press/orosanmalningarna-okar--beror-var-tionde-barn/> [accessed 1 April 2023].

53 Insidettime, *Female jails are more violent* (2023). Available at <https://insidettime.org/female-jails-are-more-violent/> [accessed 26 June 2023].

54 Michael Salter, “Multi-perpetrator domestic violence”, *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse* 15/2 (2014): pp. 102–112.

55 Q5 and Q14.

“Female” traits and gender roles

Societies across the OSCE area have long held gendered assumptions regarding work roles. Women are often considered to have and use “soft skills” such as teamwork, emotional empathy, time management and communication skills. This means that they are viewed as particularly suited to roles as carers or supporters of men rather than being capable of acting of their own accord.

Women’s perceived role as guardians of family and transmitters of family values is reflected in women being more likely to be reported as “fixers”, the actors making the business of TOC run smoothly, rather than as engaging directly in the core criminal activities of the group (see [Chapter 5](#) below).⁵⁶ Roles associated with women include: responsibilities for managing relationships, accounts and intelligence; acting as “lookouts”; and participating as facilitators or “fronts” for the transport of illicit goods or to disguise OCG activities behind a reputable facade.⁵⁷ Evidence presented in this report suggests that such perceptions mean that law enforcement and civil society do not recognize women’s active participation in core OC activities.⁵⁸

Women as victims

The prevailing narrative surrounding women and OC is that women are generally victims rather than perpetrators of crime.⁵⁹ The dominance of the victimhood narrative can leave little space for more nuanced approaches that take into account the complexity of the ways in which women are affected by or contribute to TOC. Simply equating women with victims hampers a comprehensive understanding of the gender aspects of TOC and risks, for example, excluding women from perpetrator diversion programmes. It can thus undermine efforts to improve both prevention and investigation of TOC.

The majority of respondents in this study recognized that women can be perpetrators as well as victims of OC. However, the lack of sex-disaggregated data or concrete examples of the roles played by women in OCGS creates difficulties in assessing how to translate this recognition into inclusive and operationally effective approaches that address both women and men.

Where examples were given, they revealed opportunities for improving investigations, understanding risks and vulnerabilities, and working with civil society to enhance prevention efforts.

⁵⁶ Serena Giunta, Giuseppe Mannino, Cinzia Bizzarri, and Giuliana La Fiura, “Being Mafia children: An empirical transgenerational research”, *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences* 9/1 (2018): pp. 191–202.

⁵⁷ See Q1–Q28.

⁵⁸ See Q1–Q28.

⁵⁹ Felia Allum and Anna Mitchell, *Graphic Narratives of Organised Crime, Gender and Power in Europe: Discarded Footnotes* (Abingdon, Routledge, 2022), and Felia Allum, *Women of the Mafia. Power and Influence of the Neapolitan Camorra* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2024, forthcoming).

Box 4

The victim-offender overlap

Despite a tendency to view perpetrators and victims of crime in binary terms, the relationship between prior victimization and offending is well established in criminology research. It is typically referred to as the “victim-offender overlap”.⁶⁰ Evidence shows that while not all crime victims become offenders, most offenders were previously victims of crime. The victimization experienced by individuals can produce negative physical, mental and behavioural outcomes, and some individuals may go on to commit crimes themselves.⁶¹

In the context of TOC, as with other types of crime, women can be both victims and offenders, whether simultaneously or in different periods of their lives. OCG members were often initially victims, and may retain a victim-offender overlap throughout their OCG membership. For instance, they may be so-called “Alpha victims”, a term applied to victims who have been forced or groomed before progressing to recruiting and exploiting others. While their situation within OCGs may improve and they may themselves commit offences, they can remain victims.⁶²

Two concrete examples of this complex and fluid overlap are the girls involved in so-called county lines (CL) gang groups, as well as Nigerian “Madams” involved in human trafficking with Nigerian confraternities. Both can move from being a victim to a perpetrator in order to survive. One girl involved in CL explained that to avoid being “a sex slave” she needed to find other girls for the boys, while a woman involved in a Nigerian confraternity described how she changed from being a sex worker for a Nigerian Madam to becoming a Madam herself.⁶³

There is growing recognition within criminal justice systems of the need to take account of the victim-offender overlap. The UK Crown Prosecution Service, for example, has issued guidance underlining that “it is vital we look into the evidence behind [gang] involvement, especially where vulnerable women and girls are concerned, to assess if they have been forced or groomed into committing crimes”, while also acknowledging that some women and girls may be complicit in this offending.⁶⁴

Prior victimization of the female victim-turned-offender is also an important feature in trafficking in human beings cases: Women often engage in trafficking as a means to end their own exploitation. International organizations have advocated for the application of a “non-punishment principle” to protect such victims-turned-offenders who commit crimes to escape their own exploitation.⁶⁵ The OSCE supports its pS in applying this principle by promoting gender-sensitive approaches to better protect trafficking victims and improve the investigation and prosecution of trafficking cases, as well as by combating gender stereotypes within criminal justice systems in the identification of victims and prosecution of perpetrators.

60 Mark T. Berg and Richard Felson. “Situational Factors and the Victim-Offender Overlap”. *Journal of Quantitative Criminology* (2018), 1–28.

61 Caitlin Delong and Jessica Reichert, *The victim-offender overlap: Examining the relationship between victimization and offending*, Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority Centre for Justice Research and Evaluation (2019). Available at <https://icjia.illinois.gov/researchhub/articles/the-victim-offender-overlap-examining-the-relationship-between-victimization-and-offending#> [accessed 27 June 2023]

62 Independent Anti-Slavery Commission, *Training Framework: Identification, Care and Support of Victims and Survivors of Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking* (2020). Available at <https://www.antislaverycommissioner.co.uk/media/1468/training-framework-identification-care-and-support-of-victims-and-survivors-of-modern-slavery-and-human-trafficking.pdf> [accessed 26 June 2023].

63 BBC3, *Hidden Girls Documentary* (2021). Available at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/playlist/episode/m0010dbw/hidden-girls> [accessed 1 Jan. 2023]; BBC News, *Girls are very much involved in exploitation in gangs* (2021). Available at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-58769115> [accessed 25 June 2023]; Tribunale Ordinario di ROMA, Sezione GIP–GUP Ufficio 18, proc.to n.25494 / IO R.G. notizie di reato procto 53 reg. gen. Ufficio GIP-GUP, Tribunale Roma, Ordinanza di Applicazione della custodia cautelare in carcere nei confronti di AK + 46: p. 226.

64 Crown Prosecutor Service, *Role of grooming of women involved in violent crime examined as part of new gangs guidance* (2020). Available at <https://www.cps.gov.uk/cps/news/role-grooming-women-involved-violent-crime-examined-part-new-gangs-guidance> [accessed 25 June 2023].

65 Council of Europe, *Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings* (Warsaw, 2005): Article 26. Available at <https://rm.coe.int/168008371d> [accessed 4 October 2023]; European Parliament and Council of the EU, *Directive 2011/36/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings and protecting its victims* (Brussels, 2011): Article 8. Available at <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32011L0036> [accessed 4 October 2023]; See also OSCE, *Policy and legislative recommendations towards the effective implementation of the non-punishment provision with regard to victims of trafficking* (Vienna, 2013). Available at [101002.pdf \(osce.org\)](https://www.osce.org/101002.pdf) [accessed 13 September 2023].

4. Gender and recruitment into organized crime groups



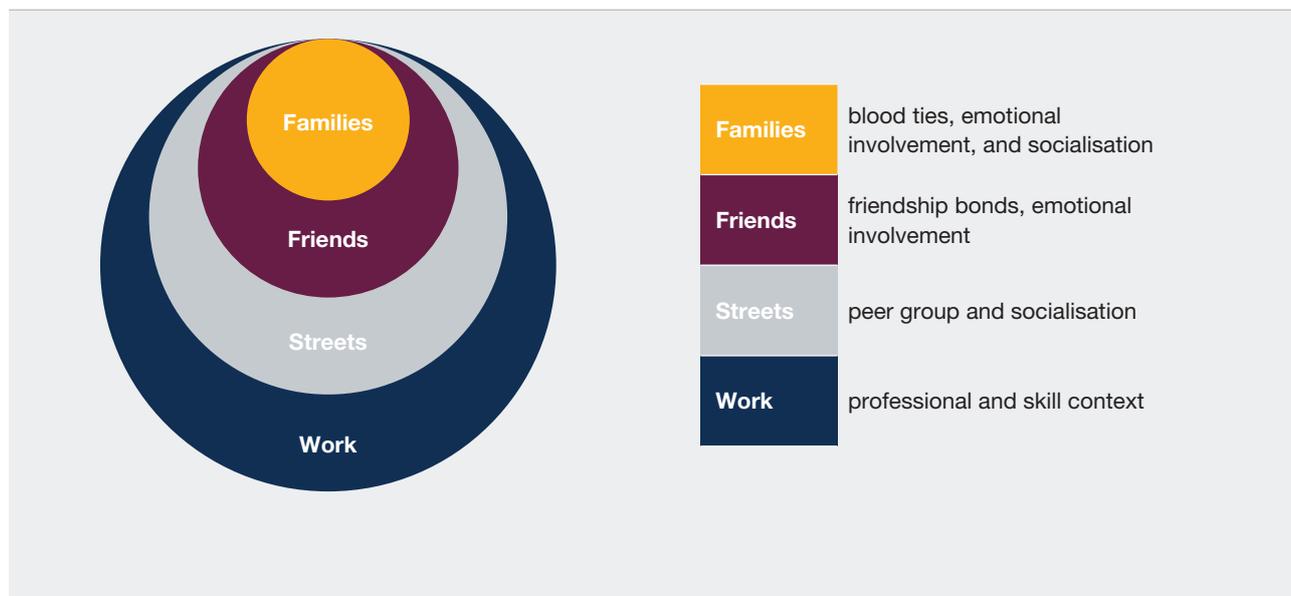
Key findings

- Four interrelated factors – or contextual fields – affect recruitment into OCGs: families, friends, streets, and work.
- Typical recruitment pathways into OCGs vary according to gender. Men are often drawn into criminality by their social context, being identified and recruited by criminal groups aware of their criminal capacities. In contrast, women typically become a part of OCGs by being born into a criminal family or through relationships with male OCG members.
- Socioeconomic inequalities and poverty are key drivers of recruitment and exploitation by OCGs of both women and men.
- Women’s recruitment into OCGs is often linked to sexual and emotional exploitation, violence, and abuse.

Recruitment into OCGs is often considered a clear-cut process, where individuals join a group, organization, or network. Their membership may be marked by an affiliation ritual, or by an individual performing tests or acts of courage to prove his or her ability and capacity to become fully involved in the group’s criminal activities and be a “trusted” group member.⁶⁶ However, looking at the factors and motivations behind why individuals join such groups reveals a more complex picture. This report has identified four interrelated factors – or contextual fields – to consider when analysing OCG recruitment: families, friends, streets, and work (see [Figure 1](#)).

It is the interplay between the individual, their family or clan, friends and associates, and the wider social and environmental context that determines how risk factors may result in involvement in OC activities and OCG membership.⁶⁷ Individuals take their social capital into the relationships they form within these fields. In the context of OC, that capital is traded for status, power, and in some cases survival. Since these contextual fields are situated within societies with well-established gender norms, they are also affected by the different experiences of, and relationships between, men and women.

Figure 1: Contextual fields for recruitment into OC



Source: OSCE (2023). Authors’ analysis of questionnaire and interview answers.

66 Federico Varese, *Mafia Life* (2018): p. 123.

67 Francesco Calderoni et al., “Recruitment into organized crime: An agent-based approach testing the impact of different policies”, *Journal of Quantitative Criminology* (2021): pp. 1–41.

Gender and pathways into organized crime

Both criminal justice authorities and researchers have considered how gender affects recruitment into OCGs. The questionnaire and interview responses provided for this report mirror existing research indicating that female outsiders are recruited and targeted because they are viewed as “clean skins” who are less likely to be identified by the police as OCG members or actors.⁶⁸

The results of the questionnaire and interviews, however, indicate a general lack of understanding that recruitment practices may be different according to gender, or that the different experiences of men and women can play a part in vulnerability to recruitment. More than two-thirds (70%) of questionnaire respondents either did not know whether gender played a role in OC recruitment, or disagreed with this idea. This seems to reflect a broader lack of awareness or understanding of how individuals become involved in OCGs.

Closer analysis suggests however that some respondents had indeed reflected on how gender impacts involvement in OCGs, particularly concerning the contextual fields most relevant for the recruitment for women and men. One respondent, for example, explained that in their view, “for women, [recruitment] is mainly through the family”.⁷⁰ Another stated that “mostly, women are motivated by friendship/concubine relations”.⁷¹ This supports the view that women enter OCGs through family and friends, including emotional and intimate connections with OCG leaders.

Respondents indicated that men, in contrast, tend to become involved because they have a common criminal past with their peers, shared childhood experiences, or joint projects, all producing loyalty to OCGs. “An ideal of brotherhood and comradeship is more relevant among men”, noted one respondent.⁷² Italian prosecutors suggested that recruitment of men is less family-centred, but based rather on the social context within which men find themselves, whether poverty, lack of opportunities or jobs, greed, opportunism or profit.⁷³

Box 5

Insiders and outsiders

When looking at recruitment into OCGs, there are two categories of actors that are useful to focus upon: insiders and outsiders. These categories intersect with gender in ways that are important for criminal justice authorities to understand if they are to effectively disrupt recruitment pathways.

“Insiders” are individuals who are related to an OCG through family members involved in crime. This study suggests that women often become involved in OC because of family networks or (perceived) romantic relationships. Children born into crime families – such as mafia families – are an important subset of insiders. They can be educated into criminal values from an early age, and therefore do not need to be recruited or spend time as “foot soldiers” to prove their commitment to the group. Their involvement is automatically more intricate, and they are more likely to have access to the inner workings of an OCG and its key decision makers and leaders. Furthermore, the “values” of OCGs often involve showing respect to female relatives, although this does not preclude domestic abuse.⁶⁹

“Outsiders” refers to those who are complete outsiders to an OCG, both in terms of family networks and social context. For such individuals, there appear to be general motives for joining OCGs that apply to both men and women. These include friendship groups, survival strategies, greed and self-interest. Girls and young women who spend a lot of their time on the street seeking to make money to survive can be vulnerable to recruitment. Often they become victims of exploitation in the sex or drugs industry, or turn to criminality as part of their survival strategy. These survival strategies are forms of agency that are fluid and contextual. They are however poorly understood.

68 Havad, T., *Girls in gangs: how they are recruited, exploited and trapped*, The Conversation (2022). Available at <https://theconversation.com/girls-in-gangs-how-they-are-recruited-exploited-and-trapped-175369> [accessed 1 February 2023]; Cecilia Farfán-Méndez, “Women’s Involvement in Organised Crime and Drug Trafficking: A Comparative Analysis of the Sinaloa and Yamaguchi-gumi Organisations” in *The Impact of Global Drug Policy on Women: Shifting the Needle* by Buxton, J., Margo, G. and Burger, L. (eds.) (Bingley: Emerald Publishing, 2020): pp. 159–168.

69 Books on organized crime and mafias often explain how within such groups, the main criminal values that are upheld and followed as “codes of honour” and “rules of behaviour” are values such as respect, honour, silence, family and tradition. These are all values that do not undermine or violate female relatives, but rather show them respect.

70 Q13.

71 Q16 and 17.

72 Q9.

73 Q13 and 17.

Another aspect responders considered is gender-based differences in so-called initiation rituals. Men must often prove the usefulness of their “skill set” to the criminal organization, whereas women do not have to do this.⁷⁴ Rather, women are useful to OCGs because law enforcement bodies often consider them to have no agency inside OCGs, leaving them undetected and able to act with impunity.⁷⁵

Some respondents highlighted how recruitment in certain environments can be affected by gender. One reported that within families, women may be recruited for specific roles. Since the family is considered a “safe space”, such recruitment may not necessarily be explicit.⁷⁶ However, the “lower end” OCG workforce recruited on the street can be both women and men.

Other respondents focused on the commonalities driving recruitment of both women and men. Many pointed to poverty and inequality as key factors behind recruitment, in conjunction with the exploitative methods used by recruiters. One respondent argued that “*the promise of a powerful life without*

economic problems is the greatest source of attraction both for men and women”.⁷⁷

Even where the evidence collected for this report indicates awareness of the impact of gender on recruitment, this did not seem to translate into gender-sensitive interventions to disrupt recruitment pathways.

Only one pS contributing to this research shared an example of an inclusive and gender-responsive approach to disruption (See **Chapter 7** below). This indicates a need for further research to support criminal justice authorities to better understand the role gender plays in OCG recruitment and its implications for effective action to prevent women and men becoming involved in TOC.

Box 6

The role of technology in TOC

As in other areas of life, the rise of the internet and social media has profoundly influenced how OCGs organize their criminal activities and communicate with the wider society. Both law enforcement agencies and civil society organizations working in crime prevention have noted that OCGs now use social media to enhance and widen their recruitment techniques, communication and marketing strategies, and their exchanges with competitors. More research is needed to explore how gender affects the role of technology in TOC and OCGs.

The use of social media to show off, gain social status and threaten others has moved into the criminal underworld. Research on gangs in the United Kingdom found that younger members were less motivated by profit, but instead were focused on their image and reputation.⁷⁸ One respondent in the interviews conducted for this study suggested that young women may use social media differently from young men: “*We are not sure, but we believe that women use more social media, they are more similar to an ‘influencer’ [when related to OC]*”.⁷⁹

The trend of using social media to give the impression of a certain lifestyle is exploited by OCGs to recruit new members. By posing attractive photos of what can be obtained by working for these groups, they can attract young people looking for easy money or who have a desire to belong.⁸⁰ It has been suggested that OCGs post photos of luxury cars on Facebook to recruit Albanian-speaking runners from Albania.⁸¹ In Canada, one respondent suggested that “*street gangs use rap videos and social media to portray an inflated criminal lifestyle to recruit new members*”.⁸²

74 17.

75 17.

76 17.

77 Q13.

78 Home Office, *Review of Drugs – evidence relating to drug use, supply and effects, including current trends and future* (London, 2020): p. 114. Available at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/882953/Review_of_Drugs_Evidence_Pack.pdf [accessed 27 May 2023].

79 I8.

80 Global Initiative (Siria Gastelum-Felix), *Social Networks: The Showcase of Organised Crime* (2014). Available at <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/social-networks/#:~:text=This%20story%20shows%20how%20criminals,Images%20speak%20louder%20than%20words>. [accessed 13 July 2023].

81 O11.

82 Q5.

Other respondents pointed to the direct engagement of young people by OCGs on social media. In the United Kingdom, many young people involved in CL admitted to being contacted and recruited via social media.⁸³ The same pattern was noted in Marseille, France, where drug dealers put out adverts on Snapchat for “look-outs”.⁸⁴ Another trend observed in this assessment is OCGs using social media to target possible victims. For example, OCGs in Moldova used social media platforms to recruit young women for sexual exploitation and men for labour exploitation.⁸⁵

Several international investigations, for example the Venetic (2020) and Encrochat (2012) operations, revealed extensive criminal communication networks operating across Europe and the world that were kept hidden from law enforcement agencies through the use of encryption.⁸⁶ There is some dispute as to whether women play a role these networks. Swedish police reported that “data from investigations emanating from encrypted apps shows that it is only men who have encrypted phones”, but that “analysis of the data from Encrochat in one police region revealed that women were tasked with taking over the responsibility for a criminal activity when the man was not able to for various reasons, like being in prison”.⁸⁷

Sexual and emotional violence and exploitation in the context of recruitment

Both existing research and the findings of the questionnaire and interviews conducted for this report point to a link between recruitment and sexual and emotional exploitation and abuse.

This is fundamental to understanding the gender aspects of recruitment into OCGs, and suggests that identifying and addressing abusive relationships may form a potential prevention route.⁸⁸

UK research on pathways into CL groups has underlined the importance of romantic relationships in the recruitment of

women and girls.⁸⁹ A study by the UK National Crime Agency in January 2019 found that “vulnerable females are targeted by male offenders who create the impression of a romantic relationship through affection and the provision of gifts such as alcohol, cigarettes and drugs, before exploiting the victim in county lines activity.”⁹⁰ This process of “seduction” rather than “coercion” in the recruitment of girls and young women has also been reported in other studies.⁹¹ While these young people may not experience this as grooming, young people seen as useful to the criminal activities may “eventually find themselves locked into a set of exploitative relationships which are hard to walk away from.”⁹² Such patterns often also characterize cases of trafficking in human beings: Feigned romantic relationships, referred to as the “lover-boy” method, are widely used by traffickers to lure girls and women into sexual exploitation.⁹³

83 Tirion Havard, *Girls in gangs: how they are recruited, exploited and trapped in The Conversation* (2022). Available at <https://theconversation.com/girls-in-gangs-how-they-are-recruited-exploited-and-trapped-175369>. See also Q28.

84 C News, “‘Nous voulons des personnes vives d’esprit et à l’affût’: l’incroyable ‘offre d’emploi’ de dealers marseillais” (2021). Available at <https://www.cnews.fr/france/2021-11-29/nous-voulons-des-personnes-vives-desprit-et-laffut-lincroyable-offre-demploi-de> [accessed 27 May 2023].

85 I12.

86 National Crime Agency, “NCA and police smash thousands of criminal conspiracies after infiltration of encrypted communication platform in UK’s biggest ever law enforcement operation” (2020). Available at <https://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/news/operation-venetic> [accessed 27 May 2023]; France 24, “Encrypted phone sting leads to global crackdown on organised crime” (2021). Available at <https://www.france24.com/en/asia-pacific/20210608-encrypted-phone-sting-leads-to-global-crackdown-on-organised-crime> [accessed 27 May 2023].

87 Swedish Police Authority, *Women’s influence on and involvement in serious violence in criminal milieus*, A440.265/2019 (Stockholm, 2021): p.7.

88 Q3, Q6 and Q19.

89 See Paul Andell and John Pitts, *Preventing the violent and sexual victimisation of vulnerable gang-involved and gang-affected children and young people in Ipswich*. Commissioned by Suffolk’s Public Health and Community Safety Team (2017). Available at <https://www.uos.ac.uk/sites/default/files/Research%20Report%20by%20Paul%20Andell%20and%20John%20Pitts.pdf> [accessed 1 March 2023]; Hudek, Jo, *Criminal exploitation of children and young people on county lines and the response of St Giles CLVSS Evaluation Report – September 2022* (London: JH Consulting, 2022): p. 4; Tirion Elizabeth Havard, et al., “Street gangs and coercive control: The gendered exploitation of young women and girls in county lines”, in *Criminology & Criminal Justice* (2021).

90 National Crime Agency, *County Lines Drug Supply, Vulnerability and Harm 2018* (London, 2019). Available at <https://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/who-we-are/publications/257-county-lines-drug-supply-vulnerability-and-harm-2018/file> [accessed 1 April 2023].

91 Carlene Firmin, *Peer on Peer Abuse: Safeguarding Implications of Contextualising Abuse between Young People within Social Fields* (2015). Available at <http://uobrep.openrepository.com/uobrep/bitstream/10547/565790/1/repository.pdf> and Andell, Paul and John Pitts, *Preventing the violent and sexual victimisation of vulnerable gang-involved* (2017): p. 12.

92 Carlene Firmin, 2009, quoted in Andell, Paul and John Pitts, *Preventing the violent and sexual victimisation of vulnerable gang-involved* (2017), p. 17.

93 OSCE, *Applying gender-sensitive approaches in combating trafficking in human beings* (Vienna, 2021). Available at [486700_1.pdf \(osce.org\)](https://www.osce.org/486700_1.pdf) [accessed 13 September 2023].

Evidence from several pS suggests that women’s recruitment into OC is interwoven with severely harmful features.⁹⁴

An examination of a police database in one pS to explore the family histories of women identified as being involved in OCG activities revealed a significant level of physical and emotional abuse and harassment suffered by women perpetrating offences typically associated with OC. This has important consequences for the victim-offender overlap (see **Chapter 3** above). Research into CL in the UK found that some women who are recruited as part of supposed romantic relationships with men “are subject to sexual exploitation and may not acknowledge they are victims due to the nature of the grooming by offenders, i.e., they believe they are in a relationship with them.”⁹⁵

It is, however, also important to recognize that gender biases may impede more nuanced understanding of the link between sexual abuse and exploitation and involvement in OCGs for both boys and girls. Practitioners working on CL – such as social workers, teachers or health practitioners – acknowledge that they have a tendency to automatically see girls as victims of child sexual exploitation (CSE) and boys as victims of child criminal exploitation (CCE), “when you know it’s probably both”.⁹⁶ Another study highlighted that unreported sexual exploitation of young girls and sexual abuse of young boys as part of their involvement in CL is only now being acknowledged.⁹⁷ That study argued that applying gender stereotypes is unhelpful since it results in a lack of recognition of the group of women who are perpetrators or of those who are victim-perpetrators. These women remain hidden and ignored by law enforcement agencies and civil society, but not by OCGs, who use them effectively.

94 Q5, Q16, I1, I9, I10 and I12.

95 National Crime Agency, *County Lines Drug Supply, Vulnerability and Harm 2018* (London, 2019). Available at <https://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/who-we-are/publications/257-county-lines-drug-supply-vulnerability-and-harm-2018/file> [accessed 1 April 2023].

96 Jo Hudek, *Criminal exploitation of children and young people on county lines and the response of St Giles CLVSS Evaluation Report – September 2022* (London, JH Consulting, 2022): p. 4.

97 Ofsted et al., *Protecting children from criminal exploitation, human trafficking and modern slavery: an addendum*, (Manchester: Ofsted, 2018): p. 6. Available at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/756031/Protecting_children_from_criminal_exploitation_human_trafficking_modern_slavery_addendum_141118.pdf [accessed 1 March 2023].

5. Gendered roles within organized crime groups



Key findings

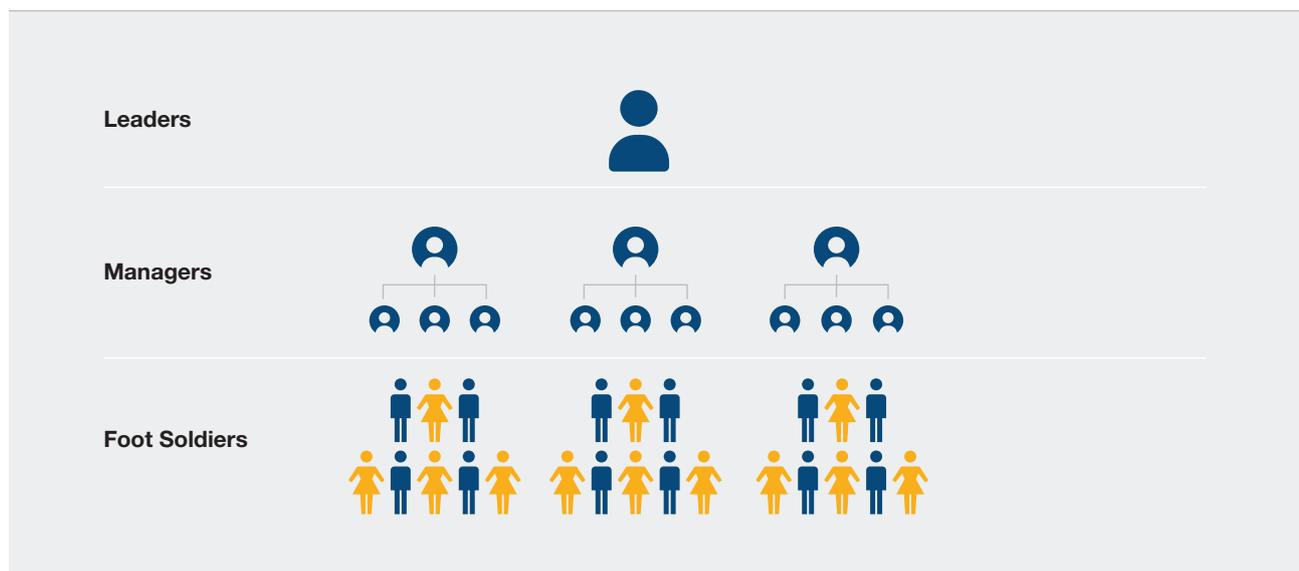
- Reflecting traditional gender stereotypes, in the context of OC women are perceived as passive, less violent and subject to the decision-making of men. This can allow them to act almost invisibly within OCGs, remaining undetected by criminal justice systems despite contributing to the criminal activities of these groups.
- In contrast, evidence shows that women can and do hold significant agency in OCGs. Women are active across the entire organizational hierarchy, functioning as leaders, managers and foot soldiers, as well as facilitating and enabling criminal activity.
- Women's roles in OCGs include conveying messages from and to prisons, assisting fugitives, collecting protection money, managing and laundering money derived from illicit activities, ordering violence, and managing various types of trafficking. Women also provide advice and assistance within OCGs on law, finances, logistics and other specialist domains.
- Women who are partners or family members of male OC figures frequently have important information about criminal operations and structures, and often act as advisors for their male partners and family members.
- Women play a key role in transmitting the culture and ideology of OCGs, including codes of silence and honour. In this way women contribute to the socialization process and development of group bonds within OCGs.

The evidence collected and analysed for this assessment clearly shows that across the OSCE area, OC is still perceived as dominated by men. Participant responses indicate that both law enforcement and civil society consider the role of women as marginal or exceptional. Empirical data, however, paints a picture of a more complex criminal landscape, where women hold important agency across all levels of hierarchy inside OCGs and across all criminal markets.

Not recognizing women's agency in OC can impede comprehension of its complexity and restrict the ability of criminal justice practitioners to combat the threat of TOC effectively.

This chapter first examines respondents' overall understanding of women's roles in OCGs across the OSCE area, before looking at the functions held by women at different levels of the criminal hierarchy (see [Figure 2](#)).

Figure 2: Hierarchy levels inside OCGs



Source: Authors' interpretation of the questionnaire and interview data following Abadinsky, Howard, *Organized Crime* (Chicago: Prentice Press, 1990).

Gendered perceptions of roles within OCGs

The questionnaire responses reflect the typical view of OCGs as gender-stratified structures, where men have specified roles, jobs and duties, and women either do not have meaningful roles, or have very different roles from men. Some respondents barely acknowledged a position for women in OCGs at all. One insisted that “women have a very marginal role”, while another stated that “in most but not all non-traditional organized crime groups, women do not hold positions of authority”.⁹⁸

Other respondents described a division of male and female roles in OCGs that closely mirrors traditional gender stereotypes: Men are leaders and women have supporting roles.⁹⁹ One respondent explained that “women are helpers, concealers, executors and men are the organizers”, a characterization shared by another, who stated that “women act as accomplices, executors. Men mainly play role of organizing crime.”¹⁰⁰ A third respondent argued that “to my knowledge, there are almost no cases where a woman has been the organizer without a male figure standing above her, who creates all and provides ‘protection and security’. Men are the authorities and therefore it is difficult for them to have a woman as a leader and boss of the organized criminal group”.¹⁰¹

Some respondents explicitly highlighted women’s roles as being distinct from the violent activities of particular groups. One respondent listed a number of functions women take on in OCGs, including “strawmen, logistical support, intermediary, translator, accomplices, executors,” noting that often “women [are] purely involved in the money laundering and less in violent operations”.¹⁰² Similarly, another respondent stated that “if the ‘rules’ allow women members, they do mostly less dangerous/important jobs like carrying moderate sums of money and delivering messages”.¹⁰³ Other respondents highlighted that women are specifically chosen to perform certain roles “because they are less suspicious”.¹⁰⁴

The intertwining of family structures and gendered perceptions significantly shapes women’s roles within OC. Women

as wives, mothers, sisters, daughters, sisters-in-law and aunts play a crucial role in OCGs as partners in crime. This underscores the need to explore how family ties influence societal views and opportunities for women’s participation in criminal enterprises. One respondent highlighted how women’s activity in OCGs can stem from the role they play in their family:

“ In recent years, women, thanks also to increased education, have taken on significant roles within criminal organizations, especially if they have family links to the top management of these organizations. In particular, when the male leadership to whom they are linked by family ties has ceased to exist, they replace them, even taking over the leadership of entire mafia families.”¹⁰⁵

The way women are concealed within criminal networks as family members results in their contributions frequently going unnoticed. However, they significantly influence the transmission of OCG culture, ideology, and the upbringing of the next generation within OCGs. Women’s insight into the functioning of criminal groups also leaves them well-placed to serve as advisors and mentors. One respondent elaborated:

“ One of the main active functions common to women in all Mafia organizations is the transmission of the cultural code and ideology of their criminal group. Mafia families tend to keep their children’s education within the home, as they fear external influence in youth education. The criminal organization therefore transmits its own ‘cultural ideology’, its own code of values, defending and protecting its cultural and social roots to encourage the formation of new Mafia personalities. In this process of cultural transmission, women, the main repositories of Mafia values and the only owners of the socialization process, have thus contributed to the formation of criminal careers and the cultural continuity of Mafia consortiums.”¹⁰⁶

A small number of respondents acknowledged the harmful effects of gendered approaches to combating TOC. One concluded that the male-focused approach and understanding of OC actors “proved to be a misinterpretation that cost [us] dearly, as it has brought a considerable advantage to Mafia associations, since women were able to act almost undisturbed and, therefore, be used in various sectors.”¹⁰⁷ This is in line with research indicating that women managing operations in OCGs can often act with impunity, unseen and undetected by law enforcement agencies, which do not consider women as

98 Q11 and Q5.

99 Margaret E. Beare, *Women and Organized Crime* (Ottawa: Public Safety Canada, 2010); Dina Siegel, “Women in transnational organized crime”, *Trends in Organized Crime* 17 (2014): pp. 52–65; Valeria Pizzini-Gambetta, “Women and the mafia: a methodology minefield”, *Global Crime* 9/4 (2008): pp. 348–353; Rossella Selmini, “Women in organized crime”, *Crime and Justice* 49/1 (2020): pp. 339–383

100 Q20 and Q16.

101 Q24.

102 Q2.

103 Q8.

104 Q17.

105 Q13.

106 Q12.

107 Q12.

relevant and important actors in criminal enterprises because of existing gender biases.¹⁰⁸

Leaders

Evidence collected and analysed for this report shows that women can and do take on leadership roles in OCGs, thus influencing and shaping how criminal organizations conduct their activities. Importantly, examples show that women act as leaders in various types of OCGs and across various countries and regions.¹⁰⁹

Italian mafias

Women in Italian mafias have traditionally been considered mothers, educating children and protecting the continuation of mafia cultural norms. This role has given them the status of “official members” of such OCGs, albeit subordinate to men in the mafia hierarchy.¹¹⁰ However, evidence suggests that women hold important independent agency and sometimes assume leadership positions. They also act as “partners in crime” and advisers. Italy’s National Anti-Mafia and Counter-Terrorism Prosecutor’s Office (DNAA) has also noted that more educated women are becoming involved in mafia activities as front company directors and defence lawyers.¹¹¹ The following selected examples showcase some of the leadership roles women have fulfilled:

Neapolitan Camorra

A.D.A., a member of the D’Amico clan from the Conocal Estate, Ponticelli in the suburbs of Naples, was murdered like “a real boss” in October 2015 in broad daylight in front of her children. A.D.A had followed in her brothers’ criminal footsteps. She initially worked with her brothers for the local Sarno clan, but when the family formed an autonomous clan, the D’Amico clan, her leadership skills and violent nature emerged. She directed the drug piazzas¹¹² in her neighbour-

hood, led the drug dealers, recruited and instructed look-outs,¹¹³ and ordered punitive attacks on her rivals.¹¹⁴

Calabrian 'Ndrangheta

According to judicial documents, R.M. led the Gallico Cosca from Palmi in the early 2000s.¹¹⁵ She was not only a *sorella d’omertà* (“sister of omertà”, the code of silence), but made decisions on criminal strategies and activities – extortion, winning public contracts, etc. – across the Cosca’s territory. She was an organizer, co-ordinator and independent leader, respected by other gang members and intimidating local citizens. According to legal documents, she complemented her brother’s leadership when he was on the run. For example, she organized activities including handling money and ordering acts of violent extortion. In 2023, she was sentenced to 17.5 years in prison for her role as “the true regent of the gang for years. She managed the business.”

Sicilian Cosa Nostra

F.M. was the wife of a boss from Catania who was given a life sentence in the 1990s. Upon her husband’s arrest, she carried on leading the clan. She was arrested in 1995 and, in 1997, became the first woman to be incarcerated under the “41-bis regime”, a harsh prison regime usually reserved for mafia bosses. She directed a protection racket and also organized the importation of arms from then Yugoslavia. When she was arrested, it is believed that she was planning to eliminate a rival.¹¹⁶

Puglian Sacra Corona Unità

C.A. and C.R.A. were sisters married to members of the Sacra Corona Unità. Initially, C.A. did not follow her husband’s decision to collaborate with the State. When she did, she revealed that she was the clan’s accountant and had worked with her

108 Elena Martellozzo, “Women with and Against the Mafia. A Case Study of Sicily”, in *SIAC-Journal – Zeitschrift für Polizeiwissenschaft und polizeiliche Praxis* (2) (2005): pp. 48–59.

109 In the following examples, initials are used rather than full names to protect the privacy of the individuals mentioned.

110 Ombretta Ingrassi, *Gender and Organized crime in Italy: Women’s agency in Italian Mafias* (London, I.B Tauris, 2021); Dickie, John. *Mafia Brotherhoods: Camorra, Mafia, 'Ndrangheta: The rise of the Honoured Societies* (London: Coronet, 2012); Tribunale Ordinario di ROMA, Sezione GIP—GUP, Ufficio 18.

111 Ministero dell’Interno “La donna nella criminalità organizzata” with the section, part IV: Argomenti di particolare interesse, Rapporto Annuale sul fenomeno della criminalità organizzata per il 1995 (Rome, 1996).

112 Drug piazzas in the mafia context refer to designated areas or territories controlled by OCGs for distributing and selling illegal drugs. See Jason Pine, *The Art of Making Do in Naples* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

113 A lookout in the mafia context is an individual hired by a CO to vigilantly monitor a local neighbourhood, especially watching for police presence and potential threats from rival groups that could disrupt their illicit operations. See Jason Pine, *The Art of Making Do in Naples* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

114 Information from: <https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2015/10/11/napoli-uccisa-annunziata-damico-sorella-del-boss-ora-sara-guerra-totale/2115562/> [accessed 10 March 2023]; <https://www.irpinianews.it/uccisa-annunziata-damico-sorella-del-boss-ora-sara-guerra-totale/> [accessed 10 March 2023];

115 Information from: https://www.ilmessaggero.it/podcast/donne_di_mala/teresa_la_reggente_ndrina_gallico-7203948.html [accessed 10 March 2023]; https://www.lacnews24.it/cronaca/truffe-del-clan-gallico-alla-regione-calabria-12-condanne-nel-processo-primo-grado_169469/ [accessed 10 March 2023];

116 Girolamo Alberto Di Pisa, *La Mafia e le donne d’onore. Un quadro generale – Parte seconda, L’identità di Clio*, (2019). Available at <https://www.lidentitadiclio.com/la-mafia-e-le-donne-donore-parte-seconda/> [accessed 5 July 2023]; see also <https://www.sicilianetwork.info/donne-e-mafia-lemancipazione-in-corso/> [accessed 5 July 2023].

husband in a co-leadership role.¹¹⁷ Together with her husband, she oversaw the trafficking, distribution and profitability of the illicit drug trade, while also being involved in the management of the criminal organization's everyday activities and territory.

Box 7

Women imprisoned for participation in mafia-type criminal organizations in Italy

On 31 January 2023, in Italy there were officially 728 prisoners convicted for being leaders of mafia associations and imprisoned under the so-called “hard prison regime” (41 bis).¹¹⁸ Of these, only 12 were women, a figure that has remained consistent over the last four years (see [Table 2](#)). Between 2020 and 2023, around two-thirds of the women imprisoned under this regime were associated with the Neapolitan Camorra, with a quarter linked to the Calabrian 'Ndrangheta. No women prisoners linked to Sicilian mafias were identified.

Table 2: Number of Italian inmates currently held in prison under harsh prison regime.

Year	Men	%	Women	%	total
2020	743	98.2	13	1.7	756
2021	742	98.4	12	1.5	754
2022	737	98.4	12	1.6	749
2023	716	98.4	12	1.6	728

Source: DNAA, [law 41.bis] January 2023.

Notably, the average age of these women was 65. This age profile warrants further exploration. It could suggest that law enforcement agencies are identifying, investigating and prosecuting women OCG members rather late in their criminal careers, potentially when their husbands or other family members are in prison or have died.¹¹⁹

West African confraternities and brotherhoods

In West Africa, confraternities originated as politicized student groups on campuses following Nigeria's independence in 1960.¹²⁰ Over time, these ideological groups have transformed into criminal groups involved in drug trafficking and human trafficking for sexual exploitation in Europe.

Violence is frequently used against both rival groups and the individuals trafficked from Africa to Europe.¹²¹ Often presented as “male only” and purely focused on drug trafficking, these complex transnational OCGs networks are also involved in human trafficking and money laundering activities. Moreover, they do have women involved as members and advisors.¹²²

Examples of this are women who function as so-called “madams” and act as leaders in human trafficking networks. As in OCGs in Italy, these women are often wives and sisters of male OCG members. While these women might not be “official” members, they take on similar functions as such members.

¹¹⁷ Information from: <https://www.lagazzettadelmezzogiorno.it/news/brindisi/1386090/brindisi-le-pentite-parlano-ci-avvisarono-che-stavano-per-arrestarci.html> [accessed 1 May 2023]; <https://www.lagazzettadelmezzogiorno.it/news/brindisi/1381083/brindisi-le-donne-dei-boss-parlano-e-ricostruiscono-la-mappa-dello-spaccio.html> [accessed 2 May 2023].

¹¹⁸ Ministero della Giustizia, *Relazione del Ministero sull'amministrazione della giustizia anno 2022, Inaugurazione dell'Anno Giudiziario 2023*, (2023): pp. 777–778. Available at https://www.giustizia.it/cmsresources/cms/documents/anno_giudiziario2023_relazione_amministrazione2022.pdf [accessed 1 May 2023].

¹¹⁹ Alessio Pio Pierro, “41 bis: chi sono le 13 donne sottoposte al carcere duro?” (2023). Available at <https://nxwss.com/41-bis-chi-sono-le-13-donne-sottoposte-al-carcere-duro/> [accessed 2 February 2023]. This article refers to 2020 data.

¹²⁰ See Lebur, Célia and Joan Tilouine, *Mafia Africa, Les nouveaux gangsters du Nigeria à la conquête du monde* (Paris: Flammarion, 2023).

¹²¹ See Tribunale Ordinario di ROMA, Sezione GIP–GUP, Ufficio 18, proc.to n.25494 /IO R.G. notizie di reato procto 53 reg. gen. Ufficio GIP-GUP, Tribunale Roma, Ordinanza di Applicazione della custodia cautelare in carcere nei confronti di AK + 46, Rome.

¹²² See fn. 85; Conzo, G and G. Crimaldi, *Mafie, La Criminalità Straniera alla Conquista dell'Italia* (Villaricca: Edizioni Cento Autori 2014); Becucci, Stefano and Francesco Carchedi (eds), *Mafie straniere in Italia. Come operano, come si contrastano* (Milano: Franco Angeli, 2016).

O.C.

Considered an influential figure in the Nigerian mafia, O.C. was extradited to Rome in March 2022 to serve a 13-year prison sentence after being identified as the leader of a prostitution ring.¹²³ She organized a sophisticated international operation to traffic young Nigerian women to Italy, Spain and the Netherlands for the purpose of forced prostitution. The victims were threatened with violence, as were some of their relatives abroad.

A.F.

A.F. was arrested in 2015 in Benin City after three years on the run and extradited to the United Kingdom, where she was found guilty of conspiracy to traffic for sexual exploitation and assisting unlawful immigration.¹²⁴ Her criminal network targeted Nigerian girls who were trafficked to Europe, where they were forced into prostitution and threatened with violence if they sought to escape. The criminal network used the “juju ritual” to enslave and indebt the girls in the European sex industry.

I.H.

I.H. was considered the head of the prostitution criminal network called “Authentic Sisters” that operated in Paris between 2013 and 2016.¹²⁵ Together with 16 other people (11 women and 5 men), she was accused of trafficking young girls from Nigeria to France and forcing them into prostitution. She was found guilty together with her husband and another nine madams.

I.J.

I.J. independently led her own illicit trafficking business, trafficking women and girls from Nigeria to Germany. In her leadership role, she exercised independent decision-making authority while overseeing victim recruitment, managing trafficking logistics, and orchestrating the coercion of victims. I.J. was found guilty of trafficking five women from Nigeria to work as prostitutes in brothels in Germany.¹²⁶ She was the first British national to be prosecuted under the Modern Slavery Act for trafficking victims outside the United Kingdom. In 2018, she was sentenced to 14 years in prison.

Box 8**Other examples of female leadership roles****France**

C.S. was considered to be a representative of the Corsican underworld, the *banditisme corse*.¹²⁷ Her father, an established figure in the Corsican underworld, was murdered in 2010. In 2012, C.S. was shot at 19 times while driving her car. She has been accused of leading a criminal network involved in various crimes, including fraud, drugs and firearms trafficking, organized robbery, and a vast network of unlicensed slot machines. She was considered to be the person taking executive decisions for the various illicit activities of the group. In 2019, she was sentenced to 9 months in prison for social security fraud.

123 Information from: <https://dailytrust.com/nigerian-trafficker-to-serve-13-years-imprisonment-in-italy/> [accessed 23 April 2023]; <https://www.unodc.org/nigeria/en/unodcs-liaison-magistrate-initiative-helps-nigeria-and-italy-to-achieve-major-success-in-the-fight-against-human-trafficking.html> [accessed 23 April 2023].

124 Information from: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/gang-leader-jailed-over-trafficked-girls> [accessed 25 April 2023]; <https://www.premiumpages.com/tag/franca-asekota> [accessed 25 April 2023]; <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3675332/Trafficking-boss-known-Auntie-Franca-terrified-40-teen-orphans-witchcraft-selling-prostitution-Europe.html> [accessed 25 April 2023].

125 Information from: <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/10/04/africa/paris-nigerian-women-trafficking/index.html> [accessed 23 April 2023]; <https://www.renate-europe.net/11-years-prison-authentic-sisters-nigerian-pimps-france/> [accessed 23 April 2023].

126 Information from: <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/crime/josephine-iyamu-london-bermondsey-jailed-b990757.html> [accessed 23 April 2023]; <https://www.getreading.co.uk/news/reading-berkshire-news/nurse-arrested-heathrow-modern-slavery-23510082> [accessed 23 April 2023]; <https://www.birminghammail.co.uk/news/midlands-news/voodoo-nurse-jailed-trafficking-offences-23511957> [accessed 23 April 2023].

127 Information from: <https://www.leparisien.fr/week-end/le-crime-en-heritage-06-03-2014-3648901.php> [accessed 24 April 2023]; <https://www.laprovence.com/article/edition-vaucluse/5419166/aurelie-merlini-a-nouveau-condamnee.html> [accessed 24 April 2023]; <https://www.laprovence.com/actu/en-direct/6769654/jugement-machines-a-sous-push.html> [accessed 24 April 2023]; <https://www.ladepeche.fr/2022/01/19/une-figure-du-banditisme-corse-relaxe-du-voil-de-lequivalent-de-300-000-euros-dhuiles-essentielles-10056198.php> [accessed 24 April 2023].

Spain

P.C.F. led and managed the La Paca clan based in the Son Banya district of Palma de Mallorca, which controlled the main cocaine and heroin markets on the Balearic Islands.¹²⁸ Considered a matriarch, in 2001 her assets (29 properties, over 50 cars and 750,000 euros) were seized as proceeds from drug trafficking and the facilitating of drug transactions, or acquired using funds earned from drug-related crimes. In 2019, she was convicted of laundering the profits from her drug-trafficking business. The 2001 investigation revealed police corruption: A senior police officer asked P.C.F. for money in return for halting the investigation. She taped their conversations, implicating all parties.

United Kingdom

D.S. and D.A. led a Bury-based crime group specializing in supplying drugs including cocaine, heroin, MDMA and cannabis, and laundering the profits of their drug dealing.¹²⁹ Twenty people were arrested and convicted for their roles in the crime empire, receiving sentences totalling 140 years. Both women were jailed for 15 to 18 years.

Managers

In the context of OC, the distinction between a leader and a manager lies in their respective roles and focus. A leader often assumes a strategic position, shaping the OCG's overarching goals, making decisions, and establishing and maintaining partnerships. On the other hand, a manager typically concentrates on day-to-day operational aspects, such as overseeing the execution of tasks, resource allocation, or ensuring the criminal network's efficient functioning.¹³⁰

Information provided for this assessment indicates that women can become effective managers within OCGs, exercising important agency.

Management roles held by women inside OCGs include, among other things: taking messages from and to prison; helping to hide fugitives; collecting and extorting money; managing and laundering money derived from illicit activities; issuing commands to ensure that violent actions or threats are carried out as a means of maintaining control, enforcing loyalty, or settling disputes; managing different types of trafficking; and providing advice and assistance on law, finance, logistics and other specialist domains.¹³¹

The data also suggests that women are specifically chosen for these roles because they present a more “reassuring” face to potential women targets of OCGs. It is suggested that this is utilized, for example, by human trafficking rings: Since women feel safer with other women, female victims trust women in situations where they would not trust men.¹³²

The following selected examples reveal the managerial functions women take on across different dominions and types of OCGs:

Albanian-speaking OCGs in South-Eastern Europe

Many Albanian-speaking women have been the victims of human trafficking networks. However, there are also women who work for these human trafficking networks as enforcers and controllers. One practitioner noted that “*in Albanian-speaking groups, women are not leaders, men decide, but women participate and co-help. They are an active part of the criminal organization [...] and participate in decision making.*”¹³³ For example, the 2005 “Operation Harem” of the Italian Carabinieri identified A.A, the sister of three brothers who ran a human trafficking ring and smuggled heroin into Italy, as collaborating fully in their criminal activity, giving advice and overseeing activities linked to legal matters.¹³⁴

128 Information from: <https://www.majorcadailybulletin.com/news/local/2022/04/01/99437/mallorca-police-notorious-drugs-matriarch-arrested-1.html> [accessed 25 April 2023]; <https://alchetron.com/Francisca-Cort%C3%A9s-Picazo> [accessed 25 April 2023].

129 Information from: <https://www.burytimes.co.uk/news/18630529.drugs-empire-sisters-bury-jailed-33-years/> [accessed 24 April 2023]; <https://www.burytimes.co.uk/news/20846189.300-000-taken-bury-sisters-ran-drugs-empire/> [accessed 24 April 2023]; <https://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/greater-manchester-news/bury-sisters-turned-gangsters-who-19378026> [accessed 24 April 2023].

130 Abadinsky, H. *Organized Crime* (Chicago: Prentice Press, 1990).

131 Q1–Q28.

132 Q25.

133 I3.

134 For information on the Operation Harem, see: *Cronaca Operazione Harem. Ndrangheta e albanesi gestivano schiavi, armi e droga* in NuovaCosenza.com, (2005). Available at <http://www.nuovacosenza.com/cs/05/dicembre/trattaschiave1.html> [accessed 2 February 2023].

Moldova

As part of a Moldovan criminal network in Dubai, a group of women recruited a young woman by offering her the possibility of getting a job as a dancer at a restaurant in Dubai. Once she was there, they forced her into sexual exploitation and she soon became trapped.¹³⁵

United Kingdom

F.C., a mother of seven, was the “matriarch” of a violent Liverpool crime family that specialized in importing drugs from Turkey, Colombia, Spain and Mexico.¹³⁶ Two of her sons were arrested and sentenced in 2013 for their involvement in multiple rackets and drug activities across the city. At the same time, she was arrested and imprisoned for her role in their £7m drug smuggling and money laundering racket, in which she acted as her sons’ banker. She was considered an important figure in the financial transactions of their business activities.

Netherlands

J.N., a Dutch Moroccan woman known as the “Godmother of Coke”, first disappeared and then was murdered in 2019. She is suspected of having been involved in drug importing, theft, cannabis cultivation, assault, forgery and threats.¹³⁷ She lived in Marbella in Spain, where it is suggested that she arranged shipments of cocaine hidden in containers of bananas to enter Europe.

Canada

Arrested in Canada in 2006, S.S. was charged with trafficking, conspiracy, money laundering and gangsterism tied to her involvement in a cross-border drug ring that produced and distributed marijuana and ecstasy for export to the United States.¹³⁸ Police officers also found firearms in her car. She served seven years in prison after pleading guilty to gangsterism, drug trafficking and possession of a prohibited weapon.

135 See NUA, “Woman ‘forced into prostitution contracted hepatitis’, Dubai court hears” (2012). Available at <https://www.thenationalnews.com/uae/courts/woman-forced-into-prostitution-contracted-hepatitis-dubai-court-hears-1.358330> [accessed 21 May 2023].

136 Information from: <https://www.liverpoolecho.co.uk/news/mother-liverpools-fitzgibbon-brothers-ordered-8387696> [accessed 22 May 2023]; <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/banker-mother-notorious-liverpool-crime-4925838> [accessed 22 May 2023]; <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2013/jun/14/liverpool-fitzgibbon-family-jailed-drugs> [accessed 22 May 2023]; <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2341806/Is-Britains-worst-mother-Benefit-scrounger-60-raised-sons-life-crime-sending-abroad-multi-million-pound-heroin-runs.html> [accessed 22 May 2023].

137 Information from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2aj9mKIZyVA> [accessed 25 May 2023]; <https://nltimes.nl/2022/04/26/photos-tortured-woman-taghis-phone-may-missing-amsterdam-woman> [accessed 25 May 2023].

138 Information from: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/quebec-woman-charged-as-leader-of-drug-ring-1.618555> [accessed 21 May 2023]; <https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/organized-crime-figure-arrested-in-2006-sentenced-to-15-years-in-prison> [accessed 21 May 2023].

Foot soldiers

Most criminal syndicates and networks recruit and employ large numbers of “foot soldiers” (in Italian mafias, “*picciotti*”), who make up the lowest rung of the organizational hierarchy. They typically fulfil roles such as enforcers, drug couriers or street-level dealers. They also carry out acts of violence and intimidation, handle the distribution and sale of illegal substances, serve as lookouts or runners for various criminal activities, and help to maintain the organization’s operations and security.¹³⁹ This workforce can consist of both aspiring young people and more experienced OCG members whose abilities have diminished.

This level of OCGs is often described as “macho”, a masculine and violent space on the street.¹⁴⁰ However, this is also an environment populated by girls who can be just as violent and active, contrary to gender expectations and stereotypes.

This is illustrated by the following examples:

- In France, estimates suggest that 1 in every 10 people arrested for possession or dealing of drugs is a woman.¹⁴¹ Although perceived as passive and as victims, evidence suggests that these women have agency and are not socially marginalized.¹⁴²
- Young people have been recruited as foot soldiers into the estimated 2,000 CL gangs in the United Kingdom to transport and sell drugs across the country.¹⁴³ Estimates suggest that girls make up 10% of the CL groups in London, a figure in line with a separate estimate, based on the number of girls being referred to social services, putting

139 Antonio Nicaso and Marcel Danesi, *Made men: Mafia culture and the power of symbols, rituals, and myth*. (Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013).

140 Breuer Niles and Federico Varese, “The Structure of Trade-type and Governance-type Organized Crime Groups: A Network Stud”, *The British Journal of Criminology* 63/ 4 (July 2022): pp. 867–888.

141 TF1 video: “Trafic de drogue: à 14 ans, Laura est déjà une dealeuse expérimentée”, (2023). Available at <https://www.tf1info.fr/justice-faits-divers/video-enquete-traffic-de-drogue-laura-dealeuse-a-14-ans-dans-les-quartiers-nord-de-marseille-symbole-de-la-feminisation-du-deal-2246681.html> [accessed 1 April 2023].

142 Sarah Perrin, “Femmes dealuses : des profils atypiques, mal identifiés et méconnus”, *The Conversation* (2021). Available at <https://theconversation.com/femmes-dealeuses-des-profils-atypiques-mal-identifies-et-meconnus-154866> [accessed 3 February 2023]; Sarah Perrin, “Femmes et dealers. Une recherche de terrain au sein du deal de classes moyennes bordelaises”, *Psychotropes* 24/1 (2018): pp. 15–37. Available at <https://www.cairn.info/revue-psychotropes-2018-1-page-15.htm> [accessed 3 February 2023].

143 Sky News, Number of drug gang ‘county lines’ more than doubles to 2,000 in a year (2019). Available at <https://news.sky.com/story/number-of-drug-gang-county-lines-more-than-doubles-to-2-000-in-a-year-11621240> [accessed 2 March 2023].

the figure at 8% in 2020 and 12% in 2022.¹⁴⁴ However, the true figures remain far from clear: Girls involved in CL continue to fall under the police radar and be invisible to social services.¹⁴⁵

- In Nigerian confraternities, both young women and men are used as mules to import drugs into Europe and to be runners across Europe. As in other cases, there is a lack of precise data.¹⁴⁶
- One respondent indicated that in North Macedonia “there have been cases in which criminal groups use women, mostly young girls, to transport drugs, or young married couples without a criminal record or criminal past.”¹⁴⁷

Girls and women at this level of OC often end up in criminal justice systems that demonstrate an inherent bias and lack of receptiveness to their specific needs and experiences, or to their status of not only being perpetrators of OC, but also victims.¹⁴⁸

Enablers and facilitators

All OCGs benefit from a “grey zone” class of enablers and facilitators who provide services to the criminal organization. This can range from health care to legal and financial advice, facilitating the laundering of criminal gains, or acting as a legitimate cover or front for criminal activities. Defining these relationships is complex, but they can be understood as taking the form of “collusion, complicity, and co-penetration”.¹⁴⁹ Such relationships can range from one-off exchanges, regular functional exchanges, to full immersion.

The role of enablers and facilitators can be considered gendered because the role often involves “softer” functions in which violence is less common and women can assist without attracting the attention of criminal justice systems.

One respondent noted that “women are used for their different skills in financial matters, but they are underestimated and often given house arrest.”¹⁵⁰

Enablers and facilitators can be both insiders and outsiders to an OCG. In both cases, they benefit from the illicit activities involved in the relationship.

Insider enablers and facilitators

Enablers who are related to criminals are insiders. Becoming enablers through this relationship is an extension of their family ties and duties.¹⁵¹ In this role, women often help their male relatives hide illicit profits and assets. For example, in mafia circles, female relatives often put their name at the disposal of the group, which uses their “clean” surname as the CEO of a front or shell company for money laundering or irregular operations.

More recently, women have provided their professional skills and knowledge to OCGs to assist them with legal matters or to resolve health issues. This phenomenon is particularly visible in mafia groups. Interviews conducted for this research indicated that there is a new generation of young university-educated women who are happy to help criminal relatives:

“ We have a wave of more educated women being involved in more professional positions [in the context of organized crime].¹⁵²

This type of involvement has been defined as “co-penetration”.¹⁵³

144 “It recently identified 4,013 individuals from the capital involved in county lines, 10% of whom were female.” Emma Forde and Jane Deith, “County lines: Girls under the radar in drug gangs” in BBC News (2019). Available at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-50045739> [accessed 20 March 2023]. See also Hudek, Jo, “Criminal exploitation of children and young people on county lines and the response of St Giles CLVSS”, in *Evaluation Report – September 2022* (2022): p. 4.

145 Sky News, “Number of drug gang ‘county lines’ more than doubles to 2,000 in a year” (2019). Available at <https://news.sky.com/story/number-of-drug-gang-county-lines-more-than-doubles-to-2-000-in-a-year-11621240> [accessed 2 March 2023].

146 Procura della Repubblica presso il Tribunale di Napoli, *Direzione Distrettuale Antimafia, Richiesta per applicazione di Misura Cautelare nei confronti di AA + 32*, Procedimento penale n. 2694/15 (2015).

147 Q19.

148 Katherine Van Wormer, “Anti-feminist backlash and violence against women worldwide”, *Social Work & Society* 6/2 (2008): p. 328. See also: Commission on Young Lives, *Hidden in Plain Sight: A national plan of action to support vulnerable teenagers to succeed and to protect them from adversity, exploitation, and harm, Final Report* (2022). Available at <https://thecommissiononyounglives.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/COYL-FINAL-REPORT-FINAL-VERSION.pdf> [accessed 1 July 2023].

149 Sciarrone, Rocco (ed.), *Mafie, relazione e affari nell’area grigia in Alleanze nell’ombra, mafie ed economie locali in Sicilia e nel Mezzogiorno* (Rome: Donzelli, 2011).

150 I7.

151 Q6, Q12, Q13.

152 I7.

153 Allum, Felia, Rossella Merlino and Alessandro Colletti, “Facilitating the Italian Mafia: The Grey Zone of Complicity and Collusion”, *South European Society and Politics* 24/1 (2019): pp. 79–101.

Examples of women acting as insider enablers and facilitators include:

- T.A. and T.J. headed a prolific OCG that supplied cocaine to the notorious Cullen gang in Warrington in the United Kingdom. Their wives were involved in spending and money laundering their profits.¹⁵⁴
- M.N., the wife of a member of the Kinahan clan, an Irish TOC syndicate, was considered a front for an international money laundering operation.¹⁵⁵
- P.A. was a criminal lawyer in the Agrigento region of Italy and became the partner of the local boss Buggea.¹⁵⁶
- L.C. was the lawyer and daughter of L.G., the “treasurer” of the Sicilian mafia boss-of-bosses Bernardo Provenzano. In her role as his lawyer, she looked after her father’s economic interests and those of the clan. She co-ordinated and supervised paperwork and payments, and dealt with interlocutors.¹⁵⁷
- The sister of Sicilian boss G.M. was deeply involved in his business activities during the 1970s.¹⁵⁸

Outsider enablers and facilitators

Outside enablers are not related to criminals; their relationship is a functional, economic transaction, often based on the enabler’s professional skills and expertise. Again, this support regularly focuses on facilitating the laundering of criminal profits. OCGs often exploit gender stereotypes, using female enablers to launder money since they are less likely to attract police attention.

As one respondent explained:

“Women mainly provide logistics and support to criminal groups in the field of economic crime, money laundering and corrupt activities.”¹⁵⁹ Another respondent reiterated that “women help men launder the proceeds of the crimes by taking the profits in their names, etc.”¹⁶⁰

This has been defined as “collusion”.

The following provides examples of women acting as outsider enablers and facilitators.

- Three Polish women were arrested in Warsaw in December 2022 and accused of money laundering for the Calabrian ‘Ndrangheta mafia. The police reported that the women “were board members of fictitious companies whose accounts were used to transfer the money of criminal groups”. One of the women admitted that “she had withdrawn over 15 million euros from banks”, which she would then give to couriers who took the cash back to Italy.¹⁶¹
- In 2022, the Avarus-Midas Operation of the Australian Federal Police uncovered a complex crime syndicate that facilitated the movement of funds for Australian criminal figures. The investigation highlighted how, by providing money laundering services, the group allowed domestic syndicates to move and access their illicit profits without being detected. Of the nine people arrested, two were women. They were charged for “conspiracy to deal in the proceeds of general crime to the value of \$1,000,000 or more”.¹⁶²

154 Information from: <https://www.cheshire-live.co.uk/news/cheshire-news/lavish-life-cheshire-woman-links-21175514> [accessed 7 February 2023]; https://uk.news.yahoo.com/drug-kingpins-women-enjoyed-profits-060000850.html?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLnNvbS8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAAG1ga6X8MbwMNS160ZwhCCOHNCEZHRFT4zbjvJR1WD1wGikOzyPGqcpogpFXksKVKXl9dGkUuLkHPXZyN5WBJAHEwSBhEtLa00BnZsakjijv18GYAfEW20mySWDIZ4Ph20FokMwAA6P54Mblpy-7G32SmbgQeVwlaqpETLwocQc [accessed 7 February 2023].

155 Information from: <https://www.irishmirror.ie/news/irish-news/kinahan-money-man-morrissey-renting-28019635> [accessed 7 February 2023]; <https://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/greater-manchester-news/ex-greater-manchester-doorman-branded-25023016> [accessed 7 February 2023].

156 Information from: <https://ground.news/article/mafia-15-years-inflicted-on-angela-porcello-canicattis-lawyer-close-to-the-bosses> [accessed 7 February 2023]; <https://www.agrigentonotizie.it/cronaca/mafia/operazione-xydi-lettera-ex-avvocato-porcello-timore-ritorsioni-buggea.html> [accessed 7 February 2023].

157 Information from: https://ricerca.gelocal.it/corrierealpi/archivio/corrierealpi/2008/10/04/AA2BL_AA204.html [accessed 7 February 2023]; also from: http://www.ristretti.it/areestudio/donne/ricerche/dossier_narcomafie.pdf [accessed 7 February 2023].

158 *Il Manifesto, Palermo, la collina del disonore* (2017). Available at <https://ilmanifesto.it/palermo-la-collina-del-disonore> [accessed 7 March 2023].

159 Q19.

160 Q10.

161 Euronews, “Police detain three Polish women suspected of Italian mafia ties” (2022). Available at <https://www.euronews.com/2022/12/01/italy-mafia-poland> [accessed 2 February 2023].

162 Australian Federal Police, *Property and cash restrained as alleged money laundering group charged* (2023). Available at <https://www.afp.gov.au/news-media/media-releases/property-and-cash-restrained-alleged-money-laundering-group-charged> [accessed 27 February 2023].

6. Gender and exiting organized crime groups



Key findings

- Women typically leave OCGs wanting freedom and a way out of the criminal world, whereas men often see their criminal career at an end, fear being killed, or are afraid of long-term imprisonment. Parenthood is an important motivation to leave OCGs for both men and women.
- Women can play various roles in their partner’s or husband’s exit from an OCG. In some cases, women support and encourage their partners during this process. In others, they may actively oppose their partner’s decision to exit the criminal network.
- There is a lack of gender-sensitive exit programmes. Judicial and police exit programmes tailored for women remain rare across the OSCE area.
- Women tend to be involved in exit programmes as the partners of male OCG members, rather than as active agents in their own right.

This chapter explores the gender-specific drivers prompting individuals, especially women, to disengage from OCGs. It looks first at the main motivations for leaving OC, then considers the extent to which gender is considered in judicial and non-judicial exit initiatives across the OSCE area. It identifies a notable gap: the lack of gender-inclusive exit initiatives. In existing initiatives, women are absent or strongly underrepresented. This underscores the need for more tailored approaches to address the particular requirements of women seeking a way out of criminality.

Gendered drivers and reasons for leaving OCGs

Few studies have investigated the reasons people exit OCGs. The limited available research findings of this type, most focused on gangs, suggests that there are not many differences between the motivations of men and women to leave OCGs.¹⁶³ It underlines that leaving an OCG is a personal and complex decision, often involving multiple types of motivation.

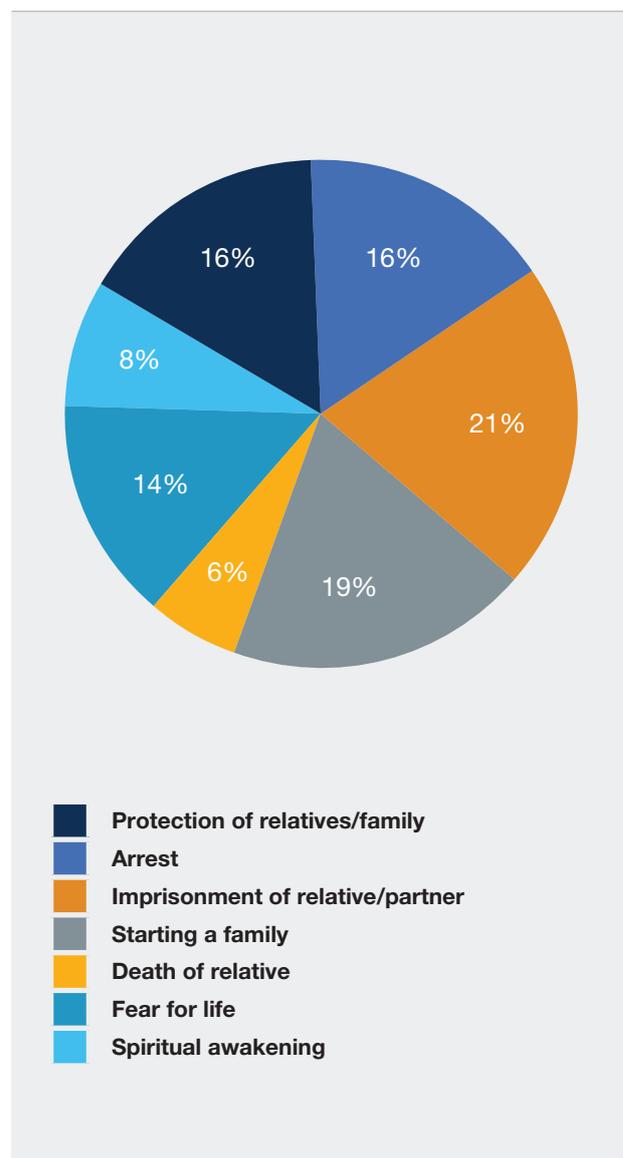
This research mirrors other evidence indicating that for both men and women, exiting OCGs is a difficult challenge emotionally, socially and economically. One respondent explained that “*fear of violence is probably the main reason for a person not to leave a criminal group*”,¹⁶⁴ a view echoed by another, who indicated that criminals “*fear for their own safety or that of their family members*.”¹⁶⁵ Fear of retaliation by OCGs thus appears to be one of the major factors holding OCG members back from leaving.

163 Eryn Nicole O’Neal et al., “Girls, gangs, and getting out: Gender differences and similarities in leaving the gang”, *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice* 14/1 (2016): pp. 43–60.

164 Q26.

165 Q13.

Figure 3: Respondents’ perception of women’s reasons for exiting OCGs



Source: OSCE (2023), responses to Q1–Q28.

This study identified gendered differences and similarities in the timing and reasons for leaving organized crime. In terms of similar reasons, being or becoming a parent seems to represent an important driver to leave OCGs for both men and women.¹⁶⁶ However, similar motivations may be experienced in gendered ways. For example, one respondent indicated that retaliatory “*violence may look different regarding women/men*”.¹⁶⁷ More research is needed to determine potential gender-specific differences in retaliation tactics in order to provide targeted protection measures for both men and women leaving OCGs.

This research has revealed important gender-based distinctions in reasons for exiting OCGs, particularly concerning timing.

Men appear to re-evaluate their criminal involvement when incarcerated, driven by existential fears and parental responsibilities. Women, on the other hand, tend to decide to exit before facing legal consequences, in pursuit of freedom and a path out of the criminal underworld.¹⁶⁸ One respondent explained: “*There exist differences in exiting motives: Men have no real choice [they are already in the criminal justice system], [...] whereas women are tired of the criminal lifestyle.*”¹⁶⁹ Another noted: “*Men make their decision to exit once in prison after their sentence, usually out of fear of death and for their children’s future. For women, it is different. They make their decision to exit before the judicial outcome.*”¹⁷⁰ A further respondent emphasized the pursuit of freedom as an important driver for women to leave criminality: “*Women [leave OCGs] when they come into contact with other contexts and start to realise that they are not free in the mafia family.*”¹⁷¹

Figure 3 presents the results of the data collection for this assessment on the reasons why women and girls choose to exit criminality. Aging or maturing seem to be an overarching reason, as well as the individual factors above, including: motherhood, proximity to violence and/or death, arrests of relatives, or spiritual awakening. Greater understanding of these gender-related differences and similarities would inform more targeted interventions and support for individuals seeking to disengage from criminal activities.

This study has also found that women can and do influence the decision of their partners or husbands to leave or remain in OCGs.

¹⁶⁶ Q1–Q28.

¹⁶⁷ Q26.

¹⁶⁸ Q12, Q14, I6.

¹⁶⁹ I6.

¹⁷⁰ Q12.

¹⁷¹ Q14.

Respondents highlighted cases where women have encouraged, followed and supported their partner or husband to exit OC and to collaborate with the State. However, they also described cases where women have disowned or actively opposed their partners who wanted to leave OC, urging them not to betray the criminal organization and lifestyle.¹⁷² This underscores the complexity of women’s roles in partners’ exiting OCGs or collaborating with law enforcement. It challenges traditional gender stereotypes by highlighting that women are not merely passive and subordinate to men’s decisions in such situations. Instead, they actively engage both in supporting and opposing their partners’ exit choices, which reveals these women’s agency and influence.

Gender-sensitive exit strategies and programmes

Assistance and support from social services and law enforcement agencies are fundamental in supporting OCG members to leave criminal groups and transition to a lawful post-OC life.

However, responses to the questionnaire and interviews conducted for this research clearly indicate that OC exit initiatives remain male focused, often including no women or very few. The respondents gave no examples of gender-sensitive exit pathways, whether judicial or non-judicial, catering to persons involved in OC, such as for “whistle-blowers” or witnesses, or for those where no prosecution is likely but who need help to get free of OC activities. However, some respondents did mention that women support staff were employed if a male State witness had a family and children with him.¹⁷³

When women are involved in exit programmes, it tends to be as the partners of male OCG members rather than as active agents in their own right.¹⁷⁴ This suggests that widespread perceptions of women as playing a marginal and subordinate role in OC are translating into a lack of gender-inclusive exit programmes across the OSCE area.

Respondents were unable to identify instances where, at the policy level, gender issues are explicitly included in exit strategies. One respondent noted: “*We don’t have a different operating model for men and women. But of course, in practice*

¹⁷² Q3, Q12, I6, I7.

¹⁷³ Q3.

¹⁷⁴ Q3, Q12, I7.

we will have to regard gender.”¹⁷⁵ One exception is in the area of human trafficking, where pS representatives mentioned that specific gendered assistance initiatives exist for women and men victims of trafficking.¹⁷⁶

A similar picture is found regarding State witness protection programmes. Such programmes can assist criminals in exiting OCGs in exchange for State protection. They are not found in all OSCE pS. Where State witness protection systems do exist, responses to the questionnaire suggest that they do not cater to women.¹⁷⁷ This is supported by statistics (see Box 9), which indicate that women make up a very small proportion of the total number of people in such programmes.

This study finds that when women are present in State witness protection programmes, it is typically as the spouse or

partner of a male OC member, rarely as an agent in their own right.¹⁷⁸

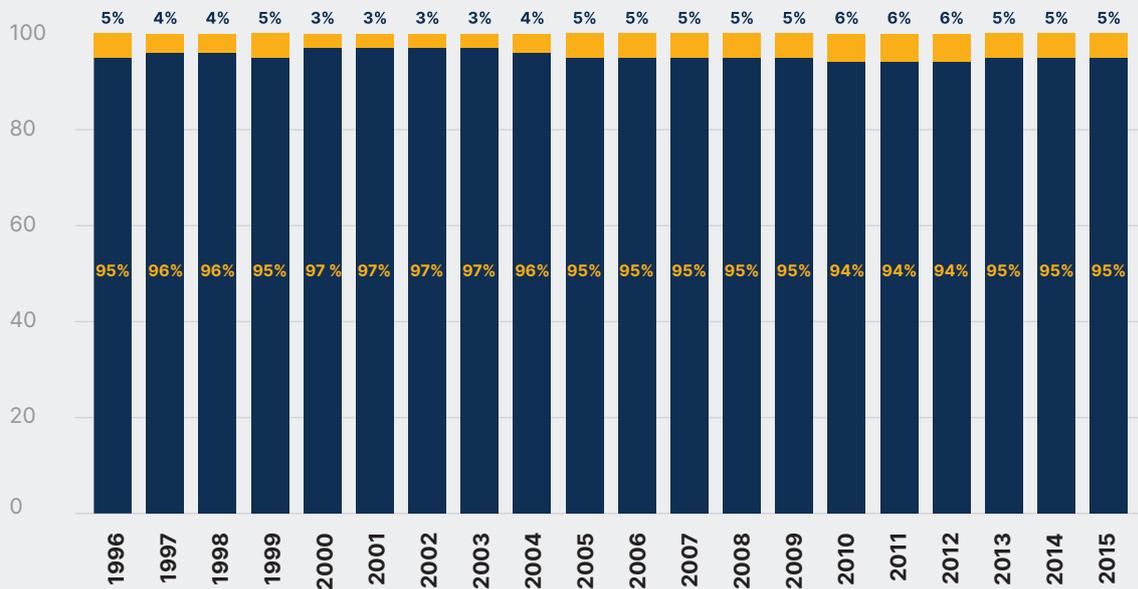
This suggests that family and romantic relationships tend to diminish or erase female criminal agency, with women often depicted solely as spouses or partners, rather than as active participants, advisers or perpetrators of criminal activities. Closer attention is needed to address this gap and its causes so that State witness protection programmes are better able to offer women a way out of criminality.

Box 9

Women in the Italian state witness protection programme

The low number of women charged with crimes who have become part of the Italian State witness protection programme is notable. Between 1996 and 2015, only between 3% and 5% of people in the programme were women (see Figure 4). Recent data suggests the gender gap remains wide: Figures for March 2023 show that just 4% of State witnesses under protection were women.¹⁷⁹

Figure 4: Ratios of State witnesses in Italy according to gender (1996–2015)



Source: OSCE (2023). Based on data from: *Ministero dell’Interno, Relazione al Parlamento sulle speciali misure di protezione, sulla loro efficacia e sulle modalità generali di applicazione*, Reports 1996–2015, Rome.

■ Men
■ Women

This low figure for women likely reflects the tendency for men to be the person entering and signing such contracts with the Italian State, with women entering only as relatives rather than as individuals who may have information to contribute.

175 Q7.

176 Q5, Q16 and I12.

177 Q3, Q5 and Q13.

178 Q3, Q13, I4, I6, I7.

179 Ministero dell’Interno, Servizio Centrale di Protezione, Direzione centrale della Polizia Criminale, March 2023.

7. Gender and criminal justice actions to disrupt organized crime



Key findings

- **Women remain under-represented in OC prevention initiatives. While the benefit of applying prevention initiatives that cater to the specific needs of men and women is recognized by some practitioners, there are very few examples of gender-sensitive prevention initiatives across the OSCE area. Women at risk of OC involvement often go unnoticed and are rarely referred to relevant prevention services.**
- **Effective tools to build resilience to recruitment by OCGs include: education and awareness-raising for women and girls on the consequences and negative impacts of involvement in OCGs, including through contact with individuals with lived experiences; timely recognition and referrals of women at risk; investment in life skills, including financial literacy; and collaborative efforts among multiple agencies.**
- **Sex-disaggregated data on organized crime is not routinely collected or analysed, leading to false assumptions regarding the prevalence and nature of women's involvement and roles in OCGs and an incomplete intelligence picture of OC actors.**
- **There is a lack of understanding of how sex-disaggregated data can be used for detecting, investigating, disrupting or preventing OC. Collaborative data sharing across relevant agencies is limited.**
- **A lack of gender-disaggregated data on OC recruitment patterns, messages and channels makes it difficult for practitioners to develop evidence-based and gender-sensitive prevention measures.**

The evidence presented in this report shows that women play a variety of active roles in OCGs across the OSCE area. Building on this finding, this chapter looks at the extent to which gender is incorporated into criminal justice actions to disrupt OC, and considers how greater recognition of the role women play in TOC and the implementation of gender-sensitive approaches can support more effective policing of OCGs. It focuses first on prevention efforts, then turns to issues regarding data collection.

Preventing involvement in organized crime groups

In the 2020 **Tirana Declaration**, OSCE pS recognized the importance of applying holistic, comprehensive and coherent approaches to preventing TOC, approaches that take into account the needs, concerns and interests of all groups within society and that promote the full, equal and meaningful participation of women.¹⁸⁰ Respondents contributing to the research for this report reflected on this commitment, recognizing the importance of applying preventive approaches that cater to the specific needs not only of men, but also of women.

The information collected for this report indicated, however, that gender-sensitive prevention initiatives across the OSCE area remain limited. One respondent mentioned that “infor-

mation about women rarely reaches the crime prevention/response units”, which suggests that women at risk are seldom identified or referred to relevant services.¹⁸¹

Nevertheless, respondents identified a number of good practices contributing to preventing women becoming involved in OCGs. Analysis of these examples suggests a number of key – and interrelated – characteristics of effective gender-sensitive prevention activities:

- **A strong focus on education and awareness-raising;**
- **Early identification of women and girls at risk of becoming involved in OC;**
- **Involving women with lived experience of being involved in organized crime;**
- **Support for developing important life skills, including financial literacy, through vocational training;**
- **Effective multi-stakeholder co-operation.**

The success of the Canadian prevention initiative “Her Time” underlines how education and awareness-raising about the dangers of involvement in OCGs can effectively prevent girls and young women from becoming involved in criminal networks (see **Box 10**).¹⁸²

¹⁸⁰ OSCE, *Ministerial Council Declaration on Strengthening Co-operation in Countering Transnational Organized Crime* (Tirana, 2020). Available at <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/e/5/479768.pdf> [accessed 8 January 2023].

¹⁸¹ Swedish Police Authority, *Women's influence on and involvement in serious violence in criminal milieus*, A440.265/2019 (Stockholm, 2021), p. 6.

¹⁸² I10.

Box 10

Education as a prevention tool: “Her Time”, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada¹⁸³

“Her Time”, an OC prevention and exit initiative focused on girls and women, was established by Detective Anisha Myette and Sergeant Sandy Avelar from the Gang Crime Unit in the Vancouver Police Department in 2017, after they noticed a gap in the services provided for girls and women involved in, or vulnerable to, OCGs. Based on volunteers, the initiative is both proactive and reactive. It proactively provides education in schools to divert girls and boys from OC through the use of speakers with lived experience of involvement in OCGs, while also supporting girls and women to exit OC. The initiative’s school intervention work and youth councillor referral system enables the identification of girls and women who are at risk and need special attention.

Between 2017 and 2020, “Her Time” was active in over 60 schools and reached more than 9,000 students. Each semester, it offers 72 girls and young women a comprehensive after-school programme, with a curriculum including physical well-being (nutrition, training in specific sports and self-defence), relationship building, life skills and financial literacy. The programme pays special attention to strengthening girls’ and young women’s life skills to encourage independence from an early age, also financially. In addition to including lived experience, educators, psychologists, and law enforcement in the development of the after-school programme, “Her Time” has also leveraged strategic partnerships with the private sector. A leading Canadian financial institute provides an advisor for educating and supporting the girls and women in the programme in financial literacy. In 2020, “Her Time” worked with 14 speakers relating their experiences in OC and assisted 30 girls to exit OCGs.

In addition to the after-school programme, “Her Time” will soon launch a 12-week full-time summer camp programme. This reflects the specific risks of involvement in organized crime during the summer, when there is no school and a lack of parental supervision, which exposes girls and young women to negative influences and the danger of falling into the wrong circles. The summer camp will develop the life skills of the participating girls and young women, including having older girls function as mentors for the younger cohort, thus promoting responsibility, accountability and leadership qualities.

“Her Time” is an innovative programme that combines lived experiences and police expertise. By empowering girls and young women, it not only serves as an OC prevention and exit platform, it also supports personal development.

A second key characteristic of effective prevention is early identification of girls and women at risk.¹⁸⁴ This involves recognizing at an early age risk factors associated with community environments (such as poverty, discrimination, lack of opportunity, poor housing and violence) and personal childhood experiences (including domestic violence and abuse, and physical and emotional neglect) that may make girls and women susceptible to recruitment and exploitation by OCGs.¹⁸⁵ Data analysed for this study suggest that the success of such early prevention efforts relies on effective information sharing, robust referral mechanisms, and close collaboration between schools, social services and the police to address these underlying risk factors.¹⁸⁶ One respondent described programmes within Swedish municipalities “called SSPF (school, social service, police and leisure) and the SIG – special interventions team – aimed at young people who

*are assessed as vulnerable. This can include both males and females and the interventions need consent from parents or carers.*¹⁸⁷

The case studies also showcase how incorporating the lived experiences of women who were members of OCGs into educational initiatives and awareness-raising efforts is essential for building resilience against TOC.

As one respondent explained, “women who have been victims can aid in the education of others so that parents/teachers/community organizations know what signs to look out for to prevent OC infiltrating the community.”¹⁸⁸ Sharing real-life stories and perspectives of women in OCGs offers a deeper

183 See also “Her Time”’s website: <https://www.hertimevancouver.com/about> [accessed 14 June 2023].

184 Ibid.

185 Q26 and Q28.

186 Q26, Q28, I8, I10.

187 Q26.

188 Q6.

understanding of the challenges and dangers posed by TOC, while empowering girls and women to make informed choices and take proactive steps to counter its influence.

Developing essential life skills, including financial literacy, through vocational training is another characteristic of effective prevention practices. The questionnaire and interview

answers highlighted that such initiatives play a pivotal role in deterring women from engaging in OC.¹⁸⁹ By offering tangible skills such as job training and money management, they empower women to secure stable employment and economic independence, providing a viable alternative lifestyle to involvement in TOC (see **Box 11**).¹⁹⁰

Box 11

Developing life skills as a tool to prevent OCG involvement: “The Caravan of Hope”, Dushanbe, Tajikistan¹⁹¹

The NGO “Caravan of Hope (KORVONI UMED)” was set up in 2009 in Tajikistan with the support of a Danish Government grant. The organization’s main aim is to provide targeted vocational training for women and children who find themselves in vulnerable or dangerous situations, such as domestic violence, victims of human trafficking, or being involved in crime while being exploited. This includes contributing to the trafficking of others to escape their own exploitation.

In 2012, the organization established two secure residential facilities in Dushanbe to provide care for women and their children. The duration of their stay at these facilities ranges from three to six months. Once a safe environment is established, the women are encouraged to build independence through skill development and establishing their own businesses.

Between 2009 and 2023, 593 individuals received support at the shelters, of which 277 were women, 60 were “at-risk” teenagers without accompanying parents, and 256 were children accompanied by their mothers. It is noteworthy that approximately 20% of these children were also victims of psychological violence, having been present during the incidents of domestic violence. These teenagers were referred to the organization by various departments of Tajikistan’s Ministry of Internal Affairs.

Since its foundation, the organization has awarded 551 certificates of proficiency in various vocational skills. In 2022 alone, it has provided training to 472 women and girls in cutting and sewing, confectionery, hairdressing and jewellery making. Presently, a social café run by the organization employs 17 individuals who were previously victims of domestic violence. During 2022, it successfully found employment for 48 individuals.

Central to the success of each of these examples is effective multi-stakeholder co-operation, especially between law enforcement, schools, social services and civil society organizations. Combining this approach with the integration of gender aspects in the prevention of TOC can provide a blueprint for other prevention initiatives elsewhere in the OSCE area.

women in TOC, since it enables their roles and activities to be mapped out and analysed. Data must also be made available to support those creating policy or planning counter-OC initiatives. Privacy- and data protection-compliant mechanisms are required for sharing such information between and within law enforcement authorities, ministries and other relevant institutions.

Data collection and collaboration

Data collection is integral to better understanding criminal landscapes. To be effective, collected data must be appropriate and sufficiently detailed to enable in-depth and targeted analysis. The existence of systematically collected sex-disaggregated data is crucial to understanding the realities of

There is a close interrelationship between gender, data collection and effective responses to TOC. Failure to recognize the role of women in TOC has contributed to the lack of gender mainstreaming in data collection, which in turn has created knowledge gaps regarding the gender dimensions of TOC.

¹⁸⁹ Q1–Q28 and I1–I14.

¹⁹⁰ I13.

¹⁹¹ See also the Caravan of Hope website: <https://caravanofhope.weebly.com> [accessed 14 July 2023].

This impedes gender sensitive responses to TOC that reflect and target the specific roles and experiences of women and men involved in OCGs. One response captures this cycle:

“ Women very rarely are suspects in crimes related to organized crimes so there is not even need to do such analysis.¹⁹² ”

Data gaps and challenges

Data collected for this report indicate gaps and imbalances in the collection of sex-disaggregated data on TOC across the OSCE area. Questionnaire and interview responses indicate that gender is currently not considered a significant variable. The focus is on the *nature* of the crime and not the gender of the perpetrator. While sex-disaggregated data is collected for some types of crime, as for example human trafficking offences, it is often missing for wider OC-related crimes and activities.

Practitioner responses reflect the wide range of different practices across the OSCE area. One practitioner noted that “to some extent we collect cumulative data for various types of crime and are able to identify gender based on [...] collected data.”¹⁹³ One practitioner responding to the question of whether their country collects sex-disaggregated data on OC stated: “Not specifically, it depends on which area – both in terms of geography and crime”, while another concluded, “we don’t collect specific data about gender [...] our database doesn’t support this kind of request.”¹⁹⁴ Several respondents addressed the lack of sex-disaggregated data directly. One stated that they had been “shocked” not to be able to find such data; another noted that “we think women are involved [across all OC markets] but we do not have the data to prove it yet.”¹⁹⁵

Respondents also reflected on the lack of systematic processes to ensure comprehensive data collection, disaggregation and sharing. Several suggested that sex-disaggregated data was not viewed as part of operational information, and instead only used for reporting purposes.

¹⁹² Q10.

¹⁹³ Q1.

¹⁹⁴ Q26 and Q7.

¹⁹⁵ I9 and Q26

One explained that “a strategic approach to research [...] on gender distribution in OCGs has not yet been established. The collection and processing of information regarding gender distribution is limited, statistical indicators of gender disaggregation are kept only for criminal reported persons.”¹⁹⁶ This was reiterated by another respondent, who emphasized that “the gender factor is taken up in the variables [...] for reporting of OC cases [...]. At the moment, only for strategic analysis in the framework of reporting on OC cases or in the framework of a specific expertise towards [certain OC structures].”¹⁹⁷ Others regretted that the data available was not always shared with relevant actors. For example, the Swedish police noted that “information about women rarely reaches the crime prevention/response units.”¹⁹⁸

Enhancing data collection and analysis

This fragmented nature of available data on TOC reflects complex historic and geographic factors in the pS of the OSCE. These greatly affect approaches to data collection and policing practices in general, including how gender is incorporated as a key variable in investigations, or whether sex-disaggregated data is collected. It may also reflect the tendency that those collecting data are men, with the potential this can create for bias in data collection efforts.¹⁹⁹

Despite the lack of official sex-disaggregated data on OC, respondents highlighted several other sources of useful information. Civil society organizations tend to collect sex-disaggregated data to inform their approaches, which many referred to as being focused on the needs of the victim.²⁰⁰ This greater attention on including a gender perspective in data collection and analysis may reflect the fact that many CSOs are staffed predominantly by women.²⁰¹

Questionnaire and interview answers highlight that survivor accounts can provide another important source of information.²⁰²

The contribution made by women State witnesses and partners of State witnesses under the Italian State witness protection programme since 1991 has enabled a better under-

¹⁹⁶ Q19.

¹⁹⁷ Q2

¹⁹⁸ Swedish Police Authority, *Women’s influence on and involvement in serious violence in criminal milieus*, A440.265/2019 (Stockholm, 2021), p. 6.

¹⁹⁹ See Q1 in all questionnaires Q1–Q28.

²⁰⁰ I11

²⁰¹ I11

²⁰² Q14, Q17, Q28, I13, I10, I11.

standing of the internal gender dynamics of OCGs, thereby contributing significantly to the fight against TOC.²⁰³

Respondents also identified a pressing need for targeted awareness-raising and capacity-building initiatives to enable practitioners to recognize the added value of collecting sex-disaggregated data and intelligence on all OC

actors, including women. Such efforts should also involve learning about methods for generating and implementing data-driven insights for the detection, investigation, prosecution and prevention of OC. This can be incorporated into broader intelligence-led policing approaches, as is set out in the *OSCE Guidebook on Intelligence-Led Policing*.²⁰⁴

Box 12

Using sex-disaggregated data on organized crime to identify “blind spots” in policing practices and improve operational effectiveness in combating OCGs in Sweden

The Swedish Police’s National Operations Department conducted a comprehensive study focused on the involvement of women in organized crime.²⁰⁵ Its findings highlighted the significant roles that women assume in the initiation and perpetuation of activities within OC networks. Unlike their male counterparts, women are less inclined to resort to violence, but they are instrumental in logistical aspects, such as concealing weapons or narcotics, or facilitating the exchange of information.

To disseminate and integrate the research outcomes into the Swedish Police’s operations, a series of strategies were devised. These have included workshops to enhance awareness within local police districts of the roles played by women in criminal networks, identify potential “blind spots” in current policing practices, and gain a deeper understanding of the functioning of criminal networks.

During the workshops, participants discuss a specific scenario, supported by a set of follow-up questions. The scenarios are based on real-life situations where the presence of women in criminal activities often goes unnoticed, such as vehicle searches. In this way, the Swedish Police are aiming to strengthen their ability to combat OC and improve overall effectiveness in maintaining public safety.

²⁰³ Q12, Q13, Q14, I3, I6, I7, I11.

²⁰⁴ OSCE, *OSCE Guidebook Intelligence-Led Policing* (Vienna, 2017). Available at [OSCE Guidebook Intelligence-Led Policing | OSCE](#) [accessed 2 October 2023].

²⁰⁵ Swedish Police Authority, *Women’s influence on and involvement in serious violence in criminal milieus*, A440.265/2019 (Stockholm, 2021)

8. Conclusion and tools to support inclusive programming



This report makes it clear that a gender gap exists in the general understanding of the extent to which women are actively involved in TOC and of the roles they play within OCGs. Traditional gender stereotypes continue to influence and shape how criminal justice practitioners think about women and crime. Women are often considered to be victims or by-standers of OC. Yet this view of women as passive and subordinate actors lacking agency is hindering a more complete and nuanced understanding of the reality of women in OCGs. While there is no doubt that women do face gendered violence in OCGs, there are also women who participate actively in the activities of OCGs. Additionally, women in OCGs perpetrating crimes may be victims of TOC themselves.

This assessment shows that women hold important agency inside OCGs, across all criminal markets and hierarchy levels. It reveals that women provide valuable professional expertise to OCGs, while their position as mothers, wives, partners, daughters, sisters, aunts and cousins gives them the power, respect, and reputation to take on significant roles in OCGs.

Importantly, the findings also emphasize how OCGs are actively exploiting the lack of understanding and recognition of women’s role in the criminal landscape, taking advantage of the tendency of criminal justice authorities to disregard women as significant actors, which enables them to act undetected by law enforcement within criminal networks.

These findings make a compelling case for women OC actors to be better understood. However, women’s agency in OCGs remains an under-researched area and is largely absent in operational considerations. This approach has meant that gender often remains under the radar in law enforcement, prosecution

and judiciary operations, as well as in general policy approaches to combating and preventing TOC across the OSCE area.

This tendency ultimately benefits OCGs. Relegating women to the background gives them “impunity” to act for criminal groups. It also hinders the development of operationally effective approaches to preventing and countering TOC. This report has identified that prevention and exit initiatives across the OSCE area currently mainly cater to the situation and needs of men. Women are still often underrepresented from these initiatives. Especially in exit programmes, women tend to be involved as the partners of male OCG members rather than as active agents in their own right.

A cultural shift and a strong commitment to gender mainstreaming is thus needed to promote more targeted, systematic and effective criminal justice responses to TOC that fully recognize and address the different roles played by women and men. Collecting sex-disaggregated data and listening to women’s lived experiences have crucial roles to play in enabling pS to develop more nuanced understandings of women’s participation in all aspects of OC and OCGs.

Effectively addressing the gender dimensions of TOC presents a complex and multifaceted challenge that engages a wide range of stakeholders. Developed on the basis of the evidence collected for this assessment, the following tools can support the efforts of criminal justice authorities to develop and implement targeted capacity-building in support of more inclusive responses to TOC.

The OSCE Building Blocks for Inclusive Responses (**Figure 5**) set out core elements of inclusive responses to TOC. They can be used as a “readiness” checklist to identify areas that may require specific attention to build understanding and capacity on gender and TOC. They can also be transformed into individual projects as part of a whole-of-society approach to combating and preventing OC.

Figure 5: OSCE Building Blocks for Inclusive Responses in combating OC.

Generate and analyse sex-disaggregated data.	Avoid gender biases and recognize the roles women play.	Identify gender-specific vulnerabilities and drivers.
Evaluate cases and share knowledge.	Nominate leaders to promote inclusive responses.	Build strategic partnerships with civil society.
Build gender-sensitive capacity to disrupt OC recruitment.	Invest in building gender-sensitive prosecution capacity.	Create gender-responsive exit routes for women.

Source: OSCE (2023).

The **GENDER** action lens (Figure 6) is an overarching tool to provide guidance on initiating gender-sensitive approaches to TOC.

Figure 6: OSCE GENDER action lens.



Source: OSCE (2023).

References and data sources

Primary data

Much of the data presented in this report was collected specifically for this assessment through questionnaires and follow-up interviews. Institutional respondents and contributors came from different criminal justice institutions, including police, prosecution, witness protection services and border security agencies, as specified below (see [Table 3](#)). Further contributions were provided by civil society organizations (see [Table 4](#)).

Table 3: Overview of agencies contributing to this assessment

PARTICIPATING STATE	CONTRIBUTING AGENCY
Albania	Ministry of Justice
Belgium	Belgian Federal Police
Bulgaria	Ministry of Justice, Bureau for Protection of Threatened Persons
Canada	Ontario Regional Office of the Public Prosecution Service of Canada; Ontario Provincial Police
Finland	Finnish Border Guard; Finnish Police; Finnish National Prosecution Authority
Italy	National Antimafia and Antiterrorism Directorate; Italian State Police; Guardia di Finanza
Kyrgyzstan	Drug Control Service of the Ministry of Internal Affairs
Moldova	Ministry of Internal Affairs; General Prosecutor's Office
North Macedonia	Ministry of Internal Affairs; Public Prosecutor's Office
Serbia	Ministry of Internal Affairs
Spain	Spanish National Police
Sweden	Swedish Police Authority
Tajikistan	Ministry of Internal Affairs
United Kingdom	Thames Valley Police ²⁰⁶

²⁰⁶ The Thames Valley Police Violence Reduction Unit provided support in the analysis of their 2018–2022 data examining the background of women convicted of organized crime offences in Thames Valley. This provided insight into the complex histories of these women, especially their experiences of domestic abuse.

Table 4: Overview of civil society organizations contributing to this assessment

PARTICIPATING STATE	CONTRIBUTING CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATION
Bulgaria	Center for the Study of Democracy
Canada	Her Time
Italy	Libera
North Macedonia	Eurothink-Center for European Strategies, Global Initiative
Serbia	Independent Journalists' Association of Vojvodina (IJAV)/Vojvodina Investigative and Analytical Center (VOICE)
Tajikistan	Caravan of Hope
United Kingdom	Catch 22

Questionnaires

Questionnaires were sent to officially nominated national focal points for this assessment in 14 pS between July 2022 and March 2023. In addition, the questionnaire was distributed to selected civil society organizations.

Responses to the questionnaire were received from 14 pS, including representatives of:

- Ministries of Justice (MoJ)
- Ministries of the Interior (MoI)
- Law enforcement (LE)
- Prosecutorial services (P)
- Civil society (CS)

In some instances, multiple responses were received from the same institution.

Table 5: Overview of questionnaire responses received

QUESTIONNAIRE NUMBER	PARTICIPATING STATE	QUESTIONNAIRE NUMBER	PARTICIPATING STATE
Q1	Albania (MoJ)	Q2	Belgium (LE)
Q3	Bulgaria (CS)	Q4	Bulgaria (MoJ)
Q5	Canada (LE)	Q6	Canada (P)
Q7	Finland (LE)	Q8	Finland (P)
Q9	Finland (LE)	Q10	Finland (P)



QUESTIONNAIRE NUMBER	PARTICIPATING STATE	QUESTIONNAIRE NUMBER	PARTICIPATING STATE
Q11	Finland (LE)	Q12	Italy (LE)
Q13	Italy (MoJ)	Q14	Italy (CS)
Q15	Kyrgyzstan (Mol)	Q16	Moldova (LE, P)
Q17	North Macedonia (CS)	Q18	North Macedonia (P)
Q19	North Macedonia (LE)	Q20	Serbia (Mol)
Q21	Serbia (Mol)	Q22	Serbia (Mol)
Q23	Serbia (Mol)	Q24	Serbia (Mol)
Q25	Spain (LE)	Q26	Sweden (LE)
Q27	Tajikistan (Mol)	Q28	United Kingdom (CS)

Follow-up interviews

Following the receipt of responses to the questionnaire, 14 semi-structured interviews were conducted to clarify data and gather additional insights. These interviews were conducted online between November 2022 and May 2023.

Table 6: Overview of follow-up interviews conducted

INTERVIEW NUMBER	INTERVIEWEE	INTERVIEW NUMBER	INTERVIEWEE
I1	Canada (P)	I8	Sweden (LE)
I2	Spain (LE)	I9	Canada (LE)
I3	Italy (LE)	I10	Canada (CS)
I4	Bulgaria (MoJ)	I11	Italy (CS)
I5	Bulgaria (CS)	I12	Moldova (Mol)
I6	Italy (LE)	I13	Tajikistan (CS)
I7	Italy (P)	I14	United Kingdom (CS)

Other interviews

A telephone interview (OI1) was conducted with a representative from an NGO based in Mollas, Albania, in May 2022.

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Annex 1: Glossary of terms²⁰⁶

AFFILIATION RITUAL, a ceremony used by crime groups to admit new members into the group. In many cases, these rituals are quasi-religious, entailing the swearing of an oath of allegiance to the group.

COUNTY LINES (CL) is “a recent term used to describe gangs and organized criminal networks involved in exporting illegal drugs into one or more importing areas [within the UK], using dedicated mobile phone lines or other form of ‘deal line’. They are likely to exploit children and vulnerable adults to move [and store] the drugs and money and they will often use coercion, intimidation, violence (including sexual violence) and weapons.”²⁰⁸

CONFRATERNITIES OR BROTHERHOODS are labels given to organized crime groups from Western Africa. Originally groups with political aspirations for change in new post-colonial societies, during the 1990s they turned into political vote collecting machines in Africa. In Europe, they have become a highly structured criminal presence, with rules, uniforms and religious affiliation rituals. They are involved in human and drug trafficking across Europe and the world. Examples of names of such groups are Vikings, Black Axe, Eiye and Bucaneers.

ENABLERS AND FACILITATORS are professionals (such as doctors, lawyers, solicitors) who help organized criminals in their everyday life and business activities. They are also sometimes referred to as “the grey zone”.

FEMININITY is a term used to describe typical main characteristics of what it means to be or is traditionally associated with a woman. For example, women can be traditionally considered kind, emotional and talkative.

GENDER is a term used to describe socially constructed roles for women and men. It is an acquired identity that is learned, changes over time, and varies widely within and across cultures. In contrast, the term sex is used to indicate the biological differences between men and women.

GENDER MAINSTREAMING involves taking into account the different needs and perspectives of women and men when designing and implementing policies and programmes. Gender equality policies can have a positive effect in preventing and countering organized crime; vice versa, crime prevention policies can benefit from using gender equality principles to level the playing field and be more inclusive.²⁰⁹

GENDER STRATIFICATION means that criminal roles and jobs are distributed according to gender.

ITALIAN MAFIAS are organized crime groups that originate in Italy and specialize in extortion, drug trafficking, counterfeit goods, diverting public contracts and money laundering. Four main mafia groups exist in Italy: The Sicilian Cosa Nostra, the Calabrian 'Ndrangheta, the Neapolitan Camorra and the Puglian Corona Sacra Unità.

²⁰⁷ These are not legally defined or universally accepted definitions, but rather explanations of common terms used in the field to facilitate the reader's understanding.

²⁰⁸ See Home Office, Guidance, *County Lines Programme overview*, March 2023, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/county-lines-programme/county-lines-programme-overview> [accessed 2 May 2023].

²⁰⁹ See the United Nation publication *Gender Mainstreaming: A global strategy for achieving gender equality & empowerment of women and girls*, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/04/brochure-gender-mainstreaming-strategy-for-achieving-gender-equality-and-empowerment-of-women-girls> [accessed 28 March 2023].

MULE is a term for someone who smuggles drugs, often hidden inside their bodies.

MASCULINITY is a term used to describe typical main characteristics of what it means to be or is traditionally associated with a man. For example, men can be traditionally considered harsh, unemotional and violent.

ORGANIZED CRIME GROUP [OCG] according to the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC) is defined as a group of three or more persons that was not randomly formed and that exists for a period of time.²¹⁰ Members act in concert with the aim of committing at least one crime punishable by at least four years of incarceration. They undertake these crimes in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit.

SEX identifies the biological differences between men and women. Sex features are universal and do not change over time or across cultures.

TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME [TOC] according to the UNTOC consists of organized crime groups that undertake criminal activities in more than one State.²¹¹ These activities can be planned and controlled in one State and take place in another. This covers all profit-motivated serious criminal activities with international implications.

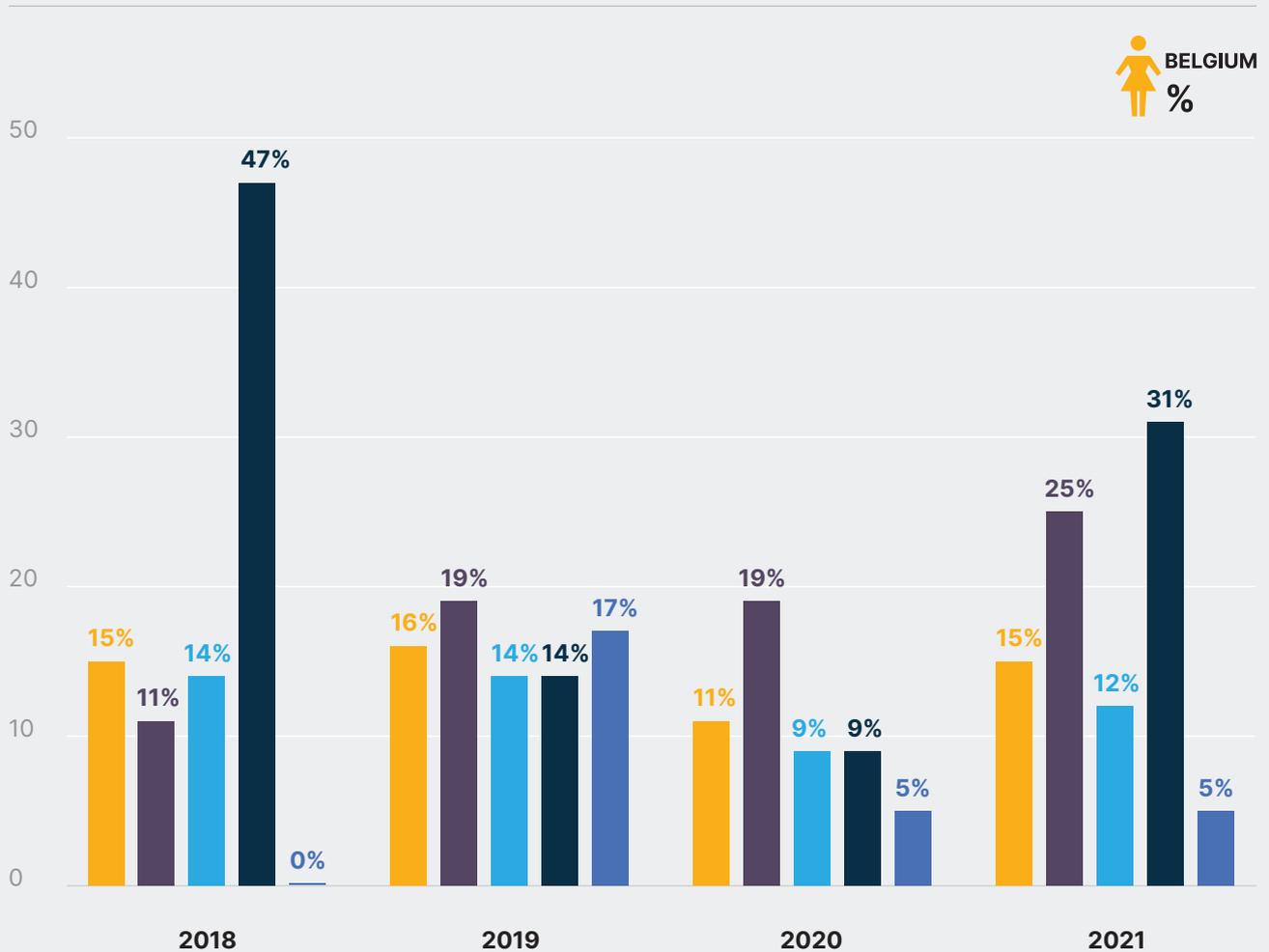
²¹⁰ See United Nation's Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and the Protocols Thereto, **UNITED NATIONS CONVENTION AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME AND THE PROTOCOLS THERETO** (unodc.org) [accessed 28 August 2023].

²¹¹ See United Nation's Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and the Protocols Thereto, **UNITED NATIONS CONVENTION AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME AND THE PROTOCOLS THERETO** (unodc.org) [accessed 28 August 2023].

Annex 2: Sex-disaggregated data on OC-related arrests

The following figures present sex-disaggregated data on OC-related arrests supplied by pS in response to the questionnaires circulated for this report.

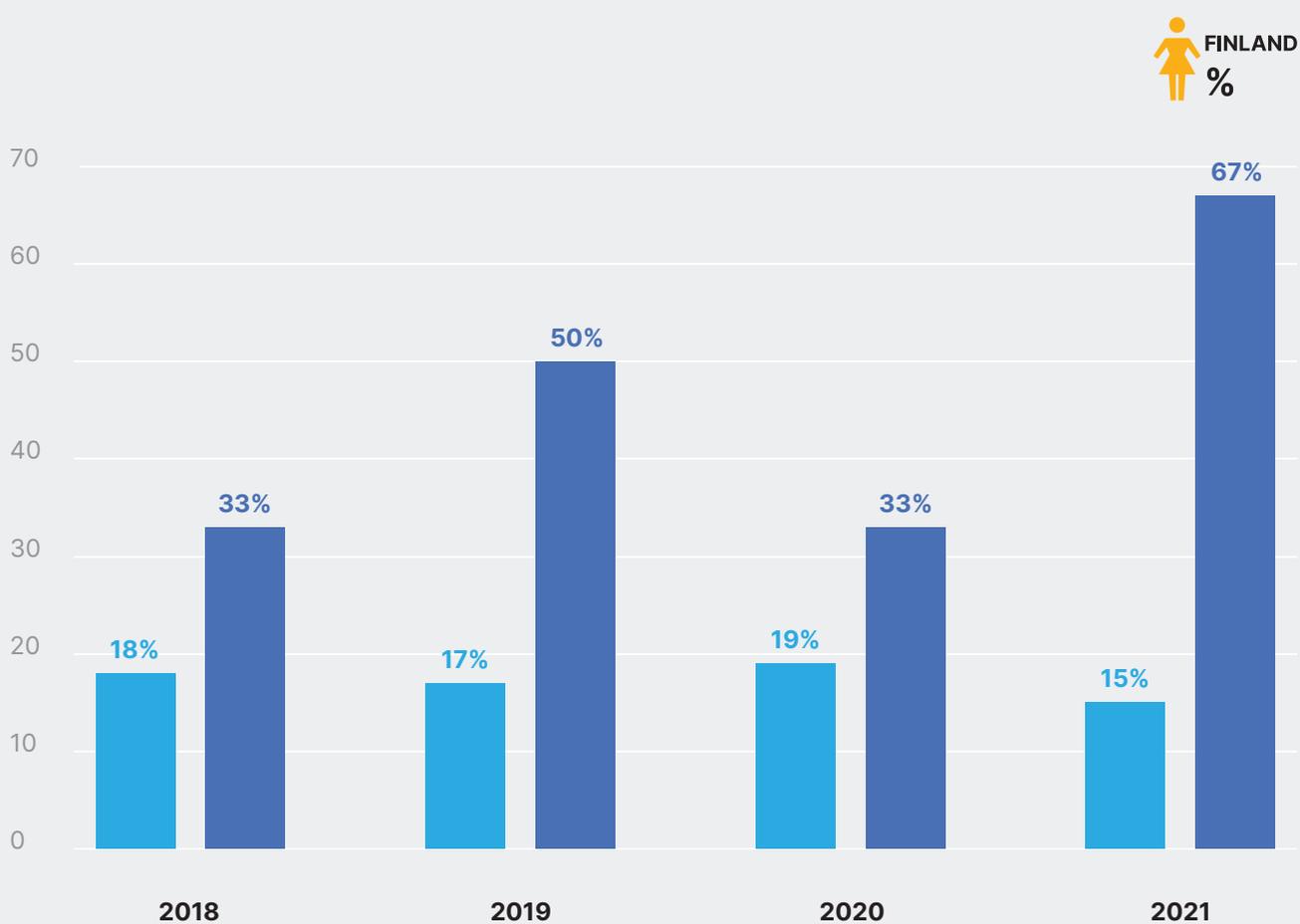
Figure A.1: Percentage of women arrested for organized crime in Belgium 2018–2021 (October 2022).



Source: Data provided by the Belgian Federal Police through the OSCE questionnaire (October 2022).

OC financial crime illicit drugs migrant smuggling human trafficking

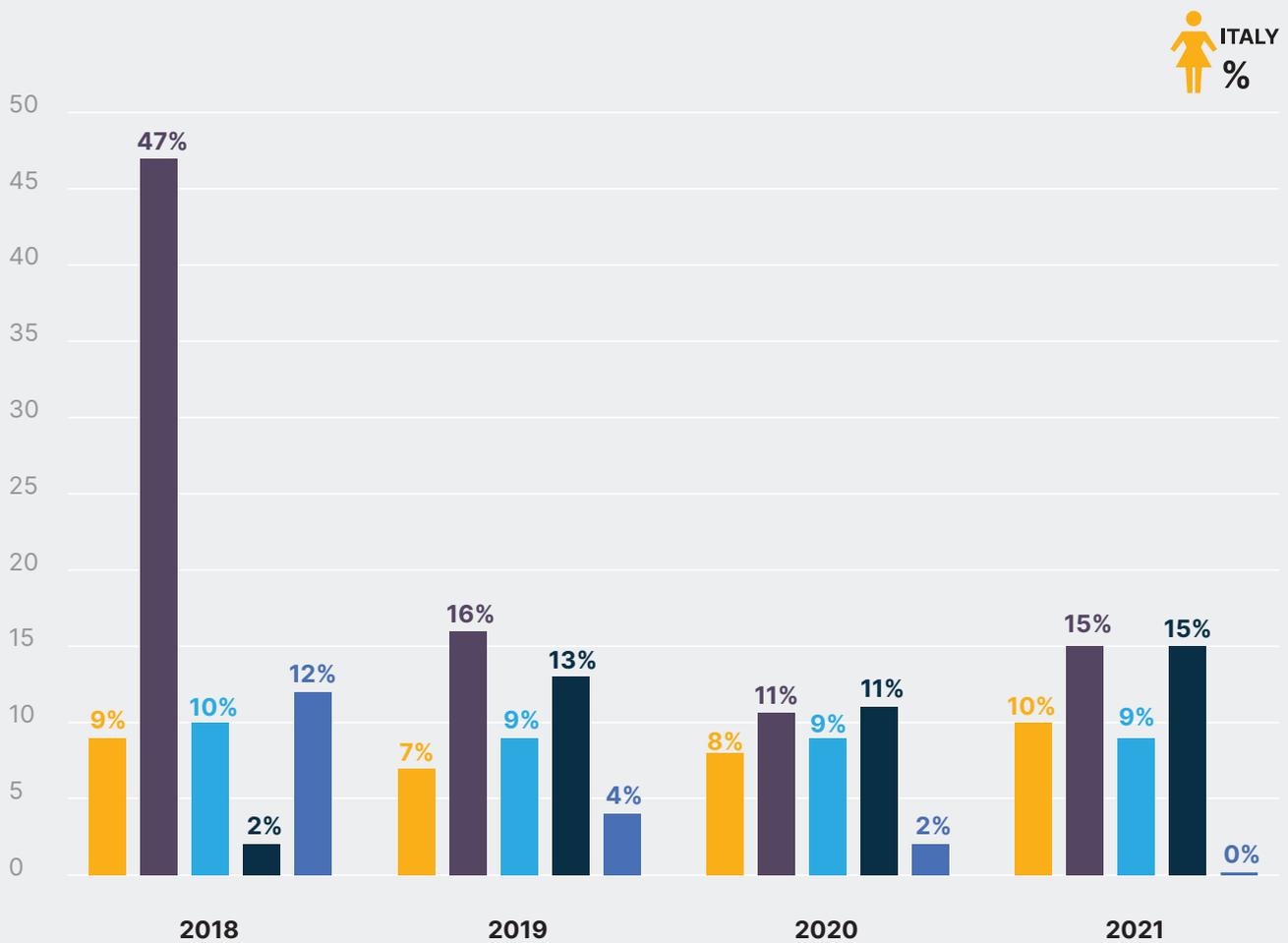
Figure A.2: Percentage of women arrested for trafficking in illicit drugs and trafficking in human beings in Finland 2018–2021 (October 2022).



Source: Data provided by the Finnish Police through the OSCE questionnaire (October 2022).

■ illicit drugs ■ human trafficking

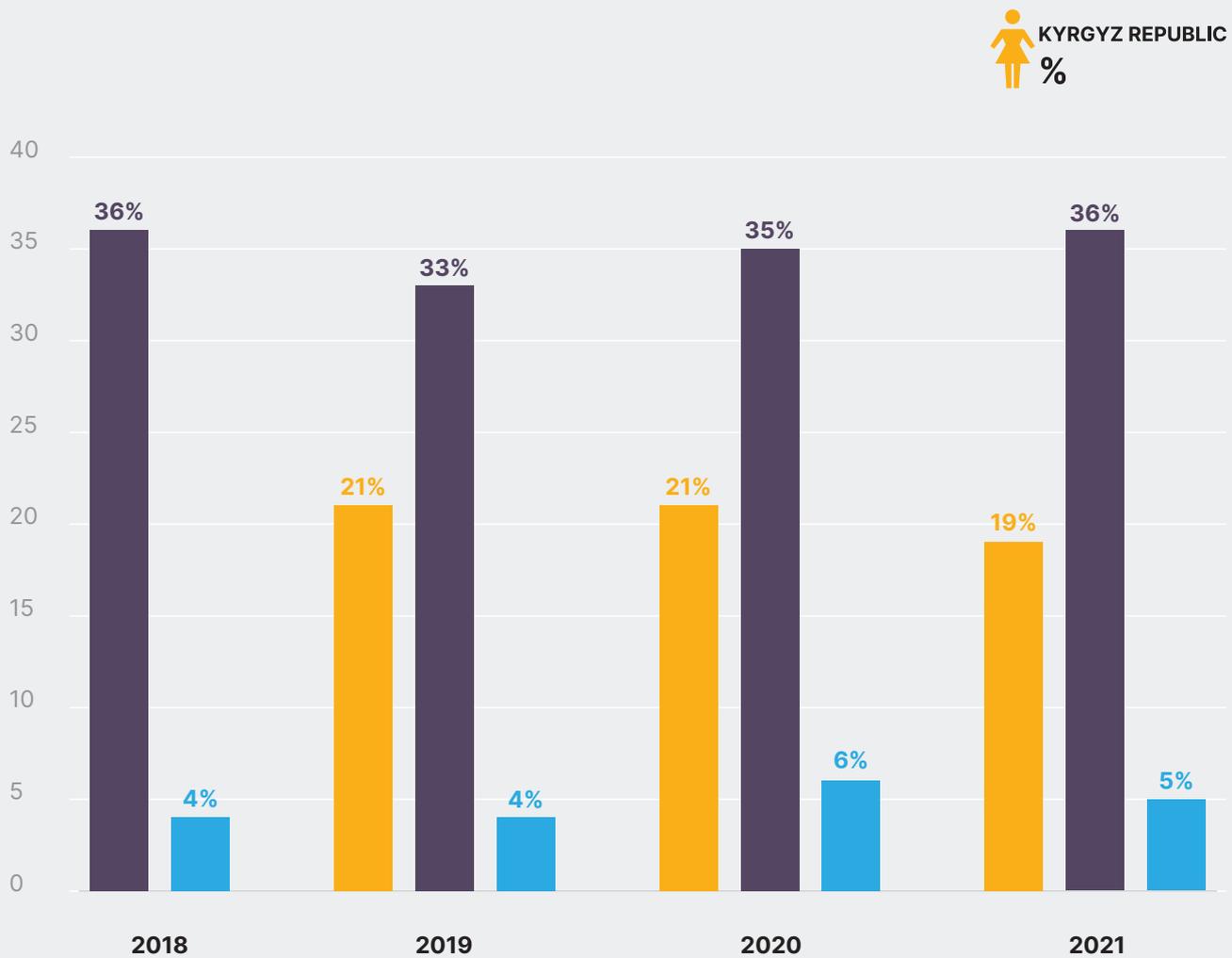
Figure A.3: Percentage of women arrested for participation in mafia-type criminal organizations in Italy 2018–2021 (October 2022).



Source: Data provided by the Direzione Nazionale Antimafia e Antiterrorismo through the OSCE questionnaire (October 2022).

OC financial crime illicit drugs migrant smuggling human trafficking

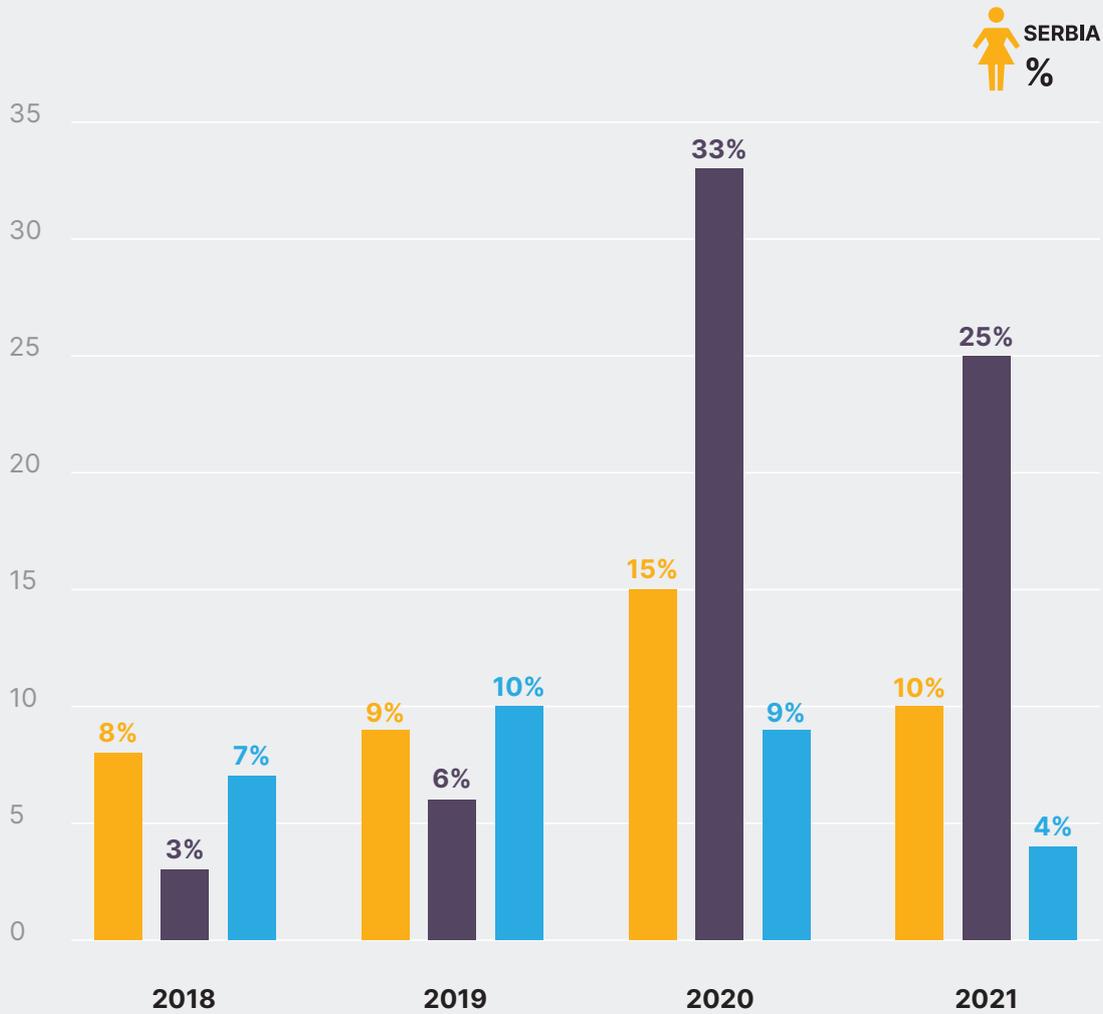
Figure A.4: Percentage of women arrested for organized crime in the Kyrgyz Republic 2018–2021 (December 2022).



Source: Data provided by the Drug Control Service of the Ministry of Internal Affairs through the OSCE questionnaire (December 2022).

OC financial crime illicit drugs

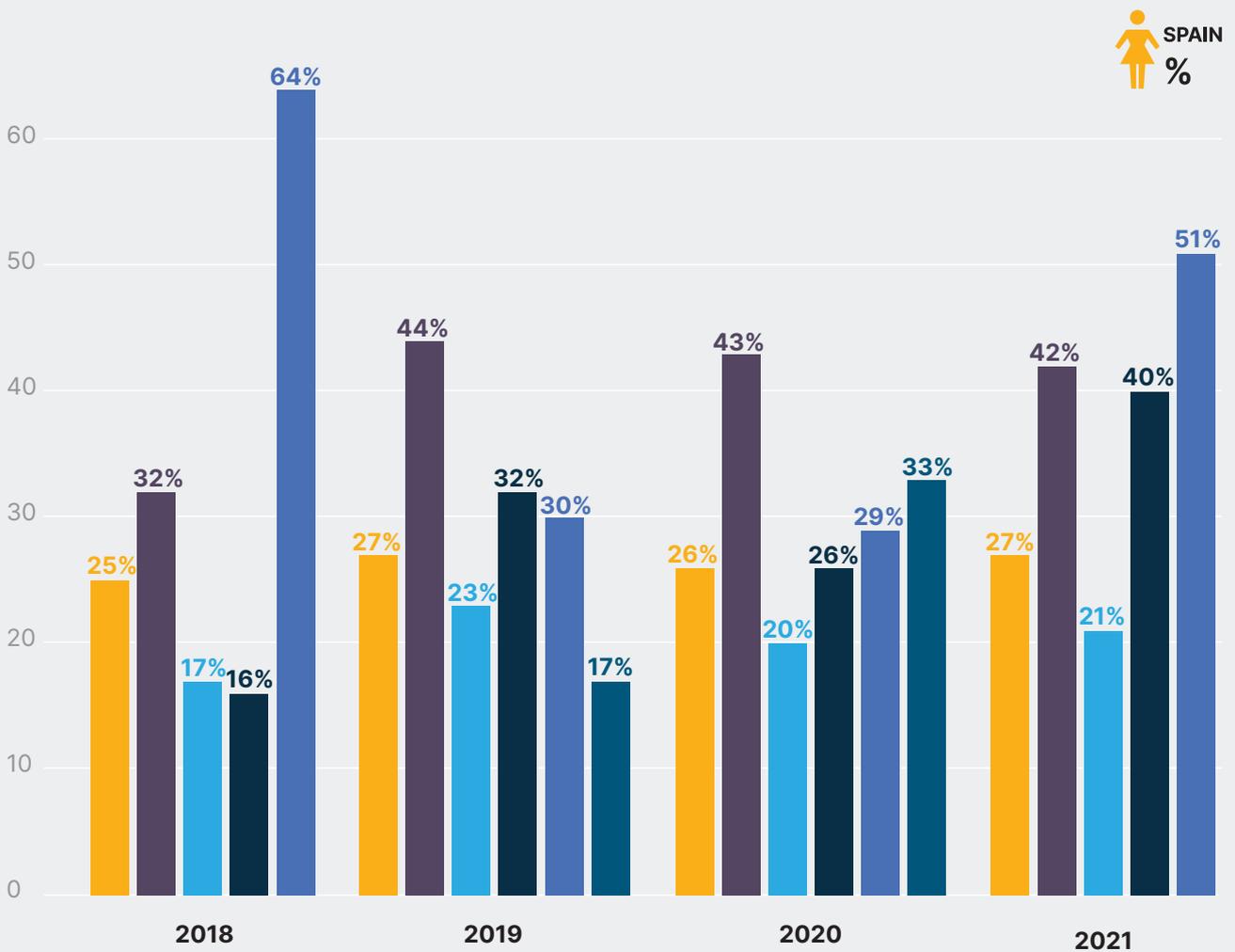
Figure A.5: Percentage of women arrested for organized crime in Serbia 2018–2021 (September 2022).



Source: Data provided by the Ministry of Internal Affairs through the OSCE questionnaire (September 2022).

OC financial crime illicit drugs

Figure A.6: Percentage of women arrested for organized crime in Spain 2018–2021 (October 2022).



Source: Data provided by the Spanish National Police through the OSCE questionnaire (October 2022).

OC financial crime illicit drugs migrant smuggling human trafficking SALW trafficking

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