

The role of gender in serious and organised/transnational crime

Jacqueline Hicks

IDS

30 March 2021

Question

What is the role of gender in serious and organised/transnational crime (SOC) with regard to gender norms, participation and prevention?

- *What roles do women play in organised crime groups and what are their pathways to participation?*
- *Do cultural gender norms influence different forms of participation for men and women in serious and organised/transnational crime?*
- *Is there any evidence that gender dynamics within families or communities can play a role in preventing serious and organised/transnational crime?*

Contents

1. Summary
2. Women's roles and pathways to participation in organised crime groups
3. Influence of gender norms on women's and men's participation in SOC
4. Community and family gender dynamics in preventing SOC
5. References

The K4D helpdesk service provides brief summaries of current research, evidence, and lessons learned. Helpdesk reports are not rigorous or systematic reviews; they are intended to provide an introduction to the most important evidence related to a research question. They draw on a rapid desk-based review of published literature and consultation with subject specialists.

Helpdesk reports are commissioned by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office and other Government departments, but the views and opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect those of FCDO, the UK Government, K4D or any other contributing organisation. For further information, please contact helpdesk@k4d.info.

1. Summary

Key Overall Findings linking gender norms, female participation and prevention of serious and organised crime (SOC):

Overall Finding #1: Gender norms and women's participation in SOC are varied and highly contextual, highlighting the importance of gender analysis to programming.

- A feature of the literature on women's participation in SOC is that for every claim, there is counter-claim. The number of female leaders versus lower ranking females and types of role in SOC depends on socio-cultural context (Kienast et al, 2014; Arsovska and Begum, 2013), how formally structured the organisation is (Hübschle, 2014; Viuhko, 2018), and type of market (Shelley, 2012).
- UNODC provides a checklist of questions to incorporate gender analysis into SOC prevention projects (UNODC, 2020). DFAT (2020) provides an example of a SOC prevention project where gender analysis is fully integrated into the project cycle.

Overall Finding #2: Gendered perceptions of men as perpetrators and women as victims in SOC undermine effective responses.

- A frequent research finding is that active offenders in SOC can also have some features of a victim, or that victims can later become offenders (Viuhko, 2018; Fleetwood & Giacomello, 2017; Baxter, 2020, Lo Iacono, 2014).
- Recognition of this so-called 'victim-offender overlap' may help identify points of intervention into SOC - for example, at the point in the human trafficking cycle when a trafficked woman has cleared all her debts (Baxter, 2020).
- The heightened social stigma attached to female offenders also shows the need for rehabilitation of victims to reduce the possibility of becoming an offender (Kienast et al, 2014; Pieris, 2014; Long, 2002).
- Men trafficked for labour are often overlooked as victims compared to women, leading to their omission from prevention programmes (Surtees, 2007, 2008).

Overall Finding #3: Some types of masculine identity have been linked to involvement in violent crime and societal tolerance of organised crime groups. In Italy, some feminists characterise opposition to SOC as an anti-patriarchal struggle.

- While there is some evidence for this finding (Deuchar 2018; Travaglino et al, 2014), it should be treated with caution as it may be particular to research on the Italian mafia.
- Following this logic, some anti-SOC activities are focused on changing gendered norms (particularly around human trafficking) or are organised by women (Alison, 2000; Schneider & Schneider, 2005; Tickner et al, 2020). However, the research also shows that this may be overambitious (Balanon & Barrameda, 2007; Hext et al, 2016), and has the potential to put women's groups at risk (Le Brun, 2019).

Additional Findings

Participation and pathways of women in SOC:

- Women have **mainly supportive roles**, with a small but significant percentage in leadership roles (Siegel & de Blank, 2010; Levenkron, 2007; Dino, 2011), and particularly in human and sex trafficking, particularly in more informal criminal networks (Viuhko, 2018; Zhang et al, 2007). They are **less likely to have leadership roles in drug trafficking** (Shelley, 2012).
- Social, romantic and family **relationships facilitate involvement in SOC** (UNODC, 2019; van San, 2011; Hübschle, 2014), as they do for men (Kleemans & depot, 2008). There is some evidence that romantic connections are particularly important pathways for women into SOC (Giacomello, 2020); Zhilla & Lamallari, 2015).
- Women are more likely to be **recruiters and managers of other victims** in human and sex trafficking (Shelley, 2012; Aronowitz, 2009; Surtees, 2008).

Influence of gender norms on participation of men and women in SOC:

- Both men and women understand their involvement in SOC as a response to poverty **mediated through their gendered roles and responsibilities** as mothers, daughters, wives, fathers, sons and husbands (Fleetwood, 2014; Carlsson, 2013).
- Social gender norms may show up in different roles for men and women by linking one form of masculinity with **violent** roles (Deuchar 2018; Baird, 2017) and one form of femininity with **'care-giving'** roles (Zhang et al, 2007; Savona and Nataoli, 2007).

The role of family/community gender dynamics in preventing SOC

- There is evidence from female delinquency programmes in the US that women and girls involved in criminal gangs are more deeply damaged than boys in a wider range of ways, and that they respond more to family and school connectedness, and relationship building, than boys (Peterson & Howell, 2013).

State of Evidence

Performing a rapid review on gender and SOC in the time available surfaced literature on drug, human and sex trafficking above other types of SOC. Throughout the large literature on gender and SOC, many authors make assertions without referencing research evidence. This helpdesk report prioritised evidential research, taking care to explain the methods used.

The clandestine nature of SOC means that much of the empirical research is based on court documents or interviews with prisoners, so only covers those captured by authorities.

There is a general tension in the research between providing evidence of large-scale trends that risk essentialising what men and women do, and honouring the intersectional complexity of gender at the individual level by including other inequalities such as race or class. Ethnographies of individuals' life stories are more realistic representations of the role of gender, but defy generalisation.

Definitions

This helpdesk report focuses mostly on transnational serious and organised crime, referred to throughout as SOC.

The UK government defines serious and organised crime as: “individuals planning, coordinating and committing serious offences, whether individually, in groups and/or as part of transnational networks.” The main types of offences relate to child sexual exploitation and abuse; illegal drugs; illegal firearms; fraud; money laundering and other economic crime; bribery and corruption; organised immigration crime; modern slavery and human trafficking; and cyber-crime. (Her Majesty’s Government, 2018).

‘Organised crime’ may be more or less coherent or hierarchical. Finckenauer (2005) notes that some crimes may require a network of individuals who work together, but they are not necessarily part of an organised criminal group (OCG). These networks may be small, informal and short-lived while actual criminal organisations have continuity. This distinction has some relevance for analysing women’s involved in SOC as some research suggests they may be more likely to be involved in more informal networks.

2. Women’s roles and pathways to participation in organised crime groups

“Focusing on whether particular behaviours reflect masculinity or femininity, or ‘doing gender,’ is not moving the ball down the field because multiple femininities and masculinities exist, they are tied to other aspects of social stratification, most notably, to race and class...and they ignore social interactions that reduce gender difference...What may move the ball down the field, however, is focusing on the situations and relational processes that foreground gender or, conversely, where they relegate gender to the background.”

Kruttschnitt (2016, p.20).

Mindful of Kruttschnitt’s advice in the above quotation, and the wide variety of roles that women can play in SOC depending on social context, the following section provides just **a few scattered examples** from the literature, categorised by market.

Women's roles in SOC are sometimes classified according to degree of independence and authority

To avoid over-generalising the wide range of female roles, Siegel & de Blank (2010) provide a useful categorisation of roles based on the degree of independence, the content of tasks, and the extent of equality in the relationship. The authors developed it in the context of human trafficking, but it draws from other research on drug trafficking (Campbell, 2008), and has been applied by others to other types of SOC. They divide the roles and tasks of female offenders into three categories:

1. **Supporters:** Subordinate to the leading traffickers and, either under threat or 'voluntarily', executed orders of the leader or other members of the human trafficking networks.
2. **Partners-in-crime:** Women who have a relationship with a man and cooperate with him, in principle on the basis of equality, in conducting tasks and activities.
3. **Madams:** Female offenders who play a central role, lead criminal organisations, and coordinate human trafficking activities.

There may be some common elements of women's experience in SOC

While recognising the variety of women's experiences in different organisations, geographies and unique individual histories (age, education, whether she was born into a criminal family, profession, socioeconomic level), Dino (2011) suggests certain common elements (p.329):

- The hidden numbers of women involved in criminal activities are consistently increasing.
- There is a strong link between the types of crimes committed by women and the social environment in which they live.
- Women often derive their criminal power from the men in their family.
- Women, particularly those on the lower rungs of the social ladder, find it difficult to have their roles formalized and recognized.
- There is an almost total absence of women from true places of power.

Human Trafficking

This is the only area of transnational crime in which women are significantly represented - as victims, perpetrators, and as anti-trafficking activists (Shelley, 2012). However, it is recognised that the relative numbers of women perpetrators may be overstated since their roles tend to be more visible, low ranking, and therefore more easily detected by law enforcement (UNODC, 2018). A second cautionary note is that **human trafficking may be organised, but not by members of organised criminal groups**. Based on data from 11 court judgements in Finland between 2004-2014, Viuhko (2018) finds "examples of a variety of operations that have been

organised by individual people, couples, small circles of friends or people who somehow know one another, instead of actual criminal groups” (p.183).

Siegel & de Blank’s (2010) research is based on the court files of 89 women of various nationalities who were convicted in the Netherlands of human trafficking from 1993–2004. Using their own taxonomy of roles as above, they find that **56 percent** of their 89 cases of women convicted for trafficking in the Netherlands could be classified as supporters, **28 percent** as partners-in-crime, **11 percent** as madams, and 5 percent were too difficult to classify.

Hübschle (2014) uses the same classification to describe human trafficking across Angola, Botswana, Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe (2007-2011), based on NGO interviews, media reports, court documents and interviews with informal sector workers. She describes **dynamic and multi-faceted roles** for women in the region, including in drug cultivation and wildlife poaching syndicates, and networks partially relying on familial and romantic links rather than ‘mafia-type’ hierarchically structured forms of organized crime. The author says women are less represented in OCGs, and **more represented in more informal networks**.

Some other frequently cited **female roles in human trafficking** include:

- Older prostitutes **recruiting** the next generation of sex trafficking victims, often through networks of friends and family (Shelley, 2012). Aronowitz (2009) notes the recruitment system is sometimes called ‘happy trafficking.’ Surtees (2008) find that women recruited other trafficked women in 49-60 percent of the time in Moldova, 40-57 percent in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and 30-60 percent of the time in Macedonia.
- Women **train the trafficking victims**, run the brothels, and maintain control of their victims (Shelley, 2012; Zhilla & Lamallari, 2015).
- In Israel, Levenkron (2007) found that women made up about 10 percent of the 325 sex traffickers under study, but almost all **played support roles**, either working with domestic partners or family members.
- Other research emphasises the **leadership roles** that women can play: from China (Zhang et al, 2007); in the Netherlands 14 percent of the women arrested for prostitution-related human trafficking were registered by the police as leaders of criminal organisations (van Dijk, 2002 cited in Siegel & de Blank, 2010).

Drug Trafficking

Compared to human trafficking, “**women rarely have positions of authority**” in the transnational drug trade (Shelley, 2012, p.17). However, this has been questioned by Kleemans et al’s (2014) empirical work on international drugs trade cases in the Netherlands, and Tickner et al (2020) boldly state: “the participation of women in organized crime economies is not exceptional and does not occur only in minor labour or subordinate positions” (p.26).

Some other frequently cited **female roles in drug trafficking** include:

- **Drug mules, recruiting** or minding mules (Fleetwood, 2014). Das (2012) says large numbers of women and children are used as mules between Bangladesh and India, based on an interview with border security officials in India.

- Minding money and drugs (Fleetwood, 2014; Zhilla & Lamallari, 2015).
- **Providing a family façade** to the vehicle the drug is being transported in, based on research from Albania (Zhilla & Lamallari, 2015).
- Trinidad & Tobago Police reported that women perform **operational or management functions** within a chain of command, and a significant role in recruiting others, especially young women (cited in Pieris, 2014).
- UN (2018) presents evidence from several cases of individual women from Latin American and African countries who have had **senior and leadership roles** in drug trafficking (p.27-28).

Money Laundering

Analysing 62 police investigations in the Netherlands, Soudijn (2010) found that women played **different roles in money laundering depending on the phase of the operation**, and were sometimes passive, and sometimes active.

In their research of cases in the Netherlands, Kleemans et al (2014) found that **7 percent** of the 247 female suspects identified were involved in crimes of **fraud and money laundering**.

A study of gender differences in 83 corporate frauds involving 436 defendants in the US found that women were not typically part of conspiracy groups, but when they were involved, they had more **minor roles and made less profit** than their male co-conspirators. The authors found two main pathways to female involvement: relational (close personal relationship with a main male co-conspirator) and utility (occupied a financial-gateway corporate position) (Steffensmeier et al, 2013).

Existing personal relationships are common pathways to women's involvement in SOC

Fleetwood's (2014) research on incarcerated female drug 'mules' from all over the world is based on 16 months of fieldwork visiting an Ecuadorian prison. She finds that mules described the traffickers they worked with as "**friends, boyfriends, husbands**, and customers who were also successful mules or recruiters" (p.161).

After nine months of fieldwork in Mexican prisons and drug treatment centres, Giacomello (2020) states that "women mainly become involved in trafficking through their **male partners**" (paragraph 55).

Hübschle (2014) reports "a few instances" of family members such as **aunts, sisters or female relatives** facilitating recruitment of their relatives into trafficking in Southern Africa.

Research from Albania which reviewed cases in the Serious Crimes Court (2006-2014) reports that judges involved in prosecuting women concluded that the majority of women were involved because of **intimate or family ties** with members of criminal groups (Zhilla & Lamallari, 2015, p.28).

A report by the UNODC and Colombia's Justice Ministry found that 53.4 percent of women interviewed inside Colombian prisons between 2018 and 2019 had **at least one relative also in prison**, usually their romantic partners (38 percent), brothers (20 percent) or other relatives (42 percent) (UNODC, 2019, cited in Tickner et al 2020).

van San's (2011) ethnographic fieldwork among Curaçao families in the Netherlands led her to conclude that relationships of trust based on **friendship, kinship, or of a sentimental nature** with people involved in the drug trade, can function as vectors for involvement.

However, as Kleemans & dePoot (2008) show from their analysis of the criminal careers of 1000 offenders in the Netherlands, **social ties are important for both men and women's** pathways to organised crime due to its secretive and trust-based nature.

Human, drug and firearm trafficking serve as interconnected pathways

UNODC (2018) highlights evidence on **connections between human trafficking and drug trafficking** for women (p.31).

Based on nine months of fieldwork interviewing women in Mexican prisons and drug treatment centres, Giacomello (2020) states that "women incarcerated for drug offences are, rather than traffickers, trafficked women" (paragraph 66).

Research data submitted from field researchers in South Africa, Mozambique and Namibia indicated that some female victims of **sex trafficking were also recruited to smuggle drugs** (Hübschle, 2014).

Shelley (2012) explores the "**numerous and complex**" linkages between drug and human trafficking, providing a useful overview of research from different parts of the world. She concludes that "links are different dependent on the type of human exploitation involved and the region of the world in which the exploitation occurs" (p.250).

UNODC (2020) reports that trafficking in small arms and light weapons is often linked to other types of trafficking, including trafficking in persons and drugs.

Socio-cultural context strongly influences women's roles in SOC

It is often remarked in the literature that the roles and pathways of women into SOC are **highly specific to socio-cultural context** as well as the different types of crime and illicit market.

National Contexts: Kienast et al (2014) underline the cultural differences in the roles of women in sex trafficking recruitment by **comparing Nigeria, Thailand and Eastern Europe**. They note media reports from Nigeria where family relations are used by "madams" to recruit women, while in Eastern Europe a French anti-trafficking official describes the profile of a madam as a businesswoman without these types of family links. In Thailand, they note the increasing use of women using social media to recruit new victims into trafficking.

Ethnic Contexts: Based on literature reviews, workshops and the analysis of 479 profiles of Balkan organised crime figures, Arsovska and Begum (2013) find that **Slavic women** have more active and independent roles in SOC compared to ethnic **Albanian women**.

Organisational Context: Dino (2011) writes of the differing levels of responsibility in women's roles in two different Italian mafia groups– the Cosa Nostra and the Camorra.

The Italian mafias have received a large share of the attention in the research, but have very specific tight hierarchical structures, and are heavily influenced by culture. In response, Arsovska & Allum (2014) ask: What type of roles do women hold in more fluid and flexible transnational organized crime groups that are less culturally bound and more about economic transactions?

It is this contextual nature of women's roles in SOC that highlights the crucial importance of situational gender analyses throughout the programming cycle, such as planned in DFAT (2020).

3. Influence of gender norms on women's and men's participation in SOC

“A satisfactory theory of masculinities and crime requires an understanding of the meanings boys and men attach to their social actions and how these actions are related to conscious choice and specific social structures in particular settings.”

Messerschmidt (2005, Chapter 12)

In the above quotation, Messerschmidt suggests that gender norms cannot be directly mapped onto explanations of participation in SOC, but rather interact with individual choice and social setting. In order to avoid further embedding gender stereotypes by isolating gender norms as an explanatory variable, Messerschmidt (2005) suggests asking: “Why is it that only a minority of men need to produce masculinity through crime rather than through other, noncriminal, means?” This again points to the importance of specific contexts, from country to sub-national cultural groups, specific criminal organisations, and down to the level of individual.

The literature offers some examples of how gender norms can influence participation within SOC. However, care should be taken **not to reify notions of masculinity or femininity**, but be mindful of their variety.

Masculine identities are linked to violent roles in SOC

There is a large body of literature **linking the social construction of masculine identities and violent crime** where men sometimes become attracted to gangs and organised crime to assert a hegemonic masculinity (toughness, physical prowess and respect) against the backdrop of social or economic marginalisation (Deuchar 2018 in Rahman, 2019).

Baird (2017) takes a typical approach: interviewing gang members in Colombia and drawing out life stories which show how young men accumulate **'masculine capital'** by joining gangs, emulating other 'successful' local male identities.

These ideas are sometimes semi-formalised in **ethical codes of conduct** that are internal to different organised crime gangs. For example, in Russia, the OCG code, *Poniatia*, determine a man's reputation in accordance with his ability to stand by his word and use physical violence (Yusupova, 2017). A similar code of **masculine honour** operates more famously in Italian mafia groups, laying down rules on when violence is acceptable (Travaglino et al, 2014). In both cases, these codes linking masculinity to violence and honour within the OCGs are also more widespread within society – Stephenson (2015) highlights a national survey where 38 percent of respondents said they had a general understanding of *Poniatia*, while Travaglino points to research showing how codes of honour are central aspects of everyday life in Southern Italy (p.801).

On the other hand, **women are sometimes thought to have roles in SOC that do not involve violence**. Zhang et al. (2007) speculate that one of the reasons women are more involved in human smuggling compared to other forms of SOC is the limited place of violence and turf as organising features of the trade. In their work on women in the Mafia, Savona and Nataoli (2007) hypothesise that the "less violence required and greater the flexibility of the criminal organization, the greater is women's participation in management and leadership roles" (p.106).

Women may have 'care-giving' roles in SOC

Zhang et al (2007) say that the unusually prominent role of Chinese women in human smuggling is related to gender ideologies about care-giving "because human smuggling involves a willing clientele who seek opportunities abroad, smugglers are often perceived as providing assistance to individuals and communities. Thus, women likely can engage in human smuggling operations **without conflicting with their gendered 'cultural role fulfilment.'**

Other research shows that women have positions of 'minding' other women, either in micro-trafficking (Fleetwood, 2014) or human trafficking (Shelley, 2012).

However, in their study Kleemans et al (2014) describe the role of women as recruiters and minders in sex trafficking – "Being able to talk to them and to take care of them, they are also able to control them and/or exploit them, with or without a male companion. This also shows that **'care giving', a central element in the traditional role of women, may go hand in hand with control and manipulation**" (pp.25-26).

Societal gender expectations are exploited to benefit SOC

In relation to firearms trafficking, LeBrun (2019) suggests that the “recruitment of women in transferring or smuggling small arms may seek to exploit gendered expectations that women are less likely to engage in such activities, or cultural norms that prevent male security personnel from inspecting women” (p.70).

Wyler and Cook (2010) report African cartels recruiting women as “low profile” drug couriers who face a lower risk of being caught by the authorities.

Gendered family responsibilities as reasons for SOC participation

Fleetwood (2014) reports that women imprisoned for trafficking frequently spoke about their involvement in terms of **maintaining or attaining gender roles**, which were oriented towards local contexts. Their narratives were often about the financial difficulties of making a life as mothers, daughters, girlfriends, and wives. Rather than being compelled by others, women often felt compelled by these responsibilities and roles. Women rarely offered narratives based on desires for themselves as men did, for example, through discourses about entrepreneurship. Shelley concludes that women’s involvement in trafficking was not solely the result of the ‘feminisation of poverty’, as has previously been claimed, but also **reflected discourses about what women ‘should be’ like** (p.162).

One article highlights an example of the **cultural specificities** of gendered family expectations. “[There is a] view in some societies that females can be used to advance a family’s economic position being sold off to repay a family’s debt, provide cash for a medical emergency, or compensate for an absence of revenue when crops have failed” (Shelley, p.17).

By comparison Fleetwood (2014) suggests that **men’s narratives about their involvement in trafficking drew on discourses of autonomy and entrepreneurship** as well as hegemonic masculinity. However, this is based on three interviews only (compared to the substantial number of interviews with women), and Fleetwood also notes some elements of relational roles such as family responsibilities within those three interviews (p.115).

Carlsson (2013) offers a more nuanced analysis of how men ‘do masculinities’ in relation to the crimes they commit based on life-history narratives of 25 Swedish offenders. He describes how these men explain their persistence or desistance from criminal activities in terms of different gendered roles they adopt throughout their lifetime such as **‘family man’, ‘provider’, and ‘good parent’**.

4. Community and family gender dynamics in preventing SOC

Social stigma against female criminals may undermine rehabilitation and promote recidivism

Women's involvement in crime is described as being seen as 'doubly deviant': not just a violation of broad social norms against offending but also specific violations of appropriate behaviour for women as women (Swart, 1991 in Chin & Zhang, 2016).

This increased **gendered social stigma has been found to limit the possibilities for women to be rehabilitated**, or reintegrated back into society after involvement in SOC.

Kienast et al (2014, p.9) note that "options to exit, besides by coercion can further be restrained by an absence of prospects outside the boundaries of the trafficking business and a lack of social and familial support for reintegration due to their stigmatization, **becoming dependent on the [criminal] system** (citing research by Long, 2002 and Lo Iacono, 2014).

Pieris (2014) states that "when women break the law and are imprisoned, they defy and transgress [gendered care-giving] stereotypes and face a double punishment: they are both sanctioned by the law and condemned by a patriarchal society. In other words, the stigma attached to women who serve sentences for drug-related crimes, whether as producers, couriers, distributors or users, is necessarily compounded with gender discrimination" (p.29). She further presents a case study showing how **recidivism can be inevitable** when there are no social reintegration programs in the face of social and state stigma (p.30).

Social **reintegration programs may not be very common**. For example, an NGO in Serbia says it is the only organization in Serbia to provide integrated rehabilitation support to victims of human trafficking, including housing, therapy, legal assistance, and help to enrol in education (UN Women, 2019).

UN Women (Puri, 2016) notes that women are less likely to access drug treatment due to social stigma and concerns about losing custody of children: "globally, only one out of five drug users in treatment is a woman, even though one out of three drug users is a woman." Given the **association of drug consumption and involvement in drug trafficking**, the provision of gender-sensitive treatment facilities may also help prevention.

Tickner et al (2020) say that the lack of support from authorities for women involved in trafficking increases their distrust of police and leads to an increased possibility of recidivism. They advocate reduction in the use of punitive measures like jail time for women to "help **break the vicious cycle** in which women enter organized crime due to a lack of opportunities and are faced with even less opportunities upon leaving prison" (p.38).

Victim-offender binaries in media and society hamper effective responses to SOC

Research has frequently found that there are gendered expectations about the nature of people's involvement in SOC, particularly in human trafficking. The literature builds on the concept of the 'ideal' victim and offender (Christie, 1986) where offenders should be 'active and bad,' and victims 'passive and weak' (Viuhko, 2018). In contrast, researchers have found a significant **'victim-offender overlap.'**

Viuhko (2018) finds that females occupying leading roles in the human trafficking process can be considered both victims and offenders at the same time. Fleetwood & Giacomello (2017) have the same finding for drug trafficking. Citing research in Nigeria (Carling, 2006; Lo Iacono, 2014), Baxter (2020) sees women moving from victim to offender at a particular time in the "trafficking cycle" just when she has cleared all her debts (p.329). Baxter (2020) provides a useful up-to-date literature review of some of the other extensive research on the victim-offender overlap (pp.329-330).

Some of the **consequences of these victim-offender stereotypes for responses to trafficking** are:

- It shapes criminal justice responses to female traffickers, **promoting recidivism** (Tickner et al, 2020), and making it more difficult for authorities to identify crimes (Viuhko, 2018).
- It hampers victims' ability to identify themselves as victims of exploitation and trafficking and can **make rehabilitation more difficult** (Viuhko, 2018).
- Men trafficked for labour are frequently not seen as victims in the same way as women (Surtees, 2008).
- It draws attention away from the structural and causal factors of inequality, such as deep social transformations brought about by the neoliberal globalisation policies (Andrijasevic, 2014).
- It results in more stringent anti-immigration measures and the perpetuation of illegal trafficking channels (Andrijasevic, 2014).

Research on female delinquency in the US highlights some female-specific needs in crime prevention programming

In the available time, this rapid review did not find any research specifically aimed at describing or assessing gender-specific programming on the prevention of SOC. What follows are some insights from a meta-review of other systematic reviews on the appropriateness of gender-specific programming for female gang members who are sometimes involved in organised crime activities in the US (Peterson & Howell, 2013). The literature reviewed in this article falls broadly within the sphere of psychology, social work and individual treatment.

The article finds that **girls involved in gangs tend to be more deeply damaged than boys in a wider range of ways**: "In general, antisocial females are more impaired across a range of co-occurring social, health, or educational domains than are antisocial males" (p.500).

- In general, antisocial females are more impaired across a range of co-occurring social, health, or educational domains than are antisocial males.
- Girls are more likely to have co-occurring problems such as anxiety and depression and mental disorders compared to boys.
- Boys are more likely to report some type of assault victimisation. Females are 10 times more likely to experience sexual assault than boys.

In prevention programmes, **girls are more likely to respond to family connectedness**, school connectedness, religiosity, and **relationship building** than boys. Girls have unique strengths compared to boys that can be used in prevention programming, including: lower rates of hyperactivity, better impulse control, stronger moral evaluations of behaviour (that enhance their ability to counteract negative peer influences), greater empathy, and more guilt proneness.

The article concludes that the **utility of both gender-neutral and gender-specific programming are supported by the research.**

Community tolerance of SOC may be related to constructions of masculinity in Italy

Under some circumstances, communities may show sympathy for criminal organisations rather than for the police. Travaglino et al (2014) investigate how the endorsement of a masculine honour ideology (*omertà*) is associated with intentions to oppose criminal organisations (COs) in Italy.

Noting that the origins of the word *omertà* (meaning 'law of silence') is derived from the word for man in Sicilian, they hypothesise that **in a cultural context informed by norms of honour and masculinity, COs may be perceived more positively**. This in turn might be associated with lower intentions to oppose COs collectively. They tested this hypothesis by distributing questionnaires on values related to *omertà*, and attitudes toward COs to 176 high school students in a southern Italian region. They found that those who endorsed beliefs related to the honourableness of male violence reported lower intentions to engage in anti-mafia activities.

One author suggests that mothers have a key role to play in SOC prevention

van San (2011) conducted ethnographic research over several years with Curaçao families in the Netherlands whose members were active in the drug economy both domestically and in transatlantic drug smuggling. Inspired by research on women in mafia families where the mother's role as educator is vital to the organisation (pp.290-291), she similarly finds that parents pass on values conducive to criminality in Curaçao families within the context of economic vulnerability. She notes that this goes against received wisdom that women keep their men out of trouble (p.282).

She concludes by saying “**Mothers as a hidden force are the only ones who can turn the tide when it comes to combating criminality within the Curaçao community,**” and suggesting some possible interventions for these mothers:

- Robust social programmes of education and work experience for the mothers, removing the necessity for their sons to provide additional sources of income and/or protection from the drug gangs they come into contact with.
- Increase the involvement of mothers in the school career of their children by organising activities for mothers at their children’s schools.
- Provide parenting support to mothers so they can teach their sons and daughters to postpone starting a family too young, thereby avoiding the pressure for criminality.

Women’s involvement in anti-SOC activities (Italy and Latin America)

Alison (2000) notes that the *Association of Women* was the first permanent anti-mafia association in Italy (p.130).

Schneider & Schneider (2005) say that “the Palermo-centered anti-mafia movement of the 1980s and ’90s was energized for the most part by middle-class citizens with high-school and often college educations. **Many of the important leaders were women.** Various **feminist groups** continue to play a role, and it is an anti-mafia goal to **transcend the patriarchal structures and practices of Sicilian society, deemed to be mafia-friendly**” (p.503).

Tickner et al (2020) note that “in Colombia, Peru and Bolivia there are cases where female coca growers have assumed leading roles within their communities and are working on collective initiatives that seek to provide opportunities for people at risk of being recruited into organized crime” (p.37).

Programmes aimed at changing gender norms may be overambitious or risk harm

Balanon & Barrameda (2007) evaluated a *Young Men’s Camp* in the Philippines aimed at transforming boys’ attitudes to gender in the context of a wider programme to prevent trafficking for sexual exploitation. The evaluators document the impressive curriculum and reach to over 4000 young men, but note the challenge of gauging long-term impact and sustainability: “Without a clear programmatic support mechanism for the graduates to fully practice the new behaviour, **how would they withstand the pressures of peers, family and community’s expectations of traditional masculinity from them?**” (p.4/43 in pdf).

In their discussion of how the masculine honour ideology *omertà* is associated with societal tolerance of SOC in Italy, Travaglino et al (2014) conclude that while they promote the potential value of changing such cultural attitudes for de-legitimising OCGs, they recognise how difficult

that is to do, and recommend that alternative perspectives and value systems also be taught in schools.

In their mid-term review of a program funded by the Australian government to combat trafficking in Asia, Hext et al (2016) consider the success of gender training to counterpart agencies. They conclude that gendered attitudes remain entrenched, and that “the program has few levers at its disposal to challenge these attitudes, as the international evidence suggests that **such attitudes are not usually affected by training programmes** – especially when staff in trafficking posts are regularly rotated to other duties” (p.10).

A report on gender-responsive small arms control does not specifically address SOC, but does offer some potential insight about the integration of women’s groups in programming. The authors describe the successful involvement of women and women’s groups in arms-collection programmes in various countries, but caution that: “while women and women’s groups do need to be involved in such efforts, their engagement has sometimes remained superficial and been limited to one-off sensitization, or ‘women’s participation’ workshops, rather than fully integrating them into the design of interventions and **empowering them as political actors in their own right**. Yet full and meaningful participation not only fulfils obligations to promote gender equality but also reduces **the risk of backlash against women** and others supporting small arms programming pre-emptively, so as not to place them at the risk of harm” (Le Brun, 2019, p.72).

5. References

- Allum, F., & Marchi, I. (2018). Analyzing the role of women in Italian mafias: the case of the Neapolitan Camorra. *Qualitative Sociology*, 41, 3, 361-380. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11133-018-9389-8>
- Andrijasevic, R. (2014). The figure of the trafficked victim: Gender, rights and representation. In: M. Evans, C. Hemmings, M. Henry, H. Johnstone, S. Madhok, A. Plomien, & S. Wearing (Eds.). *The SAGE handbook of feminist theory*. London, UK: SAGE. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781473909502>
- Aronowitz, A. (2009). Human trafficking, human misery: The global trade in human beings. Westport, Praeger Publishers. <https://doi.org/10.1515/mks-2010-930508>
- Arsovska, J., & Begum, P. (2013). From West Africa to the Balkans: Exploring women's roles in transnational organised crime. *Trends in Organised Crime*, 17, 1/2, 89-109. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12117-013-9209-1>
- Baird, A. (2018). Becoming the 'baddest': Masculine trajectories of gang violence in Medellín. *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 50, 1, 183-210. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022216X17000761>
- Balanon, F., & Barrameda, T. (2007). *Coalition against trafficking in women – Asia Pacific 2004 to 2006. Evaluation of Programs*. The Philippines: CATW. https://www.norad.no/globalassets/import-2162015-80434-am/www.norad.no-ny/filarkiv/ngo-evaluations/evaluation-of-coalition-against-trafficking-in-women_-_asia-pacific_-_the-philippines.pdf
- Baxter, A. (2020). When the line between victimization and criminalization blurs: The victim-offender overlap observed in female offenders in cases of trafficking in persons for sexual exploitation in Australia. *Journal of Human Trafficking*, 6, 3, 327-338. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23322705.2019.1578579>
- Campbell, H. (2008). Female drug smugglers on the U.S.-Mexico border: gender, crime and empowerment. *Anthropol Q*, 81, 1, 233–267. <https://doi.org/10.1353/anq.2008.0004>
- Carling, J. (2006). MRS No. 23 – *Migration, human smuggling and trafficking from Nigeria to Europe* (1–76). Switzerland: International Organization for Migration. <https://publications.iom.int/books/mrs-ndeg23-migration-human-smuggling-and-trafficking-nigeria-europe>
- Carlsson C. (2013), Masculinities, persistence, and desistance'. *Criminology*, 51, 661-92. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-9125.12016>
- Chin, K., & Zhang, S. (2016). *The Chinese heroin trade: Cross-border drug trafficking in Southeast Asia and beyond*. New York. NYU Press. <https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9781479895403.001.0001>

- Christie, N. (1986). The ideal victim. In: E. A. Fattah (ed.), *From crime policy to victim policy. Reorienting the justice system*. Basingstoke: MacMillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-08305-3>
- Das, P. (2012). Drug trafficking in India: a case for border security, Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, IDSA Occasional Paper No. 24. <https://idsa.in/occasionalpapers/DrugTraffickinginIndia>
- Deuchar, R. (2018). *Gangs and Spirituality: Global Perspectives*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-78899-9>
- DFAT (Department for Foreign Affairs). (2020). *Investment design document for the Mekong-Australia program on transnational crime*. <https://www.dfat.gov.au/about-us/business-opportunities/investment-design-document-mekong-australia-program-transnational-crime>
- Dino, A. (2011). Women and Transnational Organized Crime. In: *Routledge Handbook of Transnational Organized Crime*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203698341.ch21>
- Finckenauer, J.O. (2005). Problems of definition: What is organized crime?. *Trends Organ Crim* 8, 63–83. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12117-005-1038-4>
- Fleetwood, J. (2014). *Drug Mules*. Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137271907>
- Fleetwood, J., & Giacomello, C. (2017). Women and drug policies in Latin America: A critical review of the United Nations Resolution ‘Mainstreaming a Gender Perspective in Drug-Related Policies and Programmes’. *The Howard Journal of Crime and Justice*, 56, 3, 288-308. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hojo.12216>
- Giacomello, C. (2020). The gendered impacts of drug policy on women: Case studies from Mexico. *International Development Policy*. <https://doi.org/10.4000/poldev.3966>
- Her Majesty’s Government (2018). *Serious and organised crime strategy 2018*. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/752850/SOC-2018-web.pdf
- Hext, S., Scheye, E., Cox, M. (2016). *Australia-Asia program to combat trafficking in persons (AAPTIP). Independent mid-term review final report*. <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/australia-asia-program-combat-trafficking-persons-mid-term-review.pdf>
- Hübschle, A. (2014). Of bogus hunters, queenpins and mules: the varied roles of women in transnational organized crime in Southern Africa. *Trends in Organized Crime*, 17, 31-51. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12117-013-9202-8>
- Jamieson, A. (2000). *The Antimafia*. New York: St. Martin’s Press. <https://www.palgrave.com/gp/book/9780333801581>
- Kienast, J., Lakner, M. & Neulet, A. (2014) *The role of female offenders in sex trafficking organizations*. Regional academy on the United Nations. Available at: http://www.ra-un.org/uploads/4/7/5/4/47544571/the_role_of_female_offenders_in_sex_trafficking_organizations.pdf

- Kleemans, E., & de Poot, C. (2008). Criminal careers in organized crime and social opportunity structure. *European Journal of Criminology*, 5, 1, 69-98.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1477370807084225>
- Kleemans, E., Kruisbergen, E. & Kouwenberg, R. (2014). Women, brokerage and transnational organized crime. Empirical results from the Dutch Organized Crime Monitor. *Trends Organ Crim* 17, 16–30. [10.1007/s12117-013-9203-7](https://doi.org/10.1007/s12117-013-9203-7)
- Kruttschnitt, C. (2016). The politics, and place, of gender in research on crime. *Criminology*, 54, 1, 8–29. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-9125.12096>
- Le Brun, E. (ed.) (2019). *Gender-responsive small arms control: A practical guide*. Switzerland. Small Arms Survey. <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/resources/publications/by-type/handbooks/gender.html>
- Le Brun, E. (ed.). (2019). *Gender responsive small arms control: A practical guide*, Small Arms Survey. <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/Q-Handbooks/HB-07-Gender/SAS-GLASS-Gender-HB.pdf>.
- Lo Iacono, E. (2014). Victims, sex workers and perpetrators. *Trends Organ Crim* 17, 110–128. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12117-014-9212-1>
- Lo Iacono, E. (2014). Victims, sex workers and perpetrators: Gray areas in the trafficking of Nigerian women. *Trends in Organized Crime*. 17, 110–128. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12117-014-9212-1>
- Long, L., (2002). Trafficking in women and children as a security challenge in Southeast Europe, *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 2:2, 53-68.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14683850208454690>
- McCarthy, L. (2020). A gendered perspective on human trafficking perpetrators: Evidence from Russia. *Journal of Human Trafficking*. 6,1, 79-94,
<https://doi.org/10.1080/23322705.2019.1571302>
- Messerschmidt, J. (2005). Men, masculinities, and crime. In: Kimmel, M., Hearn, J. & Connell, R. *Handbook of studies on men & masculinities* (pp. 196-212). SAGE Publications, Inc.,
<https://www-doi-org.ezproxy.sussex.ac.uk/10.4135/9781452233833.n12>
- Petersen R., & Howell J. (2013) Program approaches for girls in gangs: Female specific or gender neutral? *Criminal Justice Review*, 38, 4, 491-509.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0734016813510935>
- Pieris, N. (2014). *Women and drugs in the Americas: A policy working paper*. Washington, D.C., American Commission of Women and Organization of American States.
<http://www.oas.org/en/cim/docs/womendrugamericas-en.pdf>
- Puri, L. (2016). *Remove barriers to women's full and equal access to drug treatment*.
<https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2016/5/lakshmi-puri-speech-at-ungass-on-drugs-side-event>

- Rahman, M. (2020). *Homicide and organised crime: Ethnographic narratives of serious violence in the criminal underworld*. S.l.: Palgrave Pivot. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-16253-5>
- Savona, E. & Nataoli, G. (2007). Women and other mafia-type criminal organizations. In: Fiandaca G (ed.) *Women and the mafia female roles in organized crime structures*. Springer, New York. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-387-36542-8>
- Schneider, J., & Schneider, P. (2005). Mafia, antimafia, and the plural cultures of Sicily. *Current Anthropology*, 46, 4, 501-520. <https://doi.org/10.1086/431529>
- Shelley, L. (2012). Relationship of drug and human trafficking: A global perspective. *European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research*, 18, 3, 241-253. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10610-012-9175-1>
- Shelley, L. (2012). *Human trafficking: A global perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511760433>
- Siegel D. & de Blank. S. (2010). Women who traffic women: the role of women in human trafficking networks – Dutch cases. *Global Crime*. 11, 4, 436-447. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17440572.2010.519528>
- Soudijn, M. (2010). Wives, girlfriends and money laundering. *Journal of Money Laundering Control*, 13, 405–416. <https://doi.org/10.1108/13685201011083902>
- Steffensmeier, D., Schwartz, J. & Roche, M. (2013). Gender and twenty-first century corporate crime: Female involvement and the gender gap in Enron-era corporate frauds. *American Sociological Review*, 78, 3, 448-476. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122413484150>
- Stephenson, S. (2015). *Gangs of Russia: from the streets to the corridors of power*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7591/9781501701689>
- Surtees, R. (2007). *Labour trafficking in South Eastern Europe: developing prevention and assistance programmes*. Vienna: Nexus Institute to Combat Human Trafficking. <https://nexushumantrafficking.files.wordpress.com/2015/03/trafficking-for-labour-nexus-paper-2007-final.pdf>
- Surtees, R. (2008). Trafficked men as unwilling victims. *St Antony's International Review*, 4, 1, 16-36. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/26225803.pdf>
- Swart, W. (1991). Female gang delinquency: A search for "acceptably deviant behavior." *Mid-American Review of Sociology*, 15, 43-52, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/23252937.pdf>
- Travaglino, G., Abrams, D., & Russo, G. (2014). Organized crime and group-based ideology: The association between masculine honor and collective opposition against criminal organizations. *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations*, 17, 6, 799-812. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430214533394>
- UN Women. (2019). *In the words of Milica Gudović: "Economic empowerment is crucial, not only for survivors, but for any woman"*. July 29, 2019. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2019/7/in-the-words-of-milica-gudovic>

- UN. (2018). Women and drugs, drug use, drug supply and their consequences. In. *World drug report 2018*. United Nations publication. No. E.18.XI.9. https://www.unodc.org/wdr2018/prelaunch/WDR18_Booklet_5_WOMEN.pdf
- UNODC. (2018). *Global report on trafficking in persons*. United Nations publication, No. E.19.IV.2. https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/glotip/2018/GLOTiP_2018_BOOK_web_small.pdf
- UNODC. (2019). *Caracterización de Condiciones Socioeconómicas de Mujeres Relacionadas Con Problemas de Drogas*. https://www.unodc.org/documents/colombia/2019/Octubre/Estudio_Las_mujeres_Privadas_de_la_Libertad_por_Delitos_de_Drogas.pdf.
- UNODC. (2020). Gender brief for UNODC staff: Mainstreaming gender in organized crime & Illicit trafficking projects. https://www.unodc.org/documents/Gender/Thematic_Gender_Briefs_English/Org_crime_and_trafficking_brief_23_03_2020.pdf
- van Dijk, E. (2002). *Mensenhandel in Nederland 1997–2000*. Zoetermeer: KLPD.
- van San, M. (2011). The appeal of ‘dangerous’ men. On the role of women in organized crime. *Trends in Organized Crime*, 14, 4, 281-297. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12117-011-9128-y>
- Viuhko, M. (2018). Hardened professional criminals, or just friends and relatives? The diversity of offenders in human trafficking. *International Journal of Comparative and Applied Criminal Justice*, 42, 2-3, 177-193. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01924036.2017.1391106>
- Viuhko, M. (2018). Hardened professional criminals, or just friends and relatives? The diversity of offenders in human trafficking. *International Journal of Comparative and Applied Criminal Justice*, 42, 2-3, 177-193, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01924036.2017.1391106>
- Wyler, L. & Cook, N. (2010). *Illegal drug trade in Africa: Trends and U.S. policy*. (Washington D.C. Congressional Research Service. <https://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc503563/>
- Yusupova, M. (2017). University of Manchester. *Shifting masculine terrains: Russian men in Russia and the UK*. https://www.research.manchester.ac.uk/portal/files/54590769/FULL_TEXT.PDF
- Zhang, S., Chin, K. & Miller, J. (2007). Women’s participation in Chinese transnational human smuggling: A gendered market perspective, *Criminology*, 45, 3, 699-733. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-9125.2007.00085.x>

Acknowledgements

We thank the following experts who voluntarily provided suggestions for relevant literature or other advice to the author to support the preparation of this report. The content of the report does not necessarily reflect the opinions of any of the experts consulted.

- Louise Shelley, George Mason University.
- Jennifer Fleetwood, Goldsmiths College.
- Sarah Meo, George Mason University.

Teaching resource

- UNODC, **Module 15: Gender and Organized Crime** (comprehensive module including class structure and student exercises), <https://www.unodc.org/e4j/en/organized-crime/module-15/key-issues/gender-and-organized-crime.html>

Suggested citation

Hicks, J. (2021). *The role of gender in serious and organised/transnational crime*. K4D Helpdesk Report 984. Brighton, UK: Institute of Development Studies. DOI: [10.19088/K4D.2021.059](https://doi.org/10.19088/K4D.2021.059)

About this report

This report is based on twelve days of desk-based research. The K4D research helpdesk provides rapid syntheses of a selection of recent relevant literature and international expert thinking in response to specific questions relating to international development. For any enquiries, contact helpdesk@k4d.info.

K4D services are provided by a consortium of leading organisations working in international development, led by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), with Education Development Trust, Itad, University of Leeds Nuffield Centre for International Health and Development, Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine (LSTM), University of Birmingham International Development Department (IDD) and the University of Manchester Humanitarian and Conflict Response Institute (HCRI).

This report was prepared for the UK Government's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) and its partners in support of pro-poor programmes. Except where otherwise stated, it is licensed for non-commercial purposes under the terms of the [Open Government Licence v3.0](#). K4D cannot be held responsible for errors, omissions or any consequences arising from the use of information contained in this report. Any views and opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect those of FCDO, K4D or any other contributing organisation.



© Crown copyright 2021.