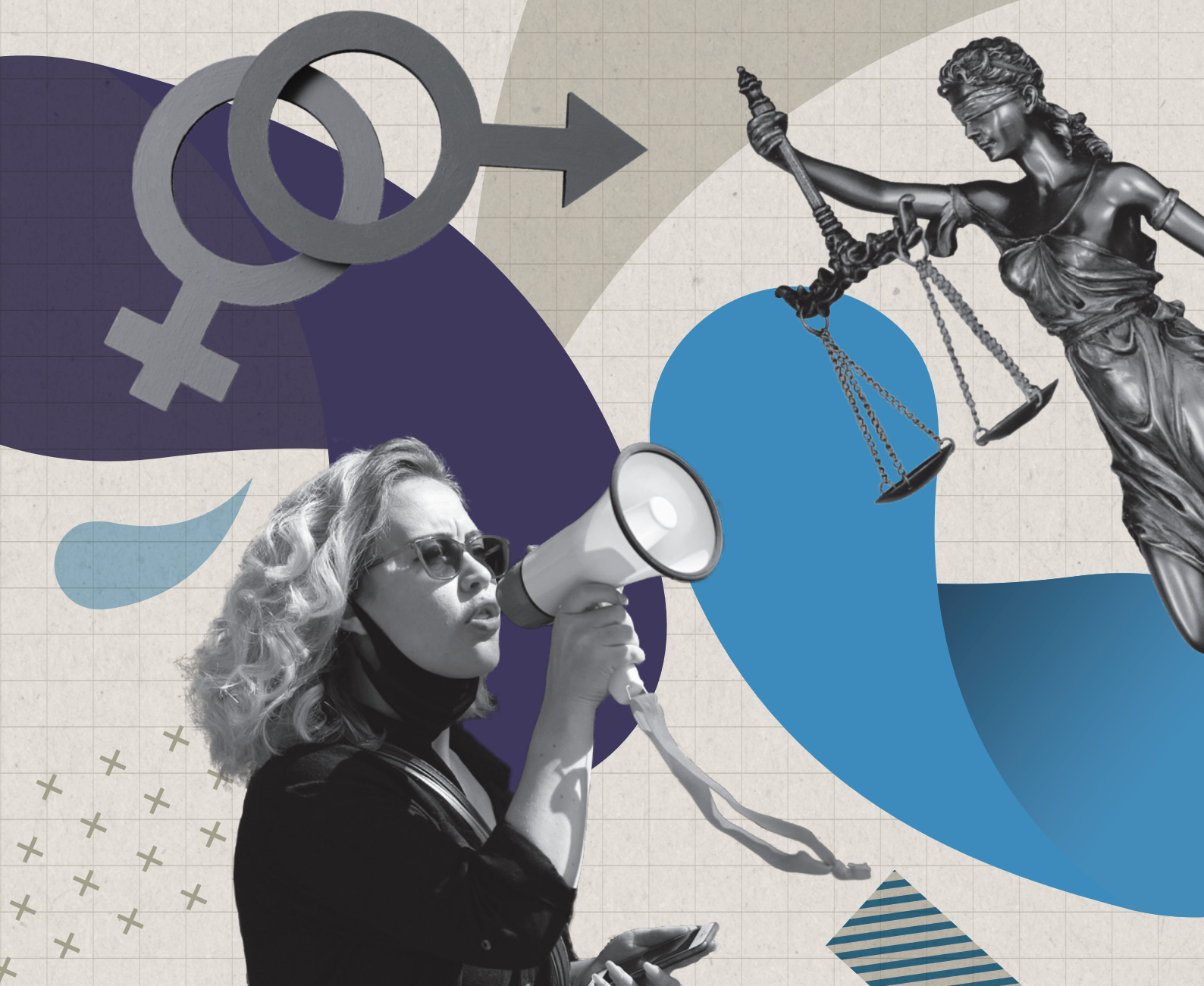


FEBRUARY 2022

RESILIENT BALKANS

GENDER AND ORGANIZED CRIME



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RESILIENT BALKANS

This brief is part of the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC's) Resilient Balkans series, which looks at topics of common interest to civil society organizations (CSOs) in the Western Balkans dealing with issues related to organized crime. This brief focuses on issues related to gender and organized crime, and looks at how CSOs consider gender aspects in their work.

This report is an output of the GI-TOC's Observatory of Illicit Economies in South Eastern Europe and the GI-TOC's Resilience Fund.

The report is based on data, information and analyses collected and shared by civil society actors based in the Western Balkan region. In particular, we would like to thank Walter Kemp for his support and guidance, and the GI-TOC's Resilience Fund grantees based in the region for their frank and constructive engagement throughout the process. We also acknowledge the brave and dedicated work of women leading CSOs dealing with organized crime and corruption in the Western Balkans.

This publication was produced with the financial support of the German Foreign Office. Its contents are the sole responsibility of the GI-TOC and do not necessarily reflect the views of the government of Germany.

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The GI-TOC organized 'resilience dialogues' in the capitals of the Western Balkan countries in 2021. Discussions included a focus on gender and organized crime.

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In December 2020, the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) convened some 50 civil society representatives for a two-day online event to discuss and reflect on current challenges and opportunities for NGOs, media and academia working on issues related to organized crime and corruption.¹ One of the topics on the agenda was 'gender and organized crime'. Although participants were sceptical at first and there was generally little known about the impact of gender on organized crime, the discussion was fruitful, and participants appreciated the opportunity to exchange their experience of research methodologies and good practices. Some asked for more attention to be given to, and more information on, this topic.

This brief is a follow-up to the policy brief *Stronger together: Bolstering resilience among civil society in the Western Balkans*, and the discussion that started at the meeting in December 2020. It is also a reflection of the Observatory of Illicit Economies in South-Eastern Europe's (SEE-Obs) growing awareness of applying a gender perspective to organized crime in its work. Using examples and case studies from the region, this brief provides a civil society perspective on gender and organized crime.

The authors and researchers recognize gender as non-binary and understand that members of sexual and gender minorities may also experience – and react in different ways to – organized crime. This brief draws on semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions and information gathered through an online questionnaire to GI-TOC Resilience Fund grantees in the Western Balkans in November 2021. It also includes references to secondary sources and government data, where relevant. The research team provided a qualitative analysis based on the information collected, its experience in the region and its network of contacts.

The following are recommendations concerning gender and how it relates to organized crime for civil society:

- There is a need for greater attention to be given to the role of gender in organized crime, by reflecting on gender perspectives and their impact on organized crime when programming activities in the Western Balkans. In this context, there is also a need to pay greater attention to the role of the traditional gender paradigm in the Western Balkans and its impact on organized crime.
- A gender-sensitive perspective in the Western Balkans needs to go beyond solely a stronger focus on women. A gender perspective should involve being sensitive to the drivers, role and impact of organized crime on different groups, including sexual and gender minorities, and the power relationships between gender groups.
- Civil society needs to work with positive role models in the arts, sports, business and the community as well as influencers to create alternatives to negative role models and narratives that glorify violence, organized crime and toxic masculinity.
- Civil society should be creative in using tools such as social media to promote increased gender awareness, including a better understanding of the gendered drivers, role and impact of organized crime on men, women and sexual and gender minorities.
- There is a need for CSOs in the region to work together to exchange expertise and raise awareness on good practices. Existing guidelines and publications, such as the GI-TOC's *Rethinking Resilience* report could be translated into local languages and further promoted.²
- Another way of improving networking and the exchange of ideas is through the creation of a coalition of organizations in media, academia, the private sector and NGOs led by women.
- Civil society should work with donors to make gender focus more than a 'proposal requirement' but rather a foundation to raise awareness of local needs and turn them into actionable points.
- Donors should help civil society entities in the Western Balkans to increase their capacity to incorporate gender-related issues in their work by facilitating meetings on the topic and promoting gender-sensitive research.



Gender plays a key role in strengthening community resilience to organized crime. In the Western Balkans, women are at the forefront of civil society initiatives.

INTRODUCTION: THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN ORGANIZED CRIME

Organized crime in the Western Balkans is usually regarded as a ‘man’s world’, and research on organized crime has been dominated by a focus on men as the primary agents of criminal behaviour. There have been few studies on the role of women in organized crime, and most have concluded that women almost always play an auxiliary role to men, and to an extent lack agency or are unwitting agents, in the sense that they may play a role by being tricked into helping their family, do not have a choice or do not know what they are doing.³

However, to view the role of women in organized crime in this way is both restrictive and misleading. It also significantly underestimates not only their active role within criminal networks as perpetrators, but also as part of communities where their agency can be a positive force for change and resilience. This limited focus has led to a significant gap in understanding the role women play as criminal actors, the impact this has on organized crime dynamics, and the implications for policy and law enforcement responses.

In the Western Balkans, discussions on why people join organized criminal groups have usually focused on young men, and how a mix of toxic masculinity, societal pressure and the lure of a 'get-rich-quick' lifestyle attracts young men who struggle to find employment opportunities in the formal sector.⁴ However, more research is needed on the drivers of organized crime, the role of women as criminal actors and how they engage in criminal markets, and on the power relationship between the genders.

Gender is a key determinant of criminality, sometimes ranking above a person's socio-economic, educational or employment status.⁵ Gender also plays a key role in determining the victims of organized crime: almost every person trafficked for commercial sex work from or to the Western Balkans is female,⁶ whereas nearly everyone assassinated as part of the Montenegrin drug war has been male.⁷ Including gender perspectives into research and the discourse on issues related to organized crime and corruption in the Western Balkans therefore also contributes to giving a voice to victims of organized crime.

This brief also examines how gender plays a key role in strengthening community resilience to organized crime. Across the Western Balkans, women are at the forefront of leading CSOs addressing vulnerabilities associated with organized crime and corruption. Incorporating women's perspectives into community responses is therefore important to further unpack the phenomenon and strengthen resilience.



Imagery that glorifies toxic masculinity and violence are all too common among youth in the Western Balkans.
Photo: Twitter



A GENDER PERSPECTIVE

Around the world, calls to apply a gender-based lens to development have increased considerably over the past decade.⁸ The topic has also been slowly gaining attention in the Western Balkans. However, in the area of organized crime, the thinking and debate by media, academia and NGOs about this approach remain very limited. This is not only true for gender as a topic covered by CSOs, but also when it comes to the degree of gender-awareness within CSOs and the way they plan their activities.

Given the novelty of the topic, civil society representatives usually refer to differences between men and women when discussing gender issues, focusing less on sexual and gender minorities. In fact, the expression 'gender' in this context continues to be used simply as a synonym for an increased focus on women.

Taking a more holistic 'gender perspective' includes paying closer attention to the following aspects:

- Gendered drivers of organized crime, including women's marginalization and norms around masculinity, as well as vulnerabilities of women, men and sexual and gender minorities.
- Roles of women, men and sexual and gender minorities, including pathways into organized crime.
- Gendered impact of organized crime, including on victims of organized crime.
- Women, men and sexual and gender minorities' involvement in civil society, government and media agencies working to tackle organized crime, including the gendered risks they face in their work.
- Entry points for addressing the gendered drivers, roles and impacts of organized crime, including awareness-raising campaigns, promoting legislative reform and women's roles in CSOs.⁹



A civil society organization in northern Kosovo working with youth to raise awareness of human trafficking.¹⁰
© Community Building Mitrovica

GENDER, AND DRIVERS AND ENABLERS OF ORGANIZED CRIME

Perceptions of what organized crime entails and who is engaged in it are heavily influenced by social norms, popular culture and the media. Engagement in organized crime tends to mirror the gender roles and expectations of society.¹¹ In the Western Balkans, the image of organized crime and those involved in it is still largely shaped by the experience of war in the 1990s, and by the transition of local economies and societies from communism to liberal democracy.¹²

Across the region, the image of organized crime is often associated with strong masculine roles and violence. Men are regarded as the primary agents, as they play central roles in society in general, and are seen as the fighters and providers. Although organized crime was already present in many parts of the region before and during the Yugoslav wars, it seems that in the post-conflict climate, organized crime has offered men a new avenue to assert, or reassert, their masculinity.¹³

In the Western Balkans, movies like *Scarface* are popular – as is music that idolizes macho young men who carry guns and lead conspicuously materialistic, male-normative lifestyles.¹⁴ Sometimes drug culture is also glamorized. Male football hooligans with a distinctive dress code and behaviours, including violence, are also part of toxic group identities in some communities.¹⁵

Even young men who are not criminals tend to mimic the dress code and style of gangsters, and drive similar cars.¹⁶ Women are often portrayed as accessories to the strongman, and are sexualized or objectified.

Such images of crime are shared widely on social media and in music. One rapper whose lyrics refer to cannabis trafficking and glorify a life of crime has 1.6 million followers on Instagram. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the profiles of several well-known criminals or people close to criminal groups have each attracted more than half a million followers.¹⁷

This type of lifestyle sometimes appears even more attractive given the slow pace of economic development in the region and lack of work opportunities, especially in smaller towns and villages. As one participant put it: 'After all, crime doesn't require a CV.'¹⁸ In an environment where legitimate work and career opportunities are limited, young men reportedly look for alternatives, engaging in criminality to maintain their image of masculinity and to fulfil their role as providers.¹⁹ During focus groups organized in Albania, young men reported that joining a criminal group can be attractive, enabling them to feel empowered, achieve a certain status in the community and gain wealth that would otherwise be out of reach. The pressure to make money, reinforced by the aforementioned imagery distributed on social media of those who are 'successful', and confronted with the reality of limited local opportunities, serves as a driver for (legal or illegal) emigration to enable them to 'make it' and help their family back home. Where legal emigration is not possible, young people take risks and often pay large sums to be smuggled.

Interviews with women engaged in organized crime have shown that the main factors for becoming part of the criminal world are economic.

Interviews with women engaged in organized crime have shown that their main motivating factors for becoming part of the criminal world are also economic.²⁰ A number of leading indicators show that women face even greater economic hardship than men in the Western Balkans. Unemployment in the region is particularly high for young women. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, only 35% of women were employed in 2019, which is one of the lowest employment rates in the region.²¹ The gender pay gap was around 10.7% in Albania in 2020,²² 11% in Montenegro in 2018,²³ and between 11% and 16% in Serbia in 2020.²⁴ Women engaged in cannabis cultivation in Albania reported that they worked for 45 days drying, cleaning

and packing cannabis ready to be shipped to Italy. According to one of them: 'It was an intensive but satisfactory experience. For eight hours of work, we were paid ALL 2 000 [€16], and if you worked ten hours, you would receive ALL 2 500 [€19]. With the money earned, I bought clothes and schoolbooks for my children.'²⁵ Sometimes, they perceived their involvement in cannabis production as a farming job rather than organized crime.²⁶

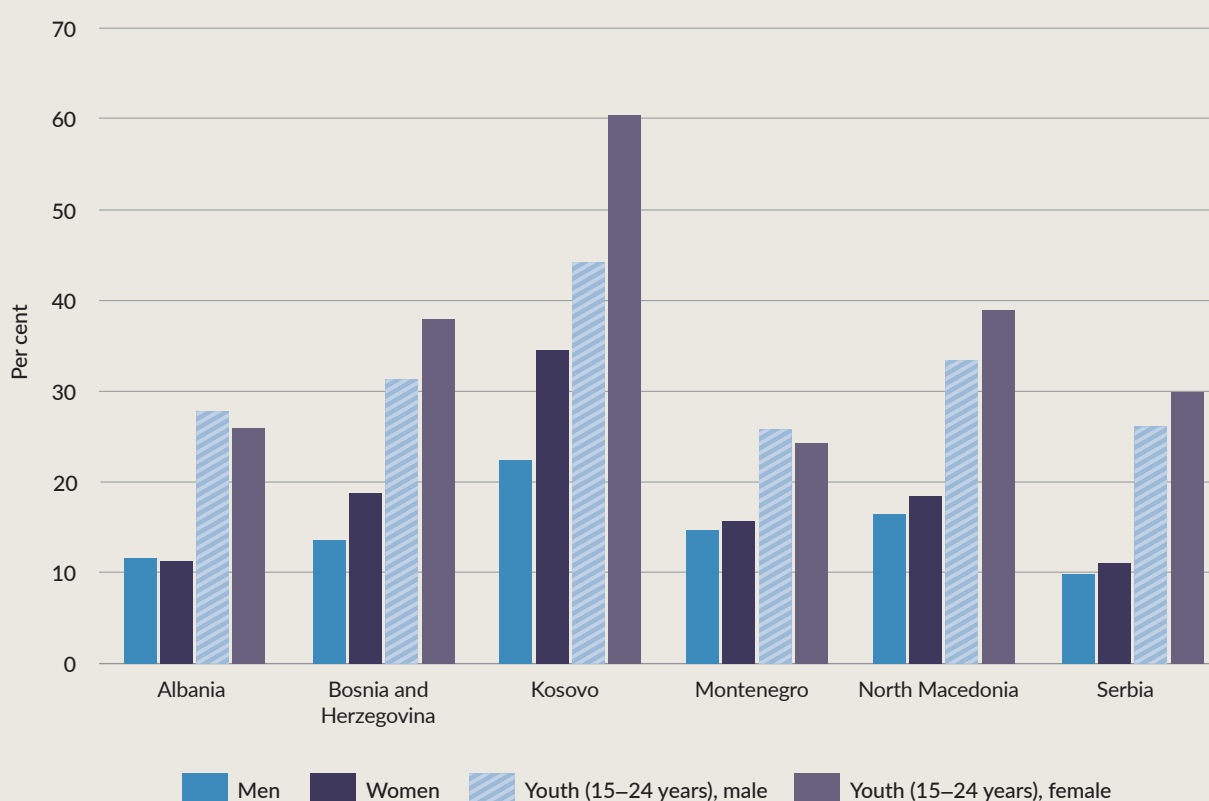


FIGURE 1 Unemployment data for the Western Balkans, 2019.

Source: World Bank Open Data

Societies in the Western Balkans are changing quickly, and this is also seen in how the role of women is perceived. One indicator of this change is the rising divorce rate. Especially in the capitals and urban areas, professional women are becoming more empowered and hold senior positions in politics, government institutions and the private sector.²⁷ And, in parallel, the role and perception of women in organized crime may also be changing, as women in the region become more empowered and their role in society evolves. In essence, as women adopt more active roles in the formal sector, they also assume more active and even leading roles in the criminal economy.

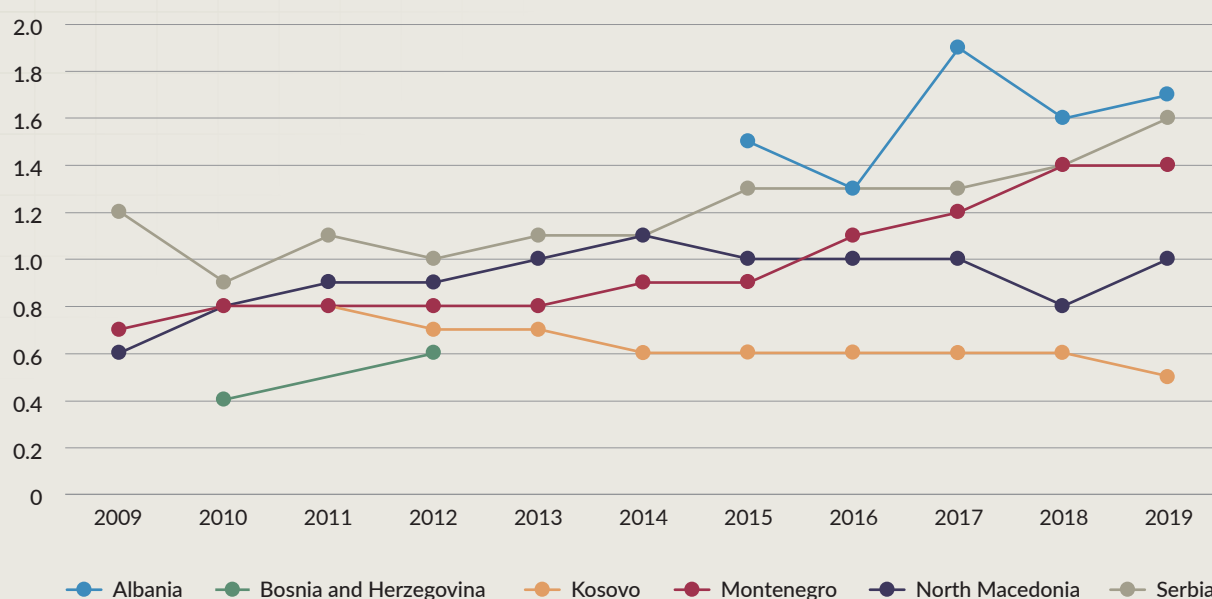


FIGURE 2 Divorce rates in the Western Balkans.

Source: Eurostat, Crude marriage rate and crude divorce rate, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tps00206/default/table?lang=en>

To give one example, women from the Western Balkans have been part of the infamous Pink Panthers, a group of burglars from Montenegro active across Europe in the early years of the 2000s.²⁸ There are also reports of women leading organized criminal groups involved in, for example, cannabis cultivation in Spain²⁹ and as recruiters for sex work.³⁰ In fact, there were several cases in 2020 in which women in the Western Balkans were charged with facilitating and mediating sex work.³¹

Other women support the running of their families' criminal enterprises. They are also assumed to be involved in laundering their male family members' money, as a recent investigation by the Serbian Prosecutor's Office for Organized Crime into the wife of a known Serbian criminal shows.³² Interviews have also indicated that women are involved in smuggling different types of illicit goods across borders, particularly since they are less likely to be checked and searched by police and border security officers than men.³³ In 2019, an actress from North Macedonia was arrested for facilitating the smuggling of 700 kilograms of cocaine in Spain on behalf of her partner, as well as arranging bank transfers.³⁴

The changing role of women in organized crime can also be observed on social media, where some have posted about their 'achievements' and rapid acquisition of (illicit) money, and promote similar values as men involved in the business.

Despite women's increasing involvement in organized crime, the number of women arrested for such crimes remains small – for instance, only 7.2% of all people arrested in Bosnia and

Herzegovina in 2020 were women.³⁵ Less than 5% of prisoners in the WB6 are women. From 2012 to 2018, only 7% of all people convicted of involvement in an organized criminal group in the Western Balkans were women.³⁶ The number is low, particularly for drug trafficking offences.³⁷ Proportionally, however, there does appear to be a higher percentage of women being convicted for other types of serious crime, such as fraud.³⁸

Although it appears that crimes committed by women are less violent than male-led cases, it is important to bear in mind that gender perceptions shape not only the role played by individuals in organized crime, but also law enforcement responses and interdiction patterns. In other words, traditional perceptions of gender among law enforcement officials may be prejudicing their tendency to discount the potential role of female perpetrators. Therefore, it may well be the case that prison populations and official statistics yield a distorted reflection of the Western Balkans' actual criminal landscape.

It is also worth noting that despite the multifaceted role that women play in organized crime across the region, civil society representatives interviewed did not attribute responsibility to women engaged in organized crime, thus reflecting the traditional perception of roles of women in society.



FIGURE 3 Prison populations in the Western Balkans by gender (per cent).

Sources: Data provided by the Ministry of Justice of Bosnia and Herzegovina; Marcelo F Aebi and Mélanie M Tiago, Prison populations, Space I – 2020, Council of Europe, 15 December 2020, https://wp.unil.ch/space/files/2021/04/210330_FinalReport_SPACE_I_2020.pdf; A e dini sa meshkuj e sa femra në Kosovë aktualisht ndodhen nëpër burgje?, Syri, 11 May 2021, https://www.syri.net/syri_kosova/lajme/249905/a-e-dini-sa-meshkuj-e-sa-femra-ne-kosove-aktualisht-ndodhen-neper-burgje/; Ženski zatvori u BiH imaju problema s kapacitetom, Vijesti, 11 November 2019, <https://www.bljesak.info/vijesti/flash/zenski-zatvori-u-bih-imaju-problema-s-kapacitetom/291600>.



Neostart, a civil society organization based in Belgrade, Serbia, is working to build up a female post-prison reintegration programme.
© Neostart

GENDER-SENSITIVE APPROACHES TO COUNTERING ORGANIZED CRIME IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

As the previous section has shown, men and women are affected by and react to organized crime in different ways.³⁹ This was also confirmed by the CSO representatives interviewed for this report.⁴⁰ So far, however, there has been little focus on how civil society has taken gender into account when shaping its responses to organized crime.⁴¹ A better understanding of the gendered aspects of resilience to organized crime would enhance the effectiveness of support provided to community organizations. Failing to take into account gender considerations in community resilience programming can expose women to greater risks and vulnerabilities, and perpetuate or exacerbate inequalities.⁴²

It is interesting that while most of the respondents to the questionnaire (see the Summary above) believed their approach to be gender-aware or even gender-sensitive, this is not always reflected in the mission statements of their organizations or included in their project proposals for new activities.⁴³ Some civil society representatives' responses reflected traditional perceptions of

women in society, with one respondent even stating that they only include ‘references to gender because of donor requirements’.⁴⁴ Others argued that given their ‘work with women, it is not necessary to take a gender-sensitive approach’.⁴⁵ This suggests that even among civil society activists in the Western Balkans, gender is still often regarded as a politically correct issue to be included only to satisfy donors, rather than as something that is genuinely needed to tackle real problems, including sexist behaviour.

However, although many organizations’ activists do not formally include references to gender in their activities and have little experience in drafting gender-aware project proposals, many do apply these principles on a practical level. Most organizations dealing with youth have different project activities for young men and women, and also provide initiatives that try to bring different social groups together around the same table. For example, the Vllaznia tae kwon do club in Shkodra, Albania, actively seeks the participation of young women in their martial arts classes, both as students and as trainers.⁴⁶ Klub Masa in Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina, organizes focus groups on the topic of hooliganism, in which young men and women regularly participate. Although hooliganism is per se a ‘male’ topic (no woman is officially registered as a hooligan in the area of Mostar), they found that bringing both groups together for a joint discussion increases understanding of the phenomenon and generates new ideas on possible steps forward.⁴⁷

The notion of bringing men and women together is particularly important. In the words of a focus group participant: ‘In many rural and suburban areas, the lives of young men and women appear to be going in parallel. They have few opportunities to meet each other after school given lack of social activities.’⁴⁸ Another focus group respondent said: ‘Men will go to a bar or betting shop, or drive around town; women will often attend private courses or meet in each other’s homes. There are few possibilities for interaction.’⁴⁹ During a focus group organized in Albania in November 2020, young men even refused to join the discussion where women were present, as they do not participate in ‘women’s activities’.

In some cases, CSOs also work with stereotypes to build bridges and engage with gender differences. For instance, an NGO working with youth to prevent drug use and distribution in rural North Macedonia reported that they use themes such as fashion to motivate girls to join their activities, while sports attract boys’ participation. Working with peer-to-peer programmes is particularly useful, as young people can relate to the experiences shared by people their own age (as opposed to teachers or adults). In this way, CSOs are able to sometimes engage with the ‘hard to reach’ cases. Peer-to-peer activities also facilitate ‘converting dry information into useful knowledge’.⁵⁰



GENDER-SENSITIVE POST-PRISON REINTEGRATION IN SERBIA

One good example of how to create gender-sensitive responses to organized crime comes from Serbia, where a CSO working on crime prevention aims to reduce vulnerability to recidivism by supporting former offenders in their reintegration efforts. Hitherto, Neostart, which is based in Belgrade, had mostly been working with men, individually and in groups, as previous attempts to encourage women to engage with their programme failed. Although women showed some initial interest in their activities (around 220 women are currently imprisoned in Serbia), they often dropped out of the programme.

Perplexed about the reaction, Neostart began investigating possible reasons and found that women released from prison or youth correctional facilities have different needs from those of men. As a member of Neostart explained: 'Women rarely come for basic needs, such as food, money or shelter, as they find one way or another to get money and are covered. But they do have other needs – and require support to find employment.'⁵¹ Women released from prison also appear to struggle less with drug addiction than men.

Based on these observations, Neostart has taken a new approach through a programme led entirely by women, for women, including support of a psychologist who designed special sessions focusing on expressive art and a stronger link to the families of ex-convicts.⁵²

One key concern for civil society is working with women victims of organized crime, and particularly victims of human trafficking. Violence against women continues to be a major concern. In Serbia in 2019, more than 60% of victims of abuse and torture were women.⁵³ In 2020, 86% of all victims of sexual crime in Albania were women,⁵⁴ while one in three women in Bosnia and Herzegovina is reported to be a victim of violence.⁵⁵ A mapping study of CSOs in the Western Balkans shows that there are NGOs specifically providing assistance to women (and their children) suffering as a result of male violence or who are victims of human trafficking. Many of them organize counselling sessions and provide shelters for women, while others provide service hotlines and counselling for men.⁵⁶

One of the key challenges for civil society in the Western Balkans identified in the report 'Stronger together: Bolstering resilience among civil society in the Western Balkans' was repeatedly raised in the discussions by civil society actors around taking a more gender-sensitive approach to organized crime – namely widespread lack of funding for NGOs. Many interviewees said that although a gender component to their work is often a donor requirement, in practice they do not have the privilege to focus on gender sensitivities, as they are required to apply for different types of projects, often following current buzzwords in the international community rather than local needs. A group of young people from Mostar explained that 'these days, CSOs are forced to apply to calls for funding proposals just to survive. But there is no focus on crime prevention and gender. If there [were] a possibility to look at gender-based needs, our organization could also make tailor-made initiatives.'⁵⁷ Another challenge is the lack of guidelines on gender and organized crime, particularly in local Balkan languages, and the fact that the capacity of civil society to offer specialized activities to different groups of beneficiaries is limited. Many organizations, especially in the smaller communities, have only a handful of employees. Ambitious young people often leave to work in bigger cities, in hope of more stable employment opportunities.



An NGO in Belgrade has launched a special reintegration programme for female ex-prisoners led entirely by women. © Officer Bimbleberry via Wikipedia



A civil society activist discusses organized crime trends with at-risk youth in Albania.
© Vlora Youth Center

THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN CSOs

Understanding the drivers of organized crime helps to unpack the various components and enables communities most affected by organized crime to respond appropriately and build resilience. While engagement in organized crime is often attributed to social pressure and expectations based on traditional gender roles, the previous section has shown that gender is an equally important component in civil society responses addressing vulnerabilities to organized crime. Gender also plays an important role in the leadership of CSOs.

Women are at the forefront of many CSOs in the Western Balkans (as in other parts of the world); they are agents of change and sources of resilience in addressing vulnerabilities associated with organized crime and corruption. As shown in the visual on the following page, they work with children and youth to raise awareness about the risks of organized crime, as well as with drug users or victims of human trafficking. They also report from the frontlines about current trends in drug distribution and use. Although data on who works for CSOs is limited, as national registries and databases are outdated and do not provide accurate information on staff profiles, the ratio of women to men working in civil society is estimated to be approximately 55:45.⁵⁸

WOMEN AT THE FOREFRONT OF RESILIENCE IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

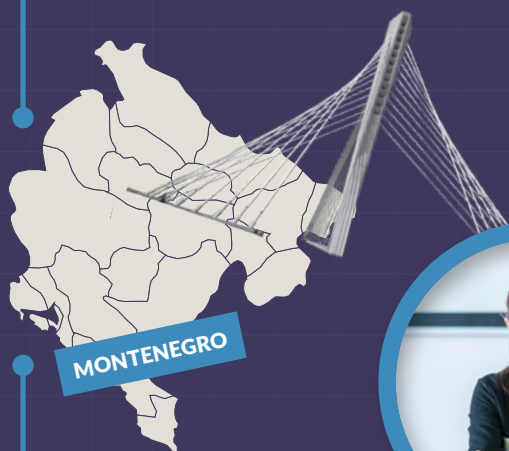


In Kosovo, civil society organizations led by women are raising their voice to report corruption and encourage the communities to step forward.



In Albania, women are leading youth centres to raise awareness of vulnerabilities associated with cannabis cultivation and offer alternative employment opportunities to at-risk youth.

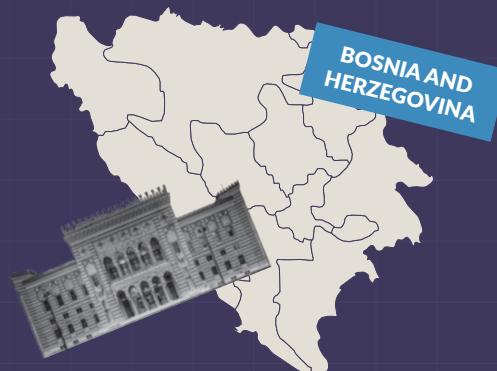
In Montenegro, the Resilience Fund is supporting a journalist organization led by women working to uncover the role of men and women in organized crime across the country.



In Montenegro, women are in the lead helping people who use drugs.



In Bosnia and Herzegovina, women are working with children to counter juvenile delinquency and hooliganism.



All civil society representatives interviewed agreed that there is widespread acceptance of and appreciation for women in civil society. Indeed, although Western Balkan society is often considered male-oriented and patriarchal, it is often women who are bravely leading grassroots movements to strengthen resilience in their communities, including against organized crime and corruption.

However, women in civil society face specific challenges, including lack of expertise on crime and corruption issues, as well as specific security concerns. A civil society representative from Kosovo argued that sometimes women are reluctant to take on challenging topics like organized crime and corruption, unless the focus is specifically on gender.⁵⁹ The traditional perception is that women are not expected to lead social movements or promote economic development. These constraints are particularly difficult to navigate in places where the space for civil society is shrinking, or where governments use government-organized non-governmental organizations (GONGOs) to further their interests, thereby harming trust with the community and independent civil society.



WOMEN AT THE FRONTLINE INVESTIGATING ORGANIZED CRIME

Fewer women than men are reported to be investigative journalists in the Western Balkans. Nevertheless, women do play a key role in bringing organized crime to light and voicing the concerns of their communities. Two brave women at the forefront of raising public awareness are Tatjana Lazarević, editor-in-chief at KosSev from Mitrovica, Kosovo, and Brankica Stanković, an editor of the documentary programme 'Insider' on the B92 TV station in Serbia. And there are many others across the region who follow and investigate organized crime and corruption in their communities.


Although there have been only a few cases in which CSOs were directly threatened by organized crime, the situation is different for many journalists. Both Lazarević and Stanković have been threatened; in fact, Brankica Stanković has been living under police protection for more than five years, after receiving continual threats from assassins and criminal networks linked to hooligan movements.⁶⁰ In April 2020, Lazarević was briefly arrested after allegedly violating a curfew during the COVID-19 pandemic, and is now facing criminal charges.⁶¹ Threats sent out on social media and fake news have also become concerns, especially for those working on issues related to corruption and environmental crime.⁶²

Despite these challenges, there are also opportunities for women to address organized crime in civil society. Women are regarded as particularly innovative in building healthy relationships and trust with institutions and law enforcement, and advocating for a broader role for civil society in the community. They are also key to promoting the role of education, youth empowerment and gender equality in reducing vulnerability to organized crime.

Women, especially those leading youth centres, are also often seen as role models for the communities. ‘The ideas and energy of young people in Vlora are my daily source of inspiration,’ said Alekta Lamani, leader of a youth centre in Vlora, Albania, that works to offer alternative pathways to local youth. She argues that while it is important to implement projects and keep the organization running, it is vital to remember that ‘we can change young people’s lives’.⁶³ Lamani is just one case among many in the Western Balkans who deserve recognition, as they are central to motivating and encouraging young people to participate and be active in their communities.

However, while analyzing how to leverage women’s roles to reduce vulnerability to organized crime and to empower people in their communities, it is also important to consider whether current resilience frameworks further entrench existing inequalities and increase burdens on women. In other words, we should avoid the danger of putting too much pressure on CSOs to deal with organized crime, thus increasing the risks for brave women who are trying to do the right thing in their communities. Instead, local and national governments in the Western Balkans should be reaching out to women-led CSOs as partners and allies in the fight against organized crime and corruption. At the same time, donors should support and empower their important work, which does so much to build resilience in vulnerable communities.

Women are at the forefront of many CSOs in the Western Balkans.





Participants at a community event held to discuss drug use in Shtip, North Macedonia. © Double Hope

MOVING FORWARD

The role of gender in organized crime is important but, unfortunately, not well understood. Therefore, as this research has shown, it is important to explore ways in which stakeholders can better understand the drivers and enablers of organized crime and to improve civil society's response to the phenomenon.

It is important to recognize the multifaceted role played by women in both countering and perpetrating organized crime, and to acknowledge that some women are not passive bystanders in organized crime activities but play central roles as agents in organized criminal activity. Furthermore, it is vital to understand and counteract negative role models that attract young people, both men and women, to organized crime. Such an approach should help to reduce the risks to women as both potential victims and perpetrators of organized crime, and address the dangers of toxic masculinity in a way that can help reduce vulnerability to organized crime. A gender-focused approach would also empower women civil society leaders who are often at the frontline of dealing with the impacts of organized crime and corruption in the community.

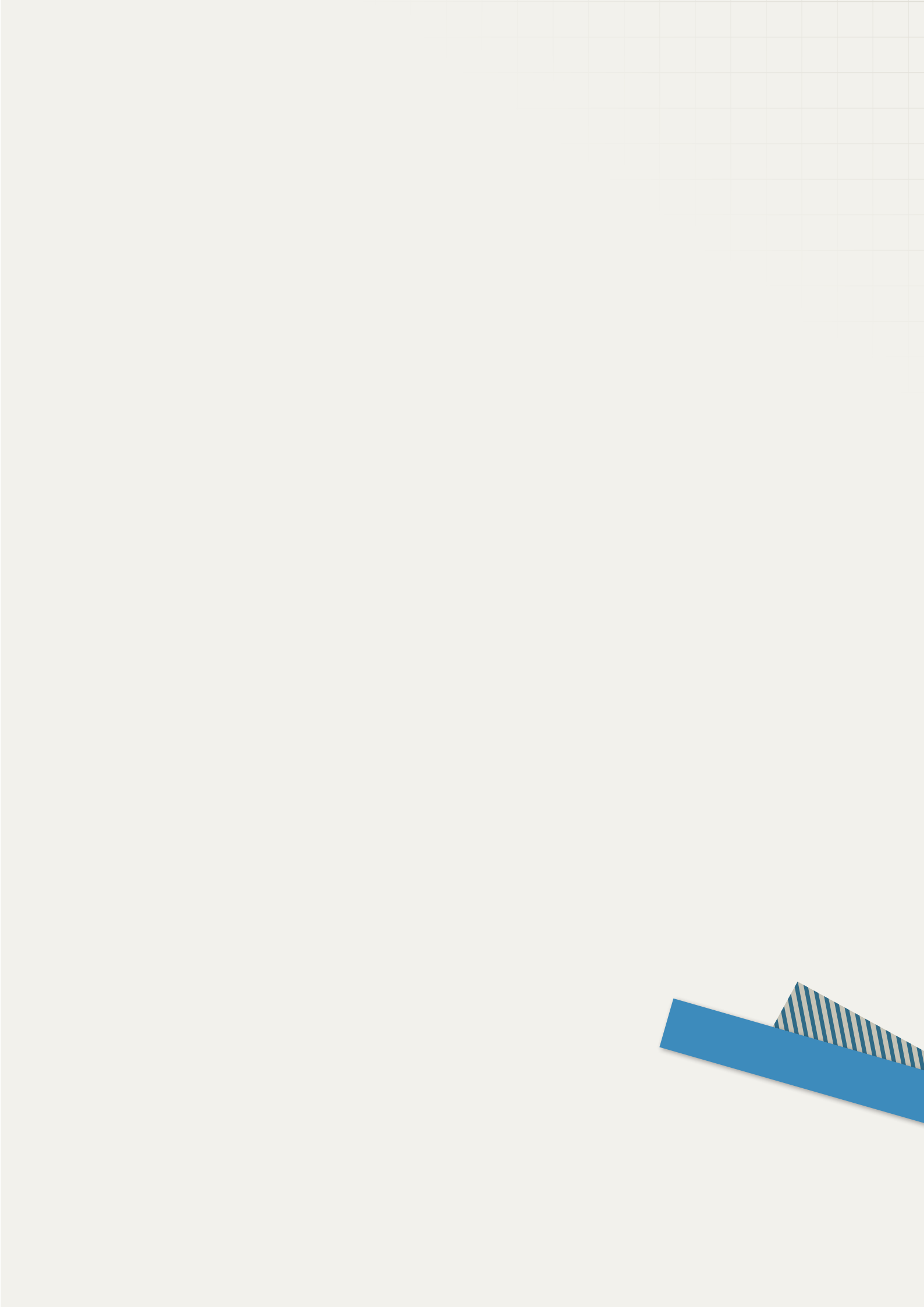
NOTES

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