THE MISSING PIECE OF THE PUZZLE

WOMEN AND ORGANIZED CRIME

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INTRODUCTION

Gender equality and non-discrimination are central to the work of the United Nations (UN) and to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agenda. The UN's commitment to gender equality is rooted in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which affirms that 'all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights' without any discrimination, in the UN Charter and SDG 5, which concerns gender equality.[1] In relation to women's rights, key milestones include the establishment of UN Women, the adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, and UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (on women, peace and security), which emphasizes the role of women in conflict prevention, peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction.

Despite the existence of widely recognized international frameworks, a gendered approach to addressing transnational organized crime is generally lacking. The differentiated gendered impact of transnational organized crime, as well as gendered responses to it, have gained increasing international attention. That women are often the victims of organized crime – human trafficking is a good example – is a widely recognized phenomenon. However, this does not always translate to effective responses in law enforcement and judicial systems. Beyond victimhood, there are many other complex dynamics around gender and organized crime. Responses to organized crime often overlook women's roles within criminal groups, and how they are impacted by illicit economies in ways that are different from men. Responses also overlook how women are agents in building effective responses to organized crime. The gendered impact of organized crime and the roles played by women when it comes to organized crime need to be better understood and appreciated, and a fundamental component of an effective strategy against transnational organized crime.[2]

Despite an increasing understanding of the benefits in promoting gender-responsive approaches to organized crime, genuine efforts to incorporate them in the international policy sphere are rare. This is reflected in multilateral platforms where discussions around organized crime and the response to it take place – primarily intergovernmental bodies in the United Nations in Vienna. Efforts to incorporate gendered approaches and language often face resistance in international policy discussions on organized crime from a group of countries,[3] which holds up negotiations, derails conversations and disrupts the Vienna spirit of consensus-based decision making. This is often in the form of rejections of gender-specific language in UN resolutions and international agreements, or objections to the role of gender being recognized in policy implementation.

As states parties gather at the 12th session of the Conference of Parties to the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC COP) from 14 to 18 October 2024 in Vienna, this brief provides policymakers with examples and evidence to enhance an understanding of the gendered dynamics of organized crime policy, as international policy discussions and negotiations at the UNTOC COP get underway. It synthetizes analysis by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) on the intersection between organized crime and women, drawing from thematic research on the topic through its work with communities, and supplemented by desk research on the topic.

Key points

Our research finds that taking a gendered perspective is particularly important to understanding and responding to organized crime for a number of reasons:

1. **Women are actors in criminal markets**. This can be overlooked because women are frequently perceived as victims. Their role in organized crime is often a supporting one, but there are cases where they play a direct leadership role. Understanding the multifaceted roles women play in facilitating criminal markets, and the drivers to their participation, is essential to designing relevant responses.

2. **Organized crime has differentiated impacts on women**. The ways in which women are impacted by organized crime often mimic other forms of violence against and repression of women in society. Identifying the root causes of these gendered impacts of criminal markets on women can help shape policy and programming to improve women's conditions and rights by identifying their specific needs.

3. **Women are agents in the response to organized crime**. Women play a role as critical actors in combating organized crime, often at the local level in mitigating the impact on communities, but also through their work and contributions in law enforcement, judicial systems and international platforms. In these spaces they contribute a gendered form of expertise and value, and understanding this and encouraging it should be a component in developing stronger responses to organized crime. However, women are often under-represented in policymaking and practice, to the detriment of the development of policy.

WOMEN AS ACTORS IN TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Discounting women's agency and involvement in organized crime leaves a blind spot in responses.
- Understanding the spectrum of women's engagement, from victim to coercion to full agency, is critical for designing policy and responses and avoid revictimization.
- Criminal justice responses need a gendered methodology to combat stereotypes and allow for non-discriminatory justice.

The dynamics of how women and organized crime interact can be explored in several ways, including gender roles within criminal organizations, and the agency of women in such contexts; the social and economic factors that are conducive to a person's involvement in criminal groups based on gender; profiling of victims; and biases in law enforcement and criminal justice responders in dealing with victims, witnesses and perpetrators in all stages of the criminal justice process.

Regarding women's role in criminal groups, an evolving body of research on gender and organized crime would suggest that women's participation in organized crime is frequently overlooked, and women are often portrayed as either victims or passive accomplices of their male counterparts.[4] While it is true that women are often exploited and victimized by organized crime, their role is more nuanced. They are also active participants in organized crime groups, and involved in various criminal markets and at different positions within the hierarchies of organizations, from a logistical support role to leadership.[5]

Gendered stereotypes continue to obscure the reality of women's involvement in organized crime, hindering effective policy and intervention strategies. They risk oversimplifying women's involvement in organized crime. A 2023 report based on data from the OSCE member states' regions finds that there is often a continuum in women's involvement, from victim to perpetrator. One of these phenomena is the 'alpha-victim', whereby women who are victims start to play a supporting function in criminal groups, such as recruitment.[6]

While women can play the same roles as men as perpetrators, some of the ways in which women participate in criminal markets stem from the fact that they are women. Gangs exploit the fact women are perceived as fragile or more vulnerable than men, making it easier for them to evade the authorities or lure victims in the case of human trafficking. In some cases, they are coerced to engage in such activities. Some examples include:

- Acting as drug mules: women are selected (and often coerced) to traffic illegal drugs because they are less likely to be identified as suspects.
- Women are used as recruiters for grooming and engaging potential human trafficking victims because it is believed women are more likely to trust other women than unknown men.
- Women are used as the face of cyberscams to entice men into the scam.[7]

Stereotyping of female victims and offenders is but one component of a larger challenge of gender bias within the criminal justice sector. This may be a function of under-representation of women in law enforcement agencies, discrimination and harassment of women working in criminal justice systems, and lack of gender-sensitive training. The criminal justice system's treatment of female offenders, witnesses and victims may therefore be influenced by these latent gender stereotypes. For example, investigations might overlook female offenders for reasons of normative societal values. And when it comes to the handling of female offenders, women who commit crimes may receive sentences that are excessively harsh or may encounter victim-blaming attitudes or be less likely to be treated seriously.

ROOT CAUSES: SOCIAL MARGINALIZATION AND GANG CULTURE

Research has found that the type of criminal organization and market conditions partly determine the nature of women's involvement in organized crime. Illegal markets regulated by several different criminal groups, for example, show more inclusivity towards women, whereas mafia-like groups tend to maintain strict gender exclusion and usually only give women status based on family ties.[8]

The GI-TOC's research on gangs reveals that girls and young women are often drawn into gang involvement through their exposure in the environments in which they live, particularly where gangs serve as the primary

form of social organization for young people.[9] Feelings of belonging to a group, a sense of protection from the violent environment they live in (including domestically), substance abuse and socio-economic factors such as poverty, lack of education, unemployment and single-parent status are factors determining female involvement in gangs.

Cultural gang norms are also a determinant, such as 'narcoculture', or family ties with criminal actors that shape women's roles and experiences.[10] A study on extortion in Central America found that women's involvement in extortion gangs was tied to emotional and community relationships. Although their roles in such gangs tended in the past to be only peripheral – for example, as romantic partners of gangsters or debt collectors – this has shifted over time and women were found in this study to play a more direct, prominent role in the extortion economy as ring leaders and hired assassins.[11]

The factors that lead women to join gangs blur the line between victimization and agency, making it essential to understand these dynamics when female offenders interact with the criminal justice system.

The criminal justice process (from investigation to sentencing) needs to give careful consideration to these factors and causes behind women's participation in organized crime, and smarter, gendered policies on crime prevention should be developed.

HOW WOMEN ARE IMPACTED BY ORGANIZED CRIME

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The ways in which women are affected by organized crime build upon and mimic existing repression and forms of violence against women in society. Gender discrimination, its intersection with other social factors of discrimination, as well as patriarchal norms increase the risk of violence against women in areas exposed to criminal governance and increases their vulnerability to exploitation.
- Sexual violence is a critical issue for women, manifesting in many ways, from human trafficking to gender-based violence as part of criminal governance.
- Criminal markets dominated by men and societal or institutional responses to male-dominated markets tend to disproportionately harm women.

Although transnational organized crime impacts everyone regardless of gender, women are particularly targeted and victimized by criminal groups. Gender discrimination and its intersection with other forms of discrimination, such as racism, age and socio-economic status, increase the likelihood of becoming victims.

Marginalized individuals are more likely to be victimized by criminal groups for the purposes of trafficking and exploitation.[12] For instance, research has explored the phenomenon of trafficking of Cambodian women and girls to China for marriage.[13] Various methods are used to coerce Cambodian women and girls into arranged and forced marriages. Some are duped and sold by their family members, relatives and acquaintances; some are lured by the promise of a marriage and better life; others are promised a job and told they need a marriage certificate

to be eligible for work. Marginalized women – low-skilled workers, undocumented migrants, refugees and IDPs, and imprisoned women – were particularly targeted for this human trafficking scam.

Similarly, research in the Western Balkans has pointed out the gender dimensions of labour exploitation.[14] Discrimination against women, which limits their access to education, employment and legal protection, reduces their power and decision-making, making them more exposed to exploitation. Even when employment opportunities exist, more women than men are employed in sectors that are informal and generally lower paid (such as domestic work, commercial cleaning, provision of entertainment, including as hostesses or dancers, and in sex work) also contributing to women's vulnerabilities to trafficking.

Gender discrimination in gang settings increases women's exposure to gender-based violence, as mentioned earlier. In the GI-TOC study on extortion in Central America, it was found that women involved in extortion were often subjected to physical, psychological, sexual and lethal violence.[15] Male gang members often create environments that increase the vulnerability of female gang members to domestic violence and abuse. GI-TOC research on gangs in Cape Town shows that women facing domestic violence or who experience significant barriers to employment or reintegration into society are more likely to be exposed to a cycle of vulnerability. [16] As a result, they risk recidivism and their children are frequently drawn into gang life as well.

In Haiti, the increase in sexual violence that has come in tandem with the growing gang presence in Port-au-Prince reflects existing forms of violence already prevalent. In a survey of some 600 women and girls from the commune of Cité Soleil, women reported that domestic violence was the most prominent form of gender-based violence they experienced during the period 2014–2022.[17] Gangs are committing atrocious crimes against women, and this layers upon existing forms of gender-based violence experienced by the victims.

Girls displaced by gang violence in Cité Soleil take refuge in Hugo Chavez Square in Port-au-Prince, October 2022. © Ricardo Arduengo/Reuters via Alamy Stock Photo

Patriarchal ideologies also often lead to differentiated impacts experienced by women in the context of illicit economies. In a research paper that analyzes the impact of drug markets on women in Eastern and Southern Africa in communities heavily affected by drug markets,[18] it was found that gender norms play a role in the response to drug use and possession. These norms were found to shape the negative experiences of women who use drugs in the areas of policy, policing and police violence, mass incarceration, and discrimination in access to health and social care. [19] The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has repeatedly called on

member states to adopt drug policies that take into account the unique needs of women as well as LGBTQ+ communities.[20]

The impacts of organized crime are also felt in ways that go beyond the direct effects on victims or perpetrators themselves. Secondary-level impacts within communities include ways in which organized crime impedes peace, stability, and economic and social development, and these are felt distinctively by women. For example, research on the Balkans has revealed how illicit financial flows have the effect of reducing public resources that could be directed to gender equality programmes and provision of services, and this was found to disproportionately affect women.[21]

THE GENDERED IMPACT OF ENVIRONMENTAL CRIME

The GI-TOC's Resilience Fund programme – a mechanism that nurtures and assists local initiatives in their responses to organized crime – examined community resilience to environmental crimes and the gendered impact of environmental degradation and biodiversity loss caused by the illegal exploitation of forests.[22] The research found that overarching patriarchal structures, reflected in land distribution systems and access to economic opportunities and political platforms, position women as dependent on men and limit women's agency, access to formal education and political participation. Again, this shows that existing structural elements in society drive the distinctive effects of criminal markets, in this case illegal forestry, on women.

Two issues from this study also ring true in other contexts of illicit economies:

Reinforced masculinization of territory and exposure to exploitation. In contexts of indigenous and rural populations, sexual assault has been reported in communities that live close to forests or rivers that find themselves exposed to illicit environmental activities. Many extractive sites are dominated by male labour, reinforcing gender roles and demands for sex work, which has reportedly led to trafficking for sexual exploitation.

Increase in domestic and caregiving roles due to health conditions. Environmental degradation generates a plethora of sicknesses, which places the burden of caregiving on women and girls in the families. In addition, if male members (who are traditional bread-winners) succumb to sickness or become disabled, women and girls are forced to earn money by taking up available work, which means they often lose out on receiving a formal education.

The masculinization of such economies influences how the market affects women's roles and participation in society by diminishing their economic empowerment.

THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN RESPONDING TO ORGANIZED CRIME

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Women are often the building blocks of resilience pathways in criminal markets in the community, and hence responses should identify how women organize their collective power.
- Involving women in institutional responses to transnational organized crime helps reshape priorities and fill gaps in responses that ignore, or even discriminate against, women.

Women play crucial and often underappreciated roles in the response to illicit economies. These roles encompass community-level prevention efforts, institutional responses within law enforcement, the judiciary, and health and education systems, as well as the part they play in victim support, advocacy and policymaking. Women's perspectives and work ensure that responses to organized crime are comprehensive and effective, and strengthen the resilience of communities facing the challenges posed by organized crime.

In institutional settings, women bring different perspectives from their male counterparts in identifying, prioritizing and responding to the harms of organized crime. However, women often constitute a small percentage of the staff in such settings and their voices often go unheard. Amplifying their role and agency institutionally needs to be part of the response to organized crime.

Within state institutions, women face challenges of their own that need to be addressed for them to participate fully in their field. These include gender-based discrimination, such as not receiving the same preferential treatment as their male counterparts in terms of career progression, access to resources or training, for example, to more serious forms of mistreatment, such as sexual harassment. These all limit women's ability to shape priorities and contribute their knowledge and expertise.

Women working in civil society also face particular challenges, as patriarchal systems have eroded women's agency. Despite these challenges, however, women are coming together to lead movements to respond.

EVIDENCE FROM THE WORK OF THE RESILIENCE FUND

Lessons learned from the Resilience Fund's activities have shown that women are the main 'providers' of resilience in the response to criminal violence and organized crime. In a report assessing the role of women in resilience building, it was found that that women 'often act by interrupting entrenched cycles of violence and reclaiming physical spaces from criminal governance in their resilience responses to organized crime'.[23]

As with interventions that aim to modify gender norms and family interactions, enabling and strengthening female roles have proven to be an important, catalytic reaction in addressing familial, ethnic and community types of crime.

In research conducted in Haiti on gender-based violence, community round tables of local leaders provided a range of preventive and response initiatives that come from women-dominated fields, such as the education sector.[24] Research from Kenya and Mozambique also shows how women are organized and build resilience in

communities and combat organized crime threats, such as gang violence.[25] Meanwhile, a civil society study based in the Western Balkans shows how women-led initiatives have been crucial in reducing recidivism and supporting reintegration of former offenders.[26]

The work of the Resilience Fund also shows how women's organizations have been crucial in helping drive legal responses to human rights violations, such as disappearances, often at the expense of their own security. Women's initiatives been successful in promoting legal aid, mental health services and advocacy.[27]

Women's organizations are frequently small scale, and operate with limited resources and under the radar. They may face financial obstacles due to gender discrimination or rely heavily on foreign funding. Research studying the impact of anti-money laundering and countering the financing of terrorism notes that the implementation of these frameworks 'can have an unintended negative impact on women's financial inclusion', in the sense that it affects their already limited financial resilience, diminishing even further women's economic empowerment.[28] Key factors influencing women's financial resilience are:

- Name recognition and influence
- Flexibility of budgets and financial resilience
- Number of dedicated staff
- Working on political issues around conflict

Women protest against family members' disappearances, Mexico, 2022.

In many ways, women-led initiatives are important tools to combat and prevent organized crime, but can often be overlooked. The international community should raise awareness of such female-led initiatives and thus empower them.

Gender-based discussions on international policy

Member states tend to diverge when gender issues are raised in multilateral policy forums.[29] For Vienna-based intergovernmental organizations, a group promoting gender equality was set up by the UK and Colombia to amplify this issue in diplomatic circles. Inclusion of gender references in resolutions, decisions and agreements by the international forums dealing with organized crime is paramount not only to guide the work of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), but also to support policy change, embolden community work and mitigate the impacts of crime through policy.

There is some progress on incorporating gender, in particular women's rights, in forums such as the Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice, the Commission on Narcotic Drugs[30] and, broadly, within the body of work of the UNODC.[31] The UNODC has a focus on gender in all its activities, including those related to organized crime,[32] and has developed tools to support member states in mainstreaming gender while implementing the UNTOC.[33]

As for the Conference of Parties to the UNTOC, gender issues are included in resolutions in matters of international cooperation, technical assistance and the Trafficking in Persons Protocol. By comparison, the Conference of State Parties of UNTOC's twin convention, the UN Convention against Corruption, adopted

Resolution 10/10 at the 10th Conference of State Parties, which recognized the different impacts that corruption practices can have on women and the gender dimensions of corruption.[34] Even though this is a milestone, given resistance from Iran, the resolution could not go further in setting out more explicit refences to gender.[35]

The Women, Peace and Security Agenda (WPS) is a model for attention to gender and specifically women in the context of a larger framework. This UN Security Council agenda recognizes that women must be critical actors to achieve sustainable international peace and security, and that women are disproportionately affected by conflict. The agenda has a four-pillar approach focused on participation, protection, prevention and relief, and recovery.[36] The Security Council holds meetings focused on women, peace and security regularly to address the impacts on women of specific timely issues, such as the drawdown of peacekeeping missions (held in August 2024).[37] While a main pillar of the WPS Agenda is to promote women's roles in responses, the focus of WPS meetings is often on sexual violence, a sad testament to how prevalent and significant the problem is.

These meetings can result in directives to the UN agencies for follow-up work and help raise awareness of key issues. This could be a model for an approach in the Vienna crime-focused agendas.

CHALLENGES TO THE RESPONSE AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As highlighted in the paper, it is critical to incorporate gender (and women-focused) perspectives within policy responses to crime for three main reasons:

- The various roles women play in criminal groups
- The differentiated impacts that criminal markets have on women
- The often unseen yet crucial role women play in the response to transnational organized crime

Applying a gender and intersectional lens when analyzing criminal groups and markets, addressing gender bias in the state response and empowering community initiatives led by women are therefore all of paramount importance. Although the gendered impact of transnational organized crime as well as gendered approaches to responses to it have gained increasing international attention, the three components highlighted in this paper need to be better reflected in the international policy space. In particular, four areas need attention:

- **Enhance gender disaggregated data and analysis of organized crime**. The absence of gender-disaggregated data perpetuates misconceptions of the role women play in organized crime and limits understanding of gendered dynamics in illicit economies. This is particularly relevant for state authorities, on whose data we often rely. The gap in the data means formulating appropriate responses to crime can be challenging. This is reflected in inadequate support systems for female victims, discrimination in the judicial system and gendered repercussions of anti-crime policies (including mass incarceration and police brutality). Addressing this gap includes training law enforcement and judicial personnel in gender sensitivity, creating gender-specific rehabilitation programmes and developing policies that account for the intersection of gender, poverty and crime. Effective responses to organized crime require an intersectional gender perspective by examining the various gendered experiences along with other intersectional characteristics, like race, ethnicity and disability.

- **Boost gender-responsive and gender-transformative programming to address organized crime**. Gender considerations should not be considered a box-ticking exercise to comply with donor requirements. It requires identifying the specific needs of women when designing programming and capacity building. Gender mainstreaming in all cycles of policy and practice is important: from consultations, policy development, gender responsive budgeting, implementation of measures, and monitoring and evaluation.

- **Amplify gender discussions and women's issues in the international debate on transnational organized crime**. Raising the profile of gender issues in agendas such as the UNTOC COP can help strengthen overall efforts to achieve gender equality in society. Incorporating gender issues in the international debate plays a fundamental role in shaping social, political, economic and cultural changes to address the global challenge of organized crime. It is not just about addressing women's issues, but about ensuring fairness, equality and justice for all genders. This is especially important to help break cycles of gender inequality. It also empowers community work through awareness raising and helps promote women's profiles.

- **Empower women-led initiatives and ensure participation of women in the policy space**. Women and community perspectives are critical to understand the dynamics, needs and experiences of those most affected by crime. Their involvement and perspectives are essential for several reasons, from prevention to supporting victims and influencing policy, and for ensuring security and mental well-being. Women's inclusion in decision making is important, but it should go beyond just data and quotas. Empowerment includes not only funding, but also shedding light on women's work, and promoting security and networks.

Notes

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GLOBAL INITIATIVE
AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME

ABOUT THE GLOBAL INITIATIVE

The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime is a global network with over 700 Network Experts around the world. The Global Initiative provides a platform to promote greater debate and innovative approaches as the building blocks to an inclusive global strategy against organized crime.

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