

# The role of women in organized crime

## Preliminary findings

### Introduction

OSCE participating States identified a lack of understanding, research and empirical evidence on gender components of transnational organized crime and on the role of women in organized crime groups (OCGs) during discussions in the OSCE Security Committee and the Annual Security Review Conference in 2021. To address this gap, the OSCE's Transnational Threats Department is preparing an assessment report on the role of women in OCGs based on collected data from criminal justice practitioners and civil society across the OSCE region. With this assessment, the OSCE seeks to contribute to a better understanding of gender aspects of organized crime and its actors, and to support evidence-based and gender-sensitive criminal justice and civil society efforts to prevent and counter organized crime. This research complements the OSCE's ongoing work on the impact of organized crime on women and the specific ways women are exploited and victimized by OCGs.

This brief presents the preliminary findings of the assessment, focusing on how women are recruited to OCGs, their roles within them and how and why they exit these groups. The OSCE plans to publish the full assessment report on the role of women in organized crime in autumn 2023.

### Preliminary findings

#### Recruitment into organized crime groups

Initial analysis of the data indicates that across the OSCE region:

- A lack of sex-disaggregated data on organized crime recruitment patterns, messages and channels makes it difficult for practitioners to develop evidence-based and gender-sensitive prevention measures.

- Typical recruitment pathways into OCGs vary according to gender. Men tend to be recruited by criminal groups who become aware of their involvement in other crimes. In contrast, women typically become part of OCGs by being born into a criminal family or through relationships with male OCG members.
- Socioeconomic inequalities and poverty are key drivers of recruitment and exploitation by OCGs for both women and men.

### Methodology

To date, 14 OSCE participating States have contributed data to this assessment in the form of completed questionnaires, case studies and semi-structured interviews with selected criminal justice practitioners and civil society.

These are: Albania, Belgium, Bulgaria, Canada, Finland, Italy, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, North Macedonia, Serbia, Spain, Sweden, Tajikistan and the United Kingdom.

The selection of States ensures the collection of perceptions and experiences of the role of women inside organized crime groups from across the OSCE region.

## Roles within organized crime groups

The preliminary analysis suggests that across the OSCE region:

- Sex-disaggregated data on organized crime is rarely collected by law enforcement agencies, contributing to a lack of intelligence on women actors in OCGs and on the roles female partners, sisters and mothers of male organized crime members play.
- Women are perceived – in line with traditional gender stereotypes – as passive, less violent and subject to the decision-making of men. This can allow them to act almost invisibly within OCGs, undetected by the criminal justice system.
- In contrast, criminal cases showcase that women can hold significant agency in OCGs and are active across the entire hierarchy, including conveying messages from and to prison, assisting fugitives, collecting protection money, managing and laundering money derived from illicit activities, ordering violence and managing various types of trafficking. Women also provide advice and assistance within OCGs on law, finance, logistics and other specialist domains.
- Women who are partners or family members of male organized crime figures frequently hold important information about criminal operations and structures, often acting as advisors for their male partners and family members.
- Women play a key role in transmitting the culture and ideology of OCGs, including the codes of silence and honour. In this way, women contribute to the socialization process and development of group bonds within OCGs.

Organized crime is still largely perceived as male-dominated, with the role of women being considered marginal or exceptional.



## Exit pathways from organized crime groups

The initial findings suggest that across the OSCE region:

- Women typically leave OCGs wanting freedom and a way out of the criminal world, whereas men often do so when they feel that their criminal career is coming to the end or for fear of being killed or getting a long-term prison sentence.
- There is a lack of gender-sensitive exit programmes. Women tend to be involved as the partners of male OCG members, rather than as active agents in their own right.

Not recognizing women's agency in organized crime can impede comprehension of its complexity and restrict the ability of criminal justice practitioners to offer women a path out of criminality.

## Initial takeaways

The preliminary analysis indicates some initial takeaways for the OSCE and its participating States:

- There needs to be a shift in how women in OCGs are perceived. This starts with the recognition that they can hold active and important roles in OCGs.
- While women in OCGs often act behind the scenes, this does not make their role less significant. Greater acknowledgement is needed of women's power and influence in advising or taking decisions, including within their partnership and family.
- Greater understanding of the specific role that women can play in OCGs can support the development and implementation of more targeted and effective efforts to prevent and respond to organized crime, including gender-sensitive exit strategies.
- Good practices from the OSCE region show that offering women a way out of OCGs can contribute to an enhanced understanding of organized crime, providing valuable intelligence on OCGs' operations and structures.

The full assessment report will include detailed recommendations.