Linkages between Gender, VAWG and SOC in Western Balkans

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Original Query: What is the evidence of the linkages between gender, VAWG and serious organised crime (SOC), with a particular focus on evidence from Albania and the wider Western Balkans region (Bosnia Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia)?

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1. Overview

This document provides a rapid review of the evidence of the linkages between gender, violence against women and girls (VAWG) and serious organised crime (SOC), with a particular focus on evidence from Albania and the wider Western Balkans region. It explores a series of sub-questions, including what roles women play in SOC, the gendered nature of financial crime and links with VAWG, the gendered disaggregation of violence associated with SOC, and the extent to which higher levels of SOC in a community increase VAWG. It also briefly looks at the impact of a gender-neutral approach to SOC and donor approaches in the Western Balkans.

Definition of Serious and Organised Crime (SOC): Individuals planning, coordinating and committing serious offences, whether individually, in groups and/or as part of transnational networks. The main categories of serious offences covered by the term are: 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 cybercrime (HMG, 2018; Stabilisation Unit, 2019)

Overall, the evidence base on the links between gender, VAWG and SOC is limited, according to DFID's (2014) How to Note on Assessing the Strength of Evidence, i.e. moderate to low quality studies, medium size evidence body, low levels of consistency. Most studies are small-scale qualitative studies that only look partially at the links and are based on interviews with offenders, victims or ethnographic studies at the community level. In addition, the report has consulted evidence from NGOs, regional and international organisations, and local news reports. Most evidence comes from Albania, with more limited evidence from elsewhere in the region. There appears to be a lack of

systematic research exploring the relationship between gender, VAWG and SOC, including on the impact of gender norms and masculinities, and exploring how experiences of violence in childhood and as an adult increase women's (and men's) risk of perpetrating or being a victim of SOC. However, there is a stronger body of evidence, assessed to be medium quality with a moderate level of consistency, exploring the links between trafficking for sexual exploitation and violence.

Key observations from the evidence review include:

- **Women play multiple roles in organised criminal networks and activities**. Most of the research from the region is from Albania and has found that ethnic Albanian women rarely play leading roles in criminal organisations, and when they do it is often for limited times (for example, if their partner has been imprisoned). However, there is some evidence of women playing an increasingly active role in some crimes, including drug trafficking, counterfeiting and kidnapping of children for sale or exploitation, as well as high profile cases such as Soula-Aspasia Mitropia who helped free her boyfriend and other organised criminals from a high security prison in Greece (Arsovska, 2015; Arskovska and Allum, 2014). The research suggests that ethnically Slavic women (as opposed to ethnic Albanian or other regional ethnicities) play more central and active roles in SOC, as 'partners-in-crime' and as organisers in human trafficking networks as well as in drugs and arms trafficking (Arsovska and Begum, 2013) (see Section 2).
- **There appear to be two main pathways leading women into SOC: (1) victims of human trafficking being "promoted" to supportive roles in the criminal network; and (2) through family ties and intimate partners.** Trafficking victims are recruited through a range of methods, including through social media, but often targeting women in vulnerable situations and with false offers. Albanian traffickers have also lured women into intimate relationships which turn into situations of coerced prostitution (Arsovska and Begum, 2013). Some victims of trafficking are "promoted" into supportive roles, such as recruiters and spies on other women, which can be a way for women to escape some of the abuse (see Section 3). Women are typically recruited into other types of SOC through partners or family networks.
- **Higher levels of SOC have the potential to increase VAWG** in several ways, although it should be noted that there is limited rigorous evidence looking at these links. Firstly, SOC undermines the rule of law in the region through the corruption of the police and judicial process, which in turn contributes to impunity for violence against women and girls. Minority groups who are discriminated against within the legal system, such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) persons or ethnic minorities, are particularly affected. Secondly, higher rates of SOC associated with the spread and availability of firearms increase the risk of death or serious injuries. Almost three quarters of women murdered by their partners were killed by firearms in North Macedonia and Kosovo (Božanić, 2016). Thirdly, the social norms that condone SOC in the community can also normalise violent behaviour against women and girls, including in the home. For example, research in Albania has highlighted social norms that encourage and reinforce criminality and VAWG, such as: masculine norms emphasising strength, assertiveness, male sexual entitlement and control over women; norms around family privacy and honour that lead to reluctance to involve authorities; norms around male imprisonment ('Jail is for men'); and firearm-related norms that portray guns as a rite of passage to manhood (see Section 7).
- **Further research is needed on women's roles in financial crime.** Historically, there is some evidence that women were involved in running pyramid schemes linked to organised crime in Albania in the 1990s. More recently, there have been cases of Albanian women being arrested for their counterfeiting roles for organised crime groups, as well as managing private companies involved in cases of swindling and fraud. Corrupt women accountants and police officers have also helped facilitate organised financial crime, although this is not well documented. The links between financial crime and violence against women also remain under-researched. (see Section 4).

- **Forms of violence associated with SOC that disproportionately affect women and girls include trafficking for sexual exploitation**, with 93% of detected victims in the region being women or girls (UNODC, 2018). However, men and boys represent the majority of people who experience violent deaths and homicides in the region (see Section 5).
- **Experiences of violence in childhood and intimate partner relationships is a risk factor for both men and women's involvement in SOC.** In Serbia, criminal gangs and traffickers often target young people who are vulnerable as a result of childhood exploitation, particularly sexual abuse (UNICEF, 2017). Similarly, in Albania, trafficking gangs find it easier to manipulate young people (particularly girls, but also boys) with experiences of childhood and partner violence (Whitehead, 2018; ARC Foundation and Asylos, 2019). Organisations working with women traffickers in Albania report that women often become perpetrators as a way of escaping their own experiences of being trafficked, with gangs telling women the only way to free themselves is to recruit another woman to 'replace' themselves (Bindel, 2013). Research with women prisoners in North Macedonia and Albania (most of whom had been jailed for financial crime) revealed that many interviewees had experienced systematic violence from their partners, with most socialised to stay 'silent' in court and not mention their experiences of abuse (Papavangjeli, 2014; Penal Reform International, 2019). (see Section 6).
- **A gender-neutral approach carries risks of perpetuating gender inequalities within SOC policy and programmatic work**. It is important to acknowledge the multiple roles that women play in SOC as well as the vulnerabilities of boys and young men being targeted by organised groups in the region. Mainstreaming gender into SOC approaches would also help address the role of masculinities and gendered pathways into SOC (both as victim and perpetrator). The proliferation of firearms in the region also has gendered implications, with high rates of male gun ownership and women being disproportionally affected as victims. There is considerable potential for gender-blind approaches to miss key entry points for addressing SOC at scale, for example prevention approaches that work in schools to help young people develop healthy relationships, change harmful norms around violence, and keep them safe from different forms of SOC. Rule of Law programmes could also consider how to incorporate components to strengthen laws and law enforcement to protect against and prosecute both VAWG and SOC (see Section 8).
- **Several international donors are addressing these issues in the Western Balkans**, including bilateral (UK, US, Germany, Netherlands, Norway) and multilateral organisations (European Union, the Council of Europe, Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and World Bank). This query conducted a rapid mapping of programme in the region (see Annex 2) and identified the following gaps (see Section 9):
  - Few donor programmes aimed at prevention, with most programmes focusing on pursuing or protecting against SOC and the violence associated with it.
  - Limited donor programming on online exploitation of children, or on drug smuggling.
  - Geographical gaps in Bosnia Herzegovina and Montenegro, with most donor engagement in Albania (likely reflecting the higher threat from SOC).
  - Lack of long-term programming, with most programmes funded for one year or less.
  - Gap in programming focused on generating evidence about what works to prevent SOC and VAWG.

2. What roles do women play in SOC?

Globally, women are involved in different forms of SOC as individuals, as part of groups and as part of organised criminal networks, and women play multiple roles in criminal networks and activities (UNODC, 2018). However, women's roles in SOC have received significantly less attention than men's roles in SOC. The Balkan region is no exception, including the Western Balkans, where relatively little is known about women's involvement in SOC and what roles they play (Arsovska and Begum, 2013). Arsovska (2015) argues that lack of attention to women's roles in SOC in the Balkans is partly a result of gender stereotypes that carry assumptions that women cannot be actively involved in serious/high-risk criminal activities (Arsovska, 2015). On the contrary, the scarce evidence that is available suggest that women are increasingly involved in SOC in the region, although little is known about the nature of their involvement (ibid.). A study from 2013 that explored the role of women in SOC in the wider Balkans describes women primarily as "partners in crimes and supporters" and suggests that women are commonly subordinated to men in criminal organisations and primarily occupy supportive roles (ibid). The sub-sections below will explore women's roles in different forms of SOC in the Western Balkans, with most evidence available from Albania.

Women's passive and active roles in SOC

Evidence suggest that women in the Western Balkans are significantly less involved in SOC than men; when they are, they often occupy supportive roles. There is evidence of Albanian women being involved SOC (as sections below will illustrate), however, they are significantly less involved than men are and women are rarely found in leading roles in criminal organisations (Zhilla and Lamarelli, 2015; Arsovska and Begum, 2013). Only in rare cases and for limited times, women have been seen to step into more prominent roles in the criminal organisations, for instance if their husband has been imprisoned (Arsovska and Begum, 2013). Reviews of cases that passed through Albania's Serious Crimes Courts 2006-2014 revealed that only 4.4% of the accused were women (ibid.) Judges in this court argue that the majority of these women have been involved in criminal activities because of romantic relationships or other family ties with members of criminal groups (ibid.).

Research of women's involvement in SOC in the Balkans has found that Albanian women generally play passive and supportive roles in relation to a criminal husband, as opposed to more active and informed roles as 'partners in crime' to a criminal partner or family member (Arsovska and Begum, 2013). Their passive role is believed to reflect women's position in Albanian society that is highly patriarchal and where women are expected to be submissive to men (ibid.). However, it is at the same time noted that women's involvement in some crimes is increasing, including drug trafficking and kidnapping of children for sale or exploitation (ibid; Arsovska, 2015). Although Albanian women are rarely seen to take on significant roles in SOC, there are exceptions such as Soula-Aspasia Mitropia who has been involved in two prison escapes in the 2000s, freeing her boyfriend and criminal figure Alket Rizaj along with other organised criminals from a high-security prison in Greece (Arskovska and Allum, 2014). Soula-Aspasia Mitropia is described as a 'partner in crime' and had an active role at the scenes of the two prison escapes, including shooting at prison guards (ibid.).

Ethnically Slavic women have been observed as operating in more central and active roles in SOC than ethnic Albanian women, with cases of women acting as partners-in-crime and as organisers in human trafficking networks as well as in drugs and arms trafficking (Arsovska and Begum, 2013). Slavic women have also been involved in organised high-value robberies and in transnational SOC (ibid.). Investigated cases of SOC in the region suggest that although Slavic women have tended to play more active roles in SOC, their decision to become involved in criminal activities is often influenced by a male partner (ibid.). Examples of women who have played active roles in SOC are Svetlana (Ceca) Raznatovic, wife of Serbian organised crime leader Zeljko

Raznatovic-Arkan (assassinated in 2003), and his godmother Stanislava Cocorovska-Poletan, who were both involved in financial crimes following his death. While Svetlana (Ceca) Raznatovic has portrayed herself as a victim of her husband's illegal activities, studies of Stanislava Cocorovska-Poletan's engagement in criminal activities (which also included smuggling of drugs and cigarettes) suggest that she played an active role as a partner-in-crime (ibid.). Arsovska and Begum (2013) argues that Slavic women's more active roles in SOC (compared to ethnic Albanian women) is a result of women in Slavic countries[1] having relatively more rights and more representation in powerful positions in society than women in Albania (ibid.).

Case study: Women in the 'Pink Panthers'

One of the best-known organised theft networks in modern criminal history is the 'Pink Panthers', a transnational group responsible for large-scale jewel thefts all over the world (Arsovska and Allum, 2014). The group is believed to consist mainly of Serbians and Montenegrins and is known to have several female members. In contrast to many other criminal networks in the region, women appear to hold prominent positions in the organisation and have key-roles in the burglaries. Interviews with group members revealed that women in the group have a high status; it is acknowledged that without them, the group would not be able to carry out their thefts (ibid.). Women's roles include scouting and surveilling the targeted jewel shops ahead of burglaries, requiring them to change appearance frequently as they present as regular costumers (Marking, 2013). The women rarely appear in reporting about the group and little is known about them and their motives, but in a rare interview, a female group member said she joined because of her boyfriend, and said that she one day wanted a "normal life" for herself and her boyfriend (Arsovska and Allum, 2014).

Women in human trafficking and modern slavery

Globally, about 35% of convicted offenders of human trafficking are women (UNODC, 2018). The corresponding figure in Central and South Eastern Europe (which includes the Western Balkans) is 18% (ibid). However, the female conviction rate gives an incomplete picture of women's involvement in human trafficking offences. Evidence suggest that women predominantly occupy "lower ranking roles", often being in direct contact with victims through recruitment, collecting money, administrating travel of victims, and supervising younger victims (Europol, 2016). Researchers have argued that women in lower ranking roles run a higher risk of getting caught than for instance men in higher ranking and managerial roes; making the role of women in human trafficking appearing more prominent than it may actually be (Broad, 2015).

Women in Western Balkans rarely appear to occupy leading roles in human trafficking networks, but they do play various support roles. A study from 2013 noted that there are no (known) significant cases of Albanian women leading human trafficking networks; women were almost exclusively identified as victims of trafficking or wives of men in the criminal networks (Arsovska and Begum, 2013). In North Macedonia, women have similarly been found exclusively in "lower ranking" roles (Stanojoska, 2015). Between 2002-2004, there were only a few documented cases of female perpetrators of human trafficking (ibid.). Support roles held by women include as recruiters of victims and clients and being responsible for and instructing victims. Research suggests that women in these roles often have their own experience as victims of trafficking or sex work, or they have close ties with traffickers (Zhilla and Lamarelli, 2015). In some circumstances, women who are victims of trafficking take on support roles during the time they are being sexually exploited, often as a means of

[1] In the Western Balkans these are Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia http://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/slavic-countries/

negotiating better conditions for themselves during the exploitation (Arsovska and Begum, 2013). Traffickers have also been found to develop "partnerships" with their victims, meaning they share some profits with the victim and give them gifts while they remain in control of them, commonly as a way to prolong the period of exploitation (Zhilla and Lamarelli, 2015).

Case study: Women in forced prostitution take on support roles as "spies"

Interviews with Moldovan women who had been held in forced prostitution by an Albanian trafficker found that there were ways for women to reach a better status in the victim group. The exploiters and pimps would commonly have a "favourite" among the women that they treated better. By becoming the pimp's lover, women could negotiate better conditions for themselves in exchange for providing information about other women. Interviews with the women found that although women in these roles became more involved in the criminal business, they would remain with the other victims. It was found to be very rare that women would rise further in the criminal hierarchy, as they would be strategically kept with the other women to be used as sources of information, for instance about escape plans etc. As such, women played support roles as "spies", although in a context of emotional and physical violence, this must be seen primarily as a survival strategy rather than an active choice to support the SOC.

Source: Arsovska and Begum (2013)

The most common role women play in human trafficking appears to be as recruiters; reports from several countries in the Western Balkans show that women are used to recruit other women into sexual exploitation. This supports findings from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) that women play important roles in human trafficking, often in recruitment (UNODC 2016; UNODC, 2018). An emerging method of recruitment in Albania is thorough social media (UNODC, 2018; Home Office, 2018a). A fact-finding mission in 2017 found that girls are increasingly recruiting other girls on behalf of traffickers, commonly through showing pictures of a "beautiful life" that could be attained in trafficking destinations (Home Office, 2018a). In Bosnia and Herzegovina, 57% of recruiters to sex trafficking were identified as women in a 2006 Europol report (cited in Broad, 2015). The same report noted that recruiters were often operating in male-female couples (ibid.). There is also documented evidence of women as recruiters of victims to sexual trafficking in Serbia, Montenegro and North Macedonia (ibid.). A study from 2015 noted that women's roles in trafficking in human beings in Albania also involve finding clients (Zhilla and Lamarelli, 2015).

Women in illicit drug production and trafficking

Drug trafficking is one type of SOC where Albanian authorities have reported a slight increase in women's involvement, and drug trafficking is believed to be the form of SOC with the highest proportion of women involved Arsovska and Begum, 2013; Arsovska, 2015; Zhilla and Lamarelli, 2015). Women's roles in trafficking of hard drugs are mostly as collaborators and couriers (ibid.). For instance, women support the transportation of drugs by car either by driving the vehicle carrying the drugs, or by merely being present during transportation, in order to project a "family façade" (ibid). Research suggests that women who are involved in these roles are often previous victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation who have formed close ties with a member of a criminal group, or are women in difficult economic situations, often divorced and with children, who may also have previously experienced sexual exploitation and/ or drug use (ibid.).

One form of drug production where there is limited evidence of women's involvement is cannabis production. Albania is infamous for its illicit cannabis production (for which it has been named Europe's "cannabis capital") (Pressly, 2016). After government efforts to curb illegal drug production, the production of cannabis has in recent years increasingly moved abroad, primarily to the UK where Albanian criminal networks are operating indoor cannabis plantations (Bird, 2018). This

rapid research has not identified any studies that examines women's roles in the cannabis production and trafficking of cannabis. However, in media reports about Albania's cannabis production, women appear as daily workers on the plantations, where women and men, young people and even children work side by side (Pressly, 2016). In a context of poverty and unemployment, cannabis plantations have provided a source of livelihood for people living in difficult economic situations. Women in interviews have described that working on the cannabis plantations enables them to provide for themselves and their children (Arapi, 2017).

Less has been reported about women's involvement in Albanian cannabis production abroad. This rapid research has identified one case where a woman and a man were arrested for involvement in cannabis operations in the UK (ITV, 2019). The married couple rented a house on a property where they grew cannabis. The couple claimed that they were employed as gardeners and did not have any further involvement in illegal activities. The woman was found to lack the legal right to be in the UK (ibid.). Media coverage of arrests of Albanian men working in cannabis production in the UK have described people working in the factories/farms as occupying the lowest positions in criminal networks (BBC, 2019). Some are illegal immigrants who have been offered work on the plantations in their search for a job in the UK, while others have been trafficked from Albania to the UK and are forced to work on the plantations to pay off their debt to the traffickers/ criminal networks (Bird and Crisp, 2018).

Smuggling of illicit firearms

Data on trade in illicit firearms show that the vast majority of those involved in trade and use of illicit firearms in the EU are men (Transcrime, 2017). Countries in the wider Balkans are major sources of illicit firearms as many countries still have 'stockpiles' of firearms remaining since the end of the armed conflicts in the region (ibid.). Trafficking of firearms has decreased since there are no longer any active armed conflicts in the region, but weapons are trafficked to other regions with ongoing conflicts, including in Africa and the Middle East (ibid.). There are also many individuals who buy illicit firearms for private possession, as the region has a culture of ownership and use of weapons, which is also strongly linked to notions of masculinity (ibid; Brown, 2017). This rapid research has not identified any evidence of women being involved in smuggling of illicit firearms in the region.

Other forms of SOC in the Western Balkan where this rapid research did not identify any evidence in relation to women's roles are:

- Human trafficking for forced labour
- Human trafficking of migrants
- Online child sexual exploitation and abuse
- Gang violence
- The illegal wildlife trade (IWT)
- Cybercrime

The table below table summarises the key issues and strength of evidence related to women's roles in SOC in the Western Balkans.

		Women's roles	Strength of evidence (DFID, 2014)
Vulnerabilities	Modern slavery and human trafficking	• **Victims:** Most victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation are women and girls, and women make up 43% of victims of trafficking for forced labour (UNODC, 2018) • **Recruiters**: Women are involved in recruiting other women into sexual exploitation, for instance by using social media (Home Office, 2018a). Some of the recruiters are victims of trafficking, while others are intimate partners of male criminals (Zhilla and Lamarelli, 2015; Barry, 2018) • **Other roles:** Women mainly occupy low status roles in networks for trafficking for sexual exploitation including as recruiters, collecting money, and spying on other women (Europol, 2016)	STRONG/ MEDIUM EVIDENCE
	Organised immigration crime	• **Victims:** Women and girls who are illegally migrating through countries in the Western Balkans are victims of trafficking, including for sexual exploitation, and face violence perpetrated by traffickers, including sexual violence (U.S Department of State, 2018) • **Recruiters:** No evidence • **Other roles:** No evidence	LIMITED EVIDENCE/ NO EVIDENCE
	Online child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA)	• **Victims:** Girls and boys are victims of CSEA, for instance this crime is reported to be on the rise Bosnia and Herzegovina (ECPAT, 2018a) • **Recruiters:** No evidence • **Other roles:** No evidence	LIMITED/ NO EVIDENCE
Prosperity	Money laundering, fraud and other economic crime	• **Victims:** No evidence • **Recruiters:** No evidence • **Other roles:** There is evidence of Albanian women being involved in financial SOC, including a recent case of an Albanian woman selling UK passports to Albanian criminal networks (Papachristou, 2019)	LIMITED EVIDENCE
	International bribery, corruption and sanctions evasion	• **Victims:** No evidence • **Recruiters:** No evidence • **Other roles:** A female police officer was arrested in Albania in 2018 on suspicion of taking money from criminal gangs running passport laboratories which produced passports for travel to the UK (Kelly, 2018)	LIMITED EVIDENCE
	Cybercrime	• **Victims:** No evidence • **Recruiters:** No evidence • **Low status roles:** No evidence	NO EVIDENCE
Commodities	Illegal firearms	• **Victims:** Women are victims of violence related to illegal firearms. For instance, most women killed in their homes in Serbia (2010-2012) were killed by firearms (Carapic, 2014). • **Recruiters:** No evidence • **Low status roles:** No evidence	LIMITED EVIDENCE
	Illegal drugs	• **Victims:** Women are increasingly involved in trafficking of drugs in the region (Arsovska and Begum, 2013). • **Recruiters:** No evidence • **Low status roles:** Women's roles in trafficking of drugs is mostly as collaborators and couriers (ibid.).	LIMITED EVIDENCE
	Organised acquisitive crime	• **Victims:** No evidence • **Recruiters:** No evidence • **Low status roles:** No evidence	NO EVIDENCE

3. How are women recruited into these roles?

There is evidence on what appear to be two main pathways leading women into SOC; victims of human trafficking being "promoted" to support roles in the criminal network, and women being introduced to SOC through family ties and intimate partners. Victims of human trafficking are being recruited through a range of methods; what is central in many cases is that the trafficker/ recruiter takes advantage of women in vulnerable situations and/ or their aspirations for a better life. Interviews with women reveal that many come from a background of family violence and sexual abuse, leading some to leave their families at young age, increasing the risk of turning to survival sex or becoming targets of human traffickers (Cela, 2016). Traffickers in Albania have also increasingly targeted divorced women, mothers and students.

In Albania, human trafficking networks have commonly used men to lure women into intimate relationships which turn into situations of coerced prostitution (Arsovska and Begum, 2013). This is commonly called the "lover-boy" method, where men use false promises such of marriage and love to initiate a relationship with the woman, which turn into further emotional manipulation to coerce women into selling sex to other men (Barry, 2018). Women have described how selling sex can initially be described as temporary or a one-time occurrence, which women may experience having some level of control over, but that it can soon escalate into situations forced prostitution where violence/ control is commonly used (ibid.).

False promises of employment opportunities are also used to recruit women and girls into forced prostitution (Trafficking in Humans Report, 2018; Zhilla and Lamarelli, 2015). Traffickers in Albania are increasingly seen to target divorced women, mothers and students with false employment offers such as waiters, dancers and singers in music bars (Zhilla and Lamarelli, 2015). A study from 2015 identified that an increasing number of women recruited through false employment offers were trafficked to Kosovo (ibid.).

Albanian criminal groups' engagement in trafficking for sexual exploitation has changed forms in recent times, which has led to new recruiters entering the picture. While the number of Albanian women being trafficked into other European countries is believed to have declined, Albanian criminal groups are increasingly involved in organising trafficking of women from other countries including Romania (Barry, 2018). Albanian criminal networks are collaborating with Romanian criminal networks, and Albanian criminals are also increasingly marrying Romanian women (ibid.). Romanian wives/ partners of Albanian criminals have been reported to be involved in recruiting female sex workers from Romania into the trafficking networks (ibid.).

Criminal networks in Albania increasingly use social media such as Facebook to recruit women into trafficking for sexual exploitation (Zhilla and Lamarelli, 2015). For instance, girls post pictures of a 'good life' for other girls to see (Trafficking in Humans, 2018; Home Office, 2018a).

Some victims of trafficking are "promoted" into support roles, such as recruiters and spies on other women, which can be a way for women to escape some of the abuse they are experiencing as victims of trafficking (see Section 2 above). Women occupying roles in drug trafficking have also been identified as being victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation (Zhilla and Lamarelli, 2015). For trafficking of illicit drugs in Albania, it has also been noted that people in vulnerable situations such as unemployed, elderly, and divorced women are increasingly being recruited or exploited as couriers of drugs (Zhilla and Lamarelli, 2015). However, little is known about how women are recruited into these roles.

The second main entry-point that facilitates women's participation in SOC is relationships with men in criminal networks. Most women whose route into SOC networks are not as victims appear to be in intimate relationships with men in SOC or having close family ties; examples in Section 2 above illustrate that women who have held more prominent roles in SOC in the Western Balkans have been acting as partners in crime with their husband/ boyfriend, and in one case the woman in question was the godmother of a prominent criminal figure. To date very little research has been conducted that examines what motives and decisions that lead women in the Western Balkans into SOC that is not primarily in relation to a male figure.

4. What is the gendered nature of financial crime and links with VAWG?

In the Western Balkans, and globally, there is very little evidence on women's involvement in financial crime, and even less on the links with VAWG, although some have suggested there are greater opportunities for women's involvement in financial crime and money laundering due to the lack of physical violence (Savona and Nataoli, 2007; Arsovska and Allum, 2014).

After drug trafficking, the most common offence (related to SOC) that Albanian women face in court is extortion (Zhilla and Lamarelli, 2015). Women's role in this form of crime is commonly to seduce the victim and obtain information that can be used for blackmailing (ibid.). It has been noted that women who are involved in extortion are increasingly operating in groups with other women (ibid).

Women have also been historically involved in **running pyramid schemes in Albania** in the 1990s, with several schemes linked to criminal activities by smuggling goods into former Yugoslavia (a violation of UN sanctions) which are believed to be the source of the high returns they paid. The schemes proliferated and almost two-thirds of the population invested in them. At their peak their liabilities accounted for almost half of Albania's GDP, and their dramatic collapse in 1996-97 led to rioting, political instability and almost 2,000 people being killed (Jarvis, 2000). Two well-known investment schemes started or run by women in Albania included Sudja and Gjallica. The collapse of both schemes triggered violent protests in Tirana and Vlora where Sudja and Gjallica were based respectively.[2] In another case, it was reported that one Albanian woman collected $50 million from investors with an offer of 20-30% interest monthly, before she was arrested.[3]

More recently, evidence from the region suggests that **women have become involved in counterfeiting[4] and falsifying passports for organised crime groups** (Arsovska, 2015), with both security implications for the UK and links to violence against women and children (see example in box below). Access to illegal identification and documentation is a key-enabler for various forms of SOC, and a form of SOC it itself. For instance, it plays a key role in trafficking of humans, including smuggling of migrants. Albanian women have also taken on the role of manager of private companies involved in cases of swindling and fraud (Arsovska, 2015).

Case of Albanian woman selling UK passports to Albanian organised crime syndicates

In March 2019, the UK's National Crime Agency (NCA) arrested a 37-year-old Albanian woman in London. She was accused of countersigning hundreds of fraudulent UK passport applications for an Albanian criminal ring, which has also been suspected of drug and human trafficking, child abuse, kidnapping and violence. A spokesperson for the NCA observed that "We believe this network has

[2] Pyramid schemes in Albania: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pyramid_schemes_in_Albania
[3] Director of Ponzi Operations: https://www.crimes-of-persuasion.com/Crimes/InPerson/MajorPerson/albania_ponzi.htm
[4] Partial or complete exchange of documents with false information for the purpose of fraud

provided criminals with a way to obtain UK passports, giving them the means to commit serious crime and travel around under the law enforcement radar."

Source: Papachristou (2019)

Women as professional facilitators of financial crime: There has been limited research looking into women's roles as professional facilitators in the region, although it is acknowledged that some groups such as accountants and lawyers are at risk of exposure to money laundering, particularly those involved in sectors such as real estate or gambling where criminal gangs have infiltrated ownership or operations (Council of Europe, 2018). This query could find no research or sex-disaggregated data on financial crime, but examples of female professional facilitators of financial crime include:

- **Accountants and lawyers**: a recently published book by the retired head of Serbia's Criminal Police, Rodoljub Milovic, claims that a female lawyer, Vesna Loncar, facilitated meetings and ties between top police inspectors and Belgrade's criminal gangs (Dojcinovic, 2019).
- **Police officers**: a female police officer was arrested in Albania in 2018 on suspicion of taking money from criminal gangs running sophisticated passport laboratories, with undocumented migrants paying up to £20,000 for fake identity documents to travel to the UK (Kelly, 2018).

Women's recruitment into financial crime: International evidence suggests that individuals are recruited through their close networks – family members and intimate partners (Arsovska and Allum, 2014). Research on women in organised crime in Albania observed that women are typically accomplices and not the main perpetrators (Paluca-Baley, 2003). Of the few examples of female money-launderers found as part of this query, all had been recruited by their husband or intimate partner. In a high-profile case in Montenegro, Amina Kalic was arrested in 2014 with her husband and brother-in-law, and accused of laundering €7.8 million between 2005-2011 to conceal money from drug smuggling (Grdnic, 2016).

Links with VAWG: To date, there is little research looking specifically at the links between financial crime and violence against women. The rise of 'poly-criminal' organised groups, operating in several illegal violent areas such as financial crime, drugs, firearms, and trafficking, also has links with violence against women, largely through the violence and exploitation associated with sex trafficking (Townsend, 2019; NCA, 2019). Another link between VAWG and financial crime is as a driver of women's perpetration; there is some evidence that women perpetrators of financial crime may be coerced or threatened by their partner or a family member (see box below with case of Milka Štěpánková), although it is also possible that this is given as an excuse to gain a shorter sentence.

Case of Milka Štěpánková: links between female involvement in financial crime and experiences of violence

In 2018, a Serbian court sentenced Darko Šarić to 15 years in prison for leading a criminal organisation that trafficked 5.7 tons of cocaine and laundered €22 million. As part of the investigation, it was revealed that Šarić had established a company in Prague to launder the money. The company was registered to a female formation agent named Milka Štěpánková. She explained her reasons for forming companies for organised criminal groups, as partly because she was in an abusive relationship with a gang member who she was afraid of and beat her, and partly because they were from her local community and she did not want to ask too many questions.

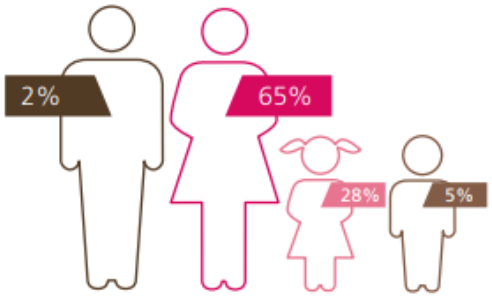
Sources: Holcova and Dojcinovic (2015); Telegraf (2018)

5. Are there forms of violence (associated with SOC) that particularly affect women or men disproportionately?

Most victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation are women and girls – a type of SOC associated with high levels of physical, sexual, emotional and financial violence. In Central and South-Eastern Europe, 70% of the total detected victims are trafficked for sexual exploitation (UNODC, 2018). One third of the victims are trafficked for forced labour or for 'other' purposes. 93% of detected victims who have been trafficked for sexual exploitation in the region are women (65%) or girls (28%) (see diagram) (UNODC, 2018). The data over detected victims in the region since 2014 show that there is a growing number of children among the detected victims of trafficking (the data does not reveal whether this may reflect an actual increase in trafficking of children; or if the methods for exposing child trafficking have improved) (UNODC, 2018).

FIG. 63 Share of detected victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation in Central and South-Eastern Europe, by age group and sex of the victims, 2016 (or most recent)

10 countries (n=930 victims)



Source: UNODC elaboration of national data.

Prevalence of trafficking of children for sexual exploitation and abuse is difficult to establish; there is a lack of data in Europe generally, including in the Western Balkans (ECPAT, 2014). However, there are indications that child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA) is increasing in some European countries (ibid.). ECPAT (2014) has expressed concern that ongoing socio-economic challenges in the Western Balkans such as high levels of poverty, unemployment and economic regression lead to a high risk of CSEA (ECPAT, 2014). This rapid research has not identified any prevalence of CSEA in the region, however evidence suggest that some children are at particular risk of CSEA. In Albania, Roma children are recognised as being at particular risk of sexual exploitation as many are living on the streets (ECPAT, 2014). Girls from Roma communities are seen to be at particular risk of forced marriage and domestic servitude, which in some cases lead to sex trafficking (U.S Department of State, 2018; IOM, 2014). Cases of young girls being trafficked for forced marriage have been documented in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo and North Macedonia, which is in some cases accompanied by domestic servitude and sex trafficking (U.S Department of State, 2018). IOM (2014) reported an increase in forced marriages of children leading to sexual exploitation in the Western Balkans, however, it was noted that this is an area in need of further research (IOM, 2014).

Although most victims of violence associated with commercial sexual exploitation and abuse of children are female, concerns have also been raised about the sexual exploitation of boys, particularly in Albania (ECPAT, 2016; ARC Foundation and Asylos, 2019). However, there is little data available on the gender disaggregation of violence associated with child sexual exploitation and abuse or other types of SOC, such as drug trafficking or financial crime.

Globally, online child sexual exploitation and abuse[5] (CSEA) is on the rise and affects both girls and boys (ECPAT, 2018b). There is little evidence of prevalence and forms of CSEA in the Western Balkans, and even less about women's involvement in this type of SOC. However, evidence

[5] "Online child sexual exploitation (OCSE) can include child sexual abuse/exploitation material (CSAM/CSEM),27 live streaming of child sexual abuse, online grooming of children for sexual purposes, sexual extortion of children and various CSAM/ CSEM-related conducts (production, distribution, downloading" (ECPAT International, 2018b)

from Bosnia and Herzegovina shed light on how the rise in internet and mobile phone users over the years have opened up for criminals to contact and abuse children sexually online (ECPAT, 2018a). A recent study (ECPAT, 2018) revealed that almost half of children have received messages from unknown persons on the Internet, and noted that cases of online CSEA are in the rise in Bosnia and Herzegovina (ECPAT, 2018a).

Women and girls in trafficking for sexual exploitation are subject to high levels and severe forms of violence. Reports from Albania reveal that women face violence perpetrated by traffickers and clients, as well as widespread stigmatisation and consequent rejections from their families and communities (Cela, 2016). Victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation in Albania testify to being locked up and forced to have sex with a high number of clients every day (Arsovska and Begum, 2013). Women who have been trafficked to the UK by Albanian human trafficking networks share similar stories of being raped (sometimes by multiple men), locked up and beaten (Whitehead, 2018).

Trafficking for forced labour affects men, women and children in the region – but men are overrepresented as victims of this form of SOC (UNODC, 2018). Men in the Western Balkans are often subject to forced labour in labour-intensive sectors, including agriculture and the construction sector (U.S Department of State, 2018). Men from the Western Balkans are also found in forced labour outside the region - for instance, Albanian men are increasingly being forced to work in cannabis production in the UK, often to pay off debts to the criminals who trafficked them into the country (Bird and Crisp, 2018; BBC, 2019).

Women make up 43% of the total victims of forced labour, which is a relatively high figure compared to other regions (UNODC, 2018). Common forms of forced labour in the region include forced begging, domestic servitude, and forced labour in agriculture and construction sectors (U.S Department of State, 2018). Children are forced to beg (commonly reported throughout the region), carry out petty crime (Serbia), selling small items (Albania) and working on cannabis plantations (Albania) (ibid.). In Kosovo, people from marginalised groups including Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian communities are vulnerable to forced begging (ibid.).

Statistics of gun violence in the Western Balkans reveal that men make up the vast majority of perpetrators as well as victims of gun violence (Brown, 2017). About 95% of the guns in the region are owned by men, and young men (aged 15 to 29) are most likely to be victims of gun violence which is closely associated with SOC (Browne, 2017). In 2018, 99% of perpetrators of firearms-related violence in South East Europe and 83% of victims were men (SEESAC, 2019). Over the last few years, statistics show that most firearms incidents in the region have been related to criminal activity (ibid.) The region has a high rate of individuals owning firearms, with Serbia and Montenegro having the highest rates of self-reported gun ownership (about 12%) (Carapic, 2014). Firearms are behind 44% of all homicides in the Western Balkans, which is significantly higher than Southern and Western Europe (ibid.). Gun ownership and related violence in the Western Balkans is closely connected to the male identity and social status (Browne, 2017.).

Men and boys represent the majority of people who experience violent deaths (homicides) associated with SOC. Globally, 81% of homicide victims are male and the male global homicide rate (UNODC, 2019). Data from different countries in the region (UNODC, 2013) reveals a mixed picture across the region, with the highest percentage of homicide victims being female in Serbia (35%) and Bosnia Herzegovina (31%) (see table below). However, data also shows that **Albania has the highest rate of women killed by intimate partners in Europe**, with 0.7 homicides per 100,000 women (UNODC, 2019).

Homicide Victims by Gender, by Country (UNODC, 2013)

	Homicide rate (per 100,000 inhabitants)	% of homicide victims male	% of homicide victims female
Albania	5.0	83%	17%
Bosnia Herzegovina	1.3	69%	31%
Kosovo	-	No data	No data
Montenegro	2.7	82%	18%
North Macedonia	1.4	87%	13%
Serbia	1.2	65%	35%

While homicide victims are predominantly male, it should be remembered that these statistics represent only a proportion of the many types of violence associated with firearms in the region. Given that women rarely own or use firearms for violence, they are disproportionally affected as victims (SEESAC, 2018). The widespread availability of firearms, combined with the cultural and social attributes connected to gun ownership, are believed to contribute to these statistics. Research suggest that the presence of firearms in the domestic sphere increases the risk of fatal outcomes in domestic violence (ibid.). A study found that about 29 women were reported to be killed in their homes in Serbia every year between 2010-2012, most of them were killed by firearms (Carapic, 2014). Statistics of death and physical injuries caused by firearms alone does not give a complete picture of how firearms affect women, as firearms are also used a means to perpetrate emotional violence and control, for instance by using it to threat, intimidate and coerce women, as well as being used to perpetrate other forms of violence against women such as sexual violence (SEESAC, 2018). These aspects of firearm violence are both under-researched and under-reported in the region (ibid.).

Trafficking of migrants through the wider Balkan region has increased sharply in recent years since 2014 – with criminal groups trafficking masses of men, women and children through multiple countries of their way to different end-destinations in Europe (Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, 2017). In 2015, an unprecedented number of people on the move illegally crossed the border into the Western Balkans, which was a 16-time increase since the previous year (ibid). Criminal groups in the region saw this as an opportunity to increase their profits and smuggling of migrants became one of the most lucrative types of SOC in the region. While this rapid research did not identify any evidence of women's involvement in trafficking of migrants, there is extensive evidence of how women, men and children are affected as victims of this form of human trafficking.

Beyond being subject to adverse risks to human safety during transportations, migrants are vulnerable to multiple forms of violence and abuse at the hands of traffickers. Many of the migrants who moved through the region in 2015 tried to make their way through North Macedonia, Serbia and into Hungary (ibid.). There have been numerous reports of violence against migrants in these border areas, especially in the infamous "smuggling towns" of Lojane, Moin and Vaksince, where traffickers frequently beat and rob migrants (ibid). Women and unaccompanied children traveling through the area are particularly vulnerable to trafficking, including for sexual exploitation (U.S Department of State, 2018). They also face high risks of other forms of violence and abuse, including sexual and gender-based violence (Save the Children and IRC, 2017). For instance, women and children, including boys, are coerced to pay smugglers with sex, and children are abused for child phonography (Rujevic, 2017).

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people are also highly vulnerable to violence associated with particular types of SOC (e.g. sexual trafficking, child sexual exploitation and abuse, bribery and corruption) in the region (Sida, 2014). However, violence against LGBT persons associated with SOC is **frequently overlooked and violence is under-reported**. For instance, UNDP's series of reports on 'Being LGBTI in Eastern Europe' highlight examples of LGBT people being asked for bribes by police officers, and LGBT people who sell sex being at high risk of sexual violence and exploitation (UNDP 2017a; UNDP 2017b). The Albania report highlights that transgender people who sell sex are at particular risk; they are subject to high levels sexual and physical violence perpetrated by clients who threaten them so that they will not report the violence to the police, which is moreover recognised for not providing protection to LGBT people (UNDP 2017b). LGBT migrants are also at high risk of trafficking, exploitation and abuse when traveling along the Western Balkan route (IOM, 2018).

6. Violence as a risk factor for women's involvement in SOC?

Women perpetrators of SOC are highly likely to be victims of gender-based violence, according to global evidence, although there is little data about how this varies by type of crime or type of involvement (Fraser, 2018). Research with women prisoners in Albania revealed that most interviewees had experienced systematic physical and/or psychological violence from their partners, and in several cases the women expressed fear about their children being victims of domestic violence. The women prisoners were mainly jailed for financial offences, such as fraud or forgery. In cases where women had been coerced into violence by a male family member or partner, the research showed that women were socialised to stay 'silent' in court and not mention their experiences of abuse (Papavangjeli, 2014). Similarly, research with women prisoners in North Macedonia found that almost all had experienced serious violence from their partners, with many saying they felt safer inside prison than outside (Penal Reform International, 2019).

Women traffickers often become perpetrators as a way of escaping their own experiences of abuse or violence, as noted previously in this report. Researchers and organisations who work with trafficked women have observed that victims are often told "the only way they can get free is to recruit another woman to 'replace' themselves" (Bindel, 2013) (see box below for example from Albania).

Pathway from victim to perpetrator of sex trafficking: example from Albania

One Albanian woman described how the only way she could escape her own trafficker after five years in a London brothel was to return to Albania and recruit fresh trafficking victims. "I had to go to my town and tell the girls there that I knew from school that there were great opportunities in the UK for them, you know, as waitresses and even as dancers," says Elira*. "They were poor and desperate like me, so they wanted to get away. I felt like I had stuck a knife in my own stomach, knowing what I was taking them to, but I could not stand one more day [in the brothel]." (Bindel, 2013) * Name changed

Furthermore, there is a growing body of evidence showing that exposure to violence in childhood is linked to future victimisation as an adult. For example, recent OSCE-led (2019) research on violence against women in the region[6] found that the strongest predictor of a woman experiencing violence in adulthood is whether she experienced childhood violence or abuse. Over half (53%) of women who experienced violence in childhood say they experienced violence in the 12 months prior to the survey, compared to only 23% of women who did not experience violence in childhood (OSCE, 2019). Most of this evidence focuses on violence in the home and schools (Corboz

[6] Survey with 15,179 women aged 18–74 in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Moldova, Ukraine and Kosovo. The research also involved focus groups and in-depth interviews.

et al, 2019; La Mattina and Shemyakina, 2017), but the potential for an intergenerational cycle of violence, with mutating forms, is increasingly convincing with broader implications for preventing and addressing SOC. Investigations with victims of Albanian trafficking gangs reveals that experiences of violence in childhood or adolescence often leads to women's victimisation by traffickers, as women (often with low self-worth) seek a source of money to escape abuse at home (Whitehead, 2018).

Role of VAWG in exacerbating vulnerabilities to trafficking: research from Albania

Qualitative research with adults who had been trafficked to the UK from Albania revealed that many had experienced violence in childhood, and this was a key element shaping their vulnerability to trafficking. Several respondents described growing up in an environment characterised by a 'toxic trio' of domestic violence, substance misuse and mental health issues. Vulnerable young women seeking to escape home and find a 'safe life' in the UK were often not expected (or able) to pay the large upfront costs of the journey. However, soon after arrival, the young women were told they needed to pay off these costs and this debt was used to exploit and abuse them (Hynes et al, 2019).

Experiences of abuse in childhood are part of a 'core set of experiences' that mark both women's and men's pathways to involvement in crime, including SOC. Global research has shown how childhood violence leads to a transition into adult violence, often involving abuse in childhood, a chaotic family life, substance abuse, and involvement in crime and violence (Kruttschnitt, 2016; Fraser 2018). Indeed, criminal gangs and traffickers often manipulate and exploit young people's vulnerabilities to lure them into criminal activities. Research in Serbia by UNICEF (2017) revealed that childhood experiences of exploitation, particularly sexual exploitation, put children at high risk of being victims of human trafficking. However, the processes through which child maltreatment and violence leads to subsequent criminal behaviour are not yet well understood.

7. To what extent, if at all, do higher levels of SOC in a community increase VAWG?

There is very limited rigorous evidence looking at the links between high levels of SOC in a community and VAWG. Most research looks at SOC separately from VAWG, and rarely at a community level.

However, there is a growing evidence base showing that social norms that condone violence in the community may also have a powerful influence on violent behaviour against women and girls, including in the home. Researchers have theorised that there is a 'culture of violence' effect, with people living in a violent community sharing a cognitive landscape embedded in violence and therefore being more prone to aggressive behaviour (Kiss et al, 2015). Research from Albania has shown how cultural norms around masculinity and violence both accept, or fail to discourage, illegal and violent and criminal behaviour; and normalise practices of violence against women (Kushi, 2015) (see box below). Several of these norms are based on the 500-year old *Kanun*,[7] a traditional code of conduct in the northern Gheg region of Albania which reinforces gender inequalities, including the submissiveness of women and masculinity of men (Arsovska, 2015).

[7] For example, according to the Kanun (article 33), a husband has the right to correct his wife, to beat and publicly humiliate her if she disobeys her, and kill her for two reasons (infidelity or betrayal of hospitality) (Arsovska, 2015).

Shared social norms that encourage criminality and violence against women

Violent behaviours related to both VAWG and SOC may be directly held in place by similar social norms.[8] For example, research in Albania has highlighted the following norms:

- **Masculine norms that emphasise strength and assertiveness**. Research with boys aged 15-18 in Albania found rigid stereotypes about what it means to be an 'Albanian man', including being strong, decisive, hard-working, assertive, tough, focused on material success and providing for their family. These norms had become well-established by mid-adolescence (Dizdar, 2016).
- **Shared beliefs about family privacy and honour can lead to reluctance to involve the authorities.** A recent Home Office (2018b) report on blood feuds[9] in Albania notes that "it is a cultural issue to keep private conflicts out of sight of the authorities" (p.23). The same is often true for violence against women; only 3% of women who had experienced intimate partner violence and 17% of non-partner violence reported it to the police in Albania (OECD, 2019).
- **Norms around male sexual entitlement and control over women** may be used to justify violence against women, both in the home and as part of organised criminal activity around sexual exploitation and trafficking.
- **'Jail is for men'** (*'Burgu është për burra')* is an Albanian expression which normalises men's imprisonment and tolerates criminality as a way for men to increase the status and wealth of their families (Kushi, 2015).
- **Firearm-related social norms,** whereby guns are a rite of passage for manhood and 'militarised masculinities' emphasise physical strength, control and aggression, norms also associated with VAWG (McEvoy and Hideg, 2017; Browne, 2017; SEESAC, 2016).

SOC in communities is also associated with increased circulation of small arms, which in turn increases the risk of death or serious injuries for VAWG. Almost three quarters of women murdered by their partners were killed by firearms in North Macedonia (73%) and Kosovo (75%) (Božanić, 2016). Global evidence has shown how firearms can be used to facilitate both VAWG and SOC activities, as well as deter those who might intervene to prevent or assist survivors of violence (Chinkin, 2013). High levels of SOC in a community also helps perpetuate firearm-related social norms (see box above). Research has also shown a link between perpetrators' experiences of armed conflict, access to firearms and the increased risk of violence against women, with a study in Serbia finding that 22% of perpetrators who participated in military conflicts using firearms in domestic violence incidents, compared to 8.8% of those who did not take part in military conflicts (Nikolić-Ristanović, 2010, cited in Božanić, 2016).

Higher levels of SOC in a community can increase the potential for VAWG by undermining the rule of law through the corruption of the police and judicial process and creating a situation of impunity. There remain considerable challenges to establishing the rule of law in the Western Balkans and it remains a top priority in the region (Elbasani and Šabić, 2018; Mendelski, 2018; Milošević and Muk, 2016). In addition, multiple forms of discrimination mean that the rule of law is particularly weak and for **minority groups at risk of SOC and VAWG**, such as Romani victims of domestic violence and human trafficking in Bosnia-Herzegovina, or LGBT persons across the region (Haider, 2018).

[8] A social norm is a collectively shared belief about what is considered typical and appropriate behaviour in a given setting and social group.

[9] Blood feuds are lengthy conflicts between families involving a cycle of retaliatory killings

8. What is the impact of a gender-neutral approach to SOC?

A gender-neutral approach to SOC carries several risks, as noted in the HMG Guidance Note (Stabilisation Unit, 2019) on Gender and SOC:

- **Failing to tackle the root causes of SOC**, including gendered norms and roles. Both globally and in the region, there is growing evidence of the role that masculinities play in driving young men to join criminal gangs as well as in perpetrating violence against women (Arsovska, 2015; Stabilisation Unit, 2019). Mainstreaming gender into SOC approaches would allow us to address the underlying structural causes of criminal activity better, for both men and women. It would also help us to understand the links between SOC and previous experiences of violence in childhood and adult relationships, and therefore the opportunities for a coordinated approach to preventing SOC and VAWG.

- **Exacerbating the risks to those most vulnerable to criminal exploitation and SOC by failing to understand and meet their needs.** The proliferation of small arms in the region has exacerbated the climate in which women and girls are more vulnerable to violence, sexual assault, and murder (Božanić, 2016; SEESAC, 2016). A gender-neutral approach also has the potential to ignore the risks of organised and targeted exploitation of young and vulnerable women and girls in trafficking networks, in online child sexual exploitation and abuse, and other forms of SOC.

- **Overlooking the vulnerabilities of boys and young males to SOC.** Research in Albania has warned that a gender-blind approach can exacerbate stereotypes of girls as victims, which ignores the role of boys (often under 14 years) who typically come from unstable or abusive family backgrounds. Boys are particularly vulnerable to being targeted by criminal gangs in Albania – many with links to the UK – both as victims of trafficking and as perpetrators as they are below the age of prosecution. Many organised criminal networks have links to the UK and there is a risk that vulnerable male victims are returned to Albania without consideration of their need for support, barriers to reintegration and the high risks of re-trafficking (ARC Foundation and Asylos, 2019).

- **Causing harm by perpetuating or strengthening existing gender inequalities within SOC policy and programmatic work**. For example, research studies in the region have shown that women play multiple roles in SOC, for example as recruiters of trafficking victims, in financial crime, and as partners-in-crime in drugs and arms trafficking; however, there is little publicly available recorded crime data disaggregated by sex. It is also important to recognise gendered differences in impact of SOC on wider society, including on service provision (DFID, 2019).

- **Missing key entry points within SOC programmes**, for example the opportunity to incorporate components to **strengthen legal structures and law enforcement to protect against VAWG and prosecute crimes of VAWG as part of broader Rule of Law programmes**. The diagram below shows the extent to which countries in the region have ratified legislation, particularly the Istanbul Convention[10] - please note, as of October 2019, Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Serbia, Montenegro have now ratified the convention. Kosovo has not yet ratified the Convention but aims to amend its Constitution to recognise the Convention's applicability (UN Women, 2019). It also shows where public services for survivors and perpetrators are more fully developed and where there are gaps. See also Annex 2 for infographics on legislation and services on VAWG in the region (UN Women, 2017). Similarly, **schools-based programming** provides a key entry point to prevent both SOC and VAWG at scale, by shaping young people's understanding of how to develop non-violent, healthy relationships and how to keep safe from child sexual exploitation and abuse (both online and offline), cybercrime, and other forms of SOC. Research on trafficking from Albania into the UK has also highlighted the importance of **whole-of-family approaches** to address issues like gender discrimination, domestic abuse, substance abuse, physical and sexual violence (Hynes et al, 2019).

Source: UNDP: http://www.eurasia.undp.org/content/dam/rbec/img/Gender%20Equality/undprbec-infographic-violence-against-women.jpg

[10] Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (2011).

9. What work are international donors doing in the Western Balkans to address these issues?

This programme review mapped the current landscape of programmes focused on SOC and VAWG in the Western Balkans, funded by selected donors including, among others, UKAid, USAID, the World Bank and the European Union (see Annex 3). The review identified a series of gaps in programming across the region:

- **Gaps in prevention programming:** Programmes are categorised based on whether their objectives are to prepare, prevent, pursue, or protect against SOC in the region. To date, most programmes have focused on pursuing or protecting against SOC. There are more than double the number of programmes focused on pursuing than on preventing it. It is also important to note that a significant proportion of those projects focused on protecting survivors of SOC are general GBV protection programmes without a specific focus on SOC.

- **Thematic gaps**: Programmes are also categorised based on the SOC focus themes, ranging from people trafficking, to the online exploitation of children, to terrorist financing. Of the programmes identified by this review, money laundering and financial crimes featured most frequently as a focus theme, with rule of law and people trafficking following close behind. Only one programme focused on the online exploitation of children, and only two focused on drug smuggling. Of those programmes focused on people trafficking, eight programmes focused on either/ both protection and pursuit, while only three focused on prevention. There was a roughly equal split between those programmes which tackled multiple themes and those which focused solely on one. This may reflect concerns regarding polycriminality across the region, with gangs engaging in a variety of types of SOC.

- **Geographical gaps:** While this programme review identified programmes in each country within the region, there were notably fewer programmes operating in Bosnia Herzegovina, and Montenegro, where only two donors were funding programmes in each. This can be contrasted with Albania, where six programmes have been identified across six donors. Albania has the highest number of programmes and donor engagement at country level.

- **Gaps in long-term programming:** While it was not possible to ascertain the length of every programme identified, the majority of programmes were funded for one year or less. This suggests a significant lack of long-term programming. Given the nature of SOC, especially that which is linked to trafficking, sustainable prevention and protection programmes are likely to require longer-term support.

- **Gaps in knowledge generation**: This programme review did not identify any programmes focused on generating evidence around the type of interventions that worked for preparing, preventing, pursuing and protecting against SOC. Given the typically short timeframes of programmes, it may to date have been difficult to identify what has worked in terms of programming.

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About Helpdesk reports: The VAWG Helpdesk is funded by the UK Department for International Development, contracted through the Inclusive Societies Department. This helpdesk report is based on 9 days of desk-based research and is designed to provide a brief overview of the key issues and expert thinking on VAWG issues.

VAWG Helpdesk services are provided by a consortium of leading organisations and individual experts on VAWG, including Social Development Direct, International Rescue Committee, ActionAid, Womankind, and the Institute of Development Studies (IDS). Expert advice may be sought from this Group, as well as from the wider academic and practitioner community, and those able to provide input within the short time-frame are acknowledged. Any views or opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect those of DFID, the VAWG Helpdesk or any of the contributing organisations/experts.

For any further request or enquiry, contact enquiries@VAWGHelpdesk.org.uk

Suggested citation:

Fraser, E., Ahlenback, V. and Clugston, N. (2019) *Linkages between Gender, VAWG and SOC in Western Balkans*, VAWG Helpdesk Research Report No. 263. London, UK: VAWG Helpdesk.

Annex 1: Methodology

Search strategy: Studies were identified through searches using Google and relevant electronic databases (PubMed, Science Direct, and Google Scholar) for priority sources. Key search terms included: “serious organised crime”, criminal gangs, criminal networks, criminal organisations, trafficking, sexual exploitation, (online) child sexual exploitation and abuse, modern slavery, forced labour, drugs, smuggling, firearms, “small arms”, gun violence, gang violence, fraud, corruption, extortion, counterfeiting, “financial crime”, cybercrime, “terrorist financing”, migration, illegal wildlife trade AND women, recruitment, violence against women, GBV, SGBV, rape, domestic violence, gender norms, masculinities AND Albania, Bosnia Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Balkans, Western Balkans, South East Europe

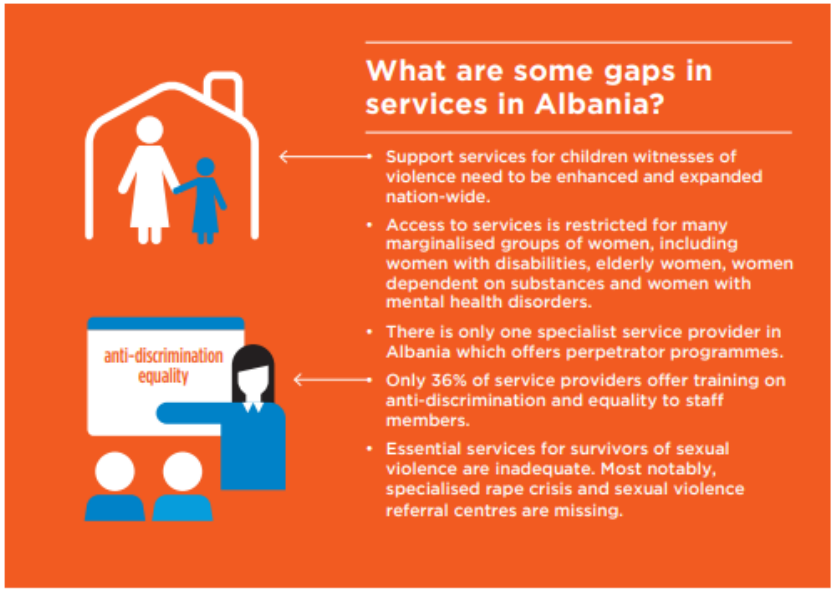
Criteria for inclusion: To be eligible for inclusion in this rapid review of the literature, studies had to fulfil the following criteria:

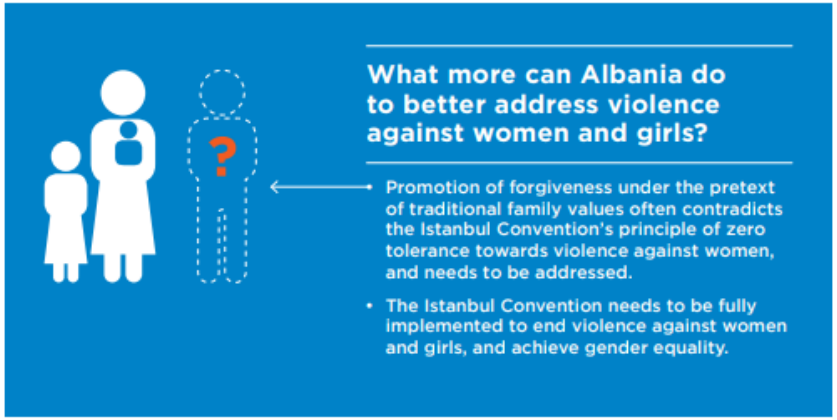
- **Focus**: Research and studies looking at the links between gender, VAWG and serious organised crime (SOC)
- **Time period**: 2000 - November 2019.
- **Language**: English.
- **Publication status**: publicly available – in almost all cases published online.
- **Geographical focus**: Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia)

Annex 2: Legislation and Gaps in Response to VAWG

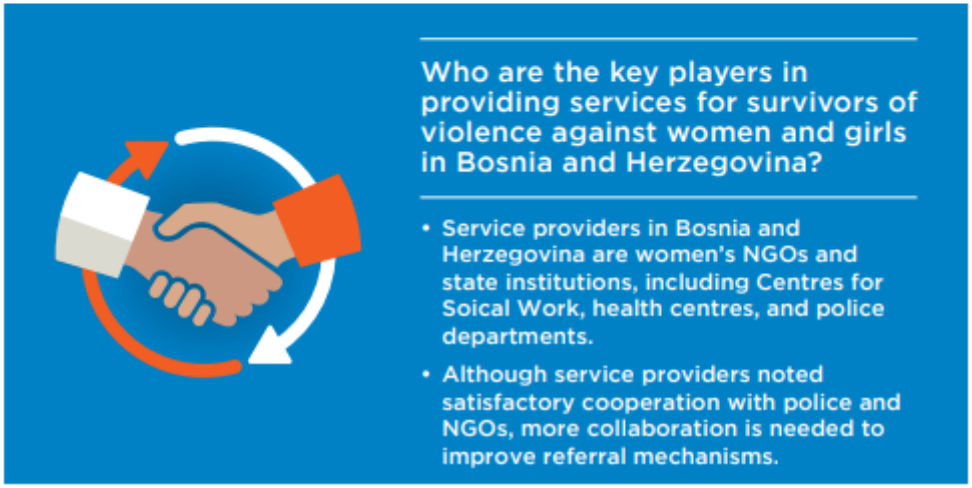
UN Women (2017), in partnership with the Council of Europe, conducted a multi-country study in 2015 to map legislation and support services for women and girls subjected to violence in the Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Turkey). The diagrams below are included for information, but it should be noted that there have been recent changes, for example North Macedonia ratified the Istanbul Convention in 2018

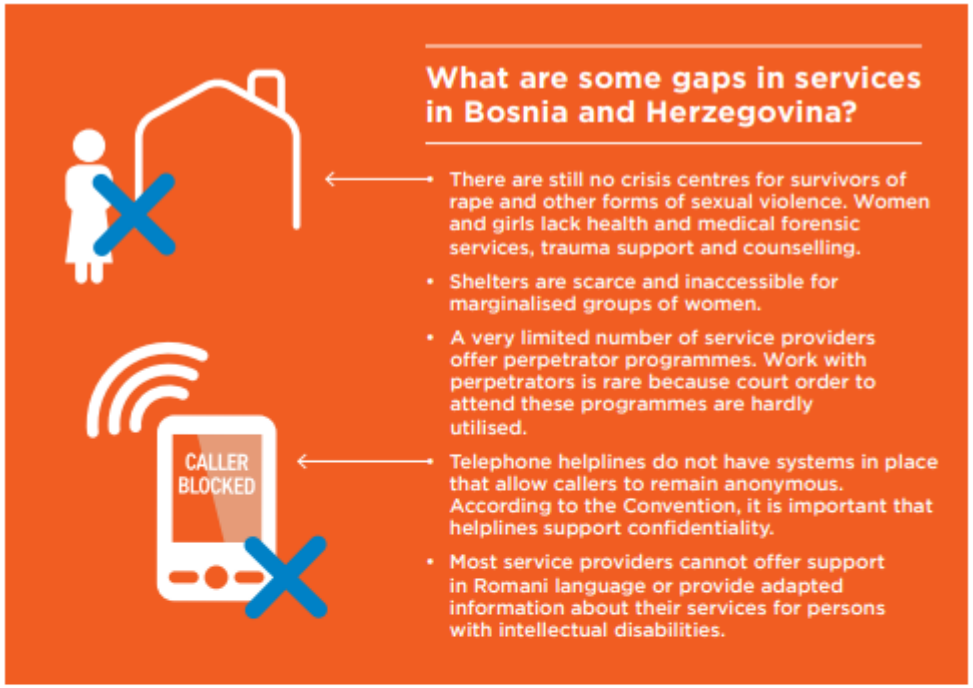
Albania: Country Profile



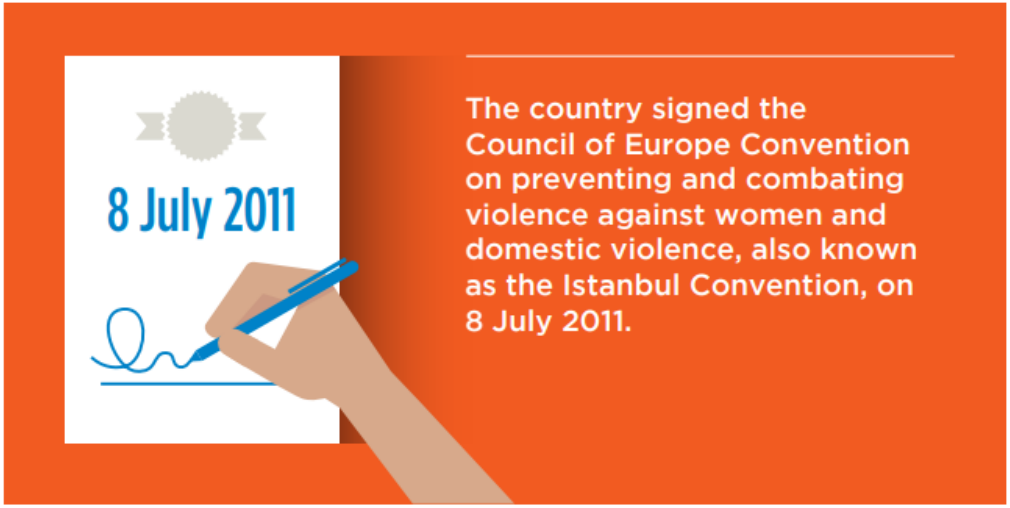


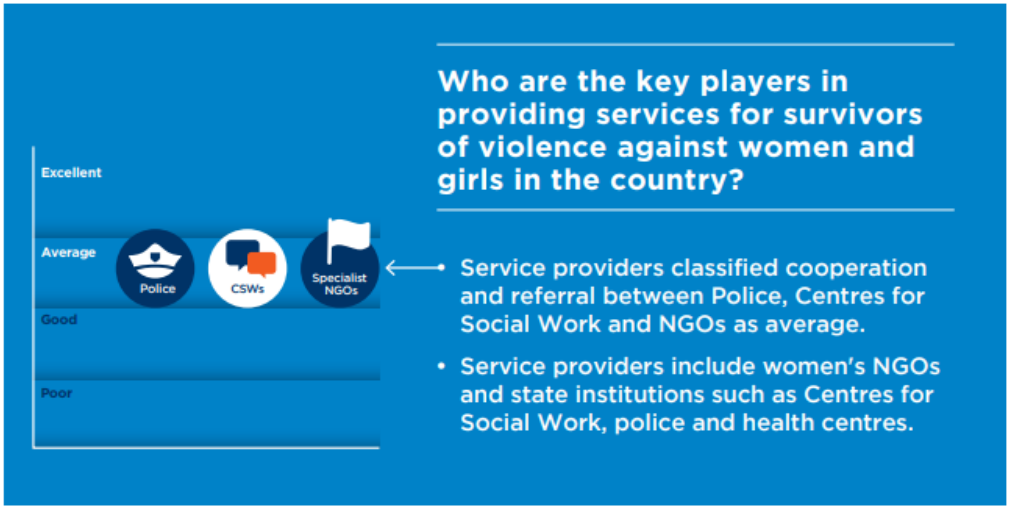
Bosnia Herzegovina: Country Profile





North Macedonia: Country Profile





Montenegro: Country Profile

- Montenegro signed on 11 May 2011, and ratified on 23 April 2013, the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, also known as the Istanbul Convention.

Who are the key players in providing services for survivors of violence against women and girls in Montenegro?

- Service providers are women's NGOs and state institutions, including Centres for Social Work and multidisciplinary teams to combat violence against women and girls.
- Service providers cooperate best with police and other NGOs serving women and girl survivors of violence.

What are some gaps in services in Montenegro?

- Services are available to all ethnic minority groups in principle, although not all services are available in minority languages. Services are not accessible in all geographical areas.
- All shelters are in the northern and central regions of the country, leaving women and girls in the entire southern region without access to shelters.
- Only 44% of service providers offer staff training on anti-discrimination and equality.

- In 2015, Montenegro established its first free, national telephone helpline that is available 24/7, however the helpline is not fully integrated with other services and does not fully meet the standards of the Istanbul Convention.
- There are no programmes for perpetrators of violence against women. Also, counsellors work with perpetrators and survivors together, encouraging both to take responsibility for violence and directly contradicting the Istanbul Convention's principle of zero tolerance towards violence.

What more can Montenegro do to better address violence against women and girls?

- Funding for services is often project-based and insecure. Legislation to address this issue needs to be fully implemented.
- Several municipalities developed plans for advancing gender equality and preventing violence, but actions toward full implementation have yet to be achieved.
- The Istanbul Convention needs to be fully implemented to end violence against women and girls, and achieve gender equality.

Serbia: Country Profile