

# SERIOUS AND ORGANISED CRIME AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN & GIRLS

VIOLENCE  
AGAINST  
WOMEN  
AND GIRLS  
HELPDESK

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## Introduction

Serious and Organised Crime (SOC) is a global problem with serious economic, political, social and security consequences in societies – including violence and abuse against individuals, with particular linkages to violence against women and girls (VAWG). This factsheet summarises findings from previous VAWG Helpdesk Reports on the links between SOC and VAWG in South America and the Caribbean<sup>1</sup> and Western Balkans<sup>2</sup>. After providing an overview of the evidence base and the linkages between SOC and VAWG, the factsheet presents evidence in three areas: **women's roles in SOC**, **women as victims of SOC**, and how **interventions** address SOC and VAWG. It is important to note that **women's roles and victimisation in SOC often overlap**, for instance, when women who have been victims of SOC are recruited into what is often low-ranking roles in SOC networks. This factsheet will focus on linkages between VAWG perpetrated as part of SOC activities, as well as in relation to women who occupy various roles in SOC.

## Definition of 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."<sup>3, 4</sup>

## State of the evidence

There is limited evidence related to gender and SOC, and linkages between SOC and VAWG have been particularly under-researched.<sup>2, 4</sup> This is both due to challenges with conducting empirical research in this field, but also a persistent gender bias in SOC research focusing on the experiences of men.<sup>4</sup>

### Evidence gaps include:

- Women's pathways to becoming involved in SOC and women's various roles in SOC.<sup>3, 4</sup>
- Potential linkages between high levels of SOC and VAWG in a community.<sup>1</sup>
- Systematic evidence of what works to address SOC and VAWG in strategic and coordinated ways.<sup>1</sup>

Despite growing attention to the importance of looking at SOC through a gender lens, **most research on SOC to date is 'gender blind'**.<sup>3</sup>

## Linkages between SOC & VAWG

**SOC and VAWG are linked in multiple and complex ways.** Understanding these linkages requires understanding the gendered nature of SOC, including gendered drivers and impacts. Evidence suggest that:

- Women's and men's motives for engaging in SOC may be different. For instance, some research has found that women are engaged in SOC as a way to access money to escape abusive relationships.<sup>1</sup>
- Many women within SOC networks and gangs face violence, including sexual violence and violence by intimate partners who are also part of the SOC networks. At the same time, joining a criminal group can be a way of seeking protection from VAWG in the family and community.<sup>5</sup>
- Research has found that violence in childhood and in intimate relationships is a risk factor for women's involvement in SOC.<sup>1, 2</sup>
- Various forms of SOC involve serious forms of violence and abuse against women and girls, including trafficking for forced sexual exploitation, online sexual abuse, violence associated with illicit firearms, forced labour and modern slavery. Women also play various roles in SOC activities related to VAWG.

## Why it matters

Despite what is known about the linkages between SOC and VAWG, interventions to prevent and tackle SOC often fail to address gendered drivers and impacts of SOC.<sup>4</sup> Although many of these linkages remain under-researched, the available evidence warrants the need for a gendered approach to understand and prevent SOC and VAWG. Furthermore, **a lack of a gendered approach to SOC carries multiple risks:**

- Causing harm by perpetuating or compounding existing gender inequalities.
- Missing out on entry points and opportunities to tackle gendered root causes of SOC.
- Failing to understand and reach women at risk of violence within SOC networks, and women and girls who are victims of SOC related violence.



## Women's roles in SOC

### Women's various roles in SOC

SOC is dominated by men; however, **women also occupy roles in all forms of SOC.**<sup>3</sup> Global prevalence data and systematic evidence of women's involvement in SOC remains scarce. The evidence available is mainly related to women's roles in human trafficking, drug trafficking, extortion and money laundering, while there is a lack of gendered data in the areas of e.g. cyber-crime and illegal wildlife trade.<sup>3</sup> Research suggests that women in SOC commonly carry out supporting roles including **recruitment** (e.g. of other women), **transport** (e.g. in trafficking), and sometimes **logistics** and **financial support**.

- Globally, women represent 38% of convicted human trafficking offenders. Women (some of whom are themselves victims of trafficking) are often used to recruit other women or younger girls into sexual exploitation.<sup>6</sup> There is also evidence of women's roles in migrant smuggling, acting in various roles ranging from leaders to supporting roles, including accompanying and providing care for children and elderly migrants.<sup>7</sup>
- Women play various roles in the drug-supply chain, from the cultivation to trafficking of drugs as "mules". Drug-related crime data from 96 countries suggest that about **10% of people arrested for drug-related offences were women**. Studies have found that some women involved in trafficking in drugs are victims of trafficking in persons, including for purposes of sexual exploitation.<sup>8</sup>

**Women's involvement in SOC is complex and multifaceted.** While there are also women that are in SOC by choice and who occupy prominent roles, the evidence that links women's victimisation in SOC and women's subsequent involvement, suggest that this is often shaped by socioeconomic conditions, relationships with male criminals, and experiences of violence and abuse.

### Case Study: Women's roles in SOC in the Western Balkans

Evidence from the Western Balkans suggest that women possess a variety of roles in SOC networks.<sup>2</sup> Women working within human trafficking commonly act as recruiters.<sup>6, 9</sup> In some cases, girls who have been trafficked are used to recruit more girls by showing pictures of the "beautiful" life available in trafficking destinations.<sup>10</sup> In Bosnia and Herzegovina, 57% of recruiters to sex trafficking were identified as women in a Europol report.<sup>11</sup> Similar trends can be found in Serbia, Montenegro and North Macedonia.<sup>11</sup> In Albania, women are engaged in both recruitment and also in identifying clients.<sup>12</sup>



### Violence as a risk factor for women's involvement in SOC

Experiences of childhood violence and abuse are part of a 'core set of experiences' observed among both women and men who are involved in crime, including SOC. The pathways between violence in childhood and adult criminal behaviour remains underexplored, but evidence suggest they a chaotic family life, substance abuse, and involvement in crime and violence are influential factors.<sup>1, 2</sup> Research with female prisoners in Colombia and Barbados found high levels of violence experienced in childhood and/ or in adult relationships.<sup>1</sup> In Colombia, 68% of women in the study had experience violence in their lifetime, including violence from an intimate partner (41%).<sup>13</sup> In Barbados, attempting to escape an abusive relationship was seen to be a key-driver for women's involvement in drug smuggling.<sup>14</sup> Involvement in SOC as a route to escape abusive relationships is one aspect that distinguishes women's motives for engaging in SOC from men's, which is instead often linked to money and power. Some research suggests that in environments characterised by high levels of VAWG, joining a criminal group can also be seen as a form of protection.<sup>15</sup>

### Case Study: Women in gangs in Cape Town

A qualitative study<sup>5</sup> with female gang members in Cape Town, South Africa, explored the life stories of women engaged in different criminal gangs, which are predominantly involved in drug operations and illicit firearm activities. Most women in the study reported a history of violence and abuse before joining the gang, many with experiences of sexual abuse within the family. Joining a gang offered a sense of belonging that their families could not provide. Women also said that they joined the gangs for protection, as they often lived in dangerous areas in which women were vulnerable to domestic and sexual violence. Joining a gang was in some cases seen as "safer" for the women than the alternative. However, women reported experiencing high levels of violence within the gangs, especially sexual violence. Women commonly entered the gangs through relationships with male gang members, which were often abusive, but could provide protection from violence by other members.

# Women's victimisation in SOC

## Overview

Women and girls are disproportionately affected by online sexual abuse and trafficking for forced sexual exploitation, making up the vast majority of victims. Poorer women are also targeted by drug cartels to act as “drug mules”, which puts them at high risk of violence with little protection. Large-scale organised crime is also associated with increased circulation of illegal firearms, which in turn increases the risk of death or serious injuries for women from intimate partner violence.<sup>1</sup> While there is limited evidence regarding the impact of SOC against women and girls with disabilities and Lesbian, Bisexual Transgender+ (LBT) women, research suggests they are likely to face higher risks of violence. For example, 68% of girls with intellectual or developmental disabilities globally will be sexually abused before their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday.<sup>16</sup> In Latin America and the Caribbean, LBT women are particularly vulnerable to sexual trafficking and face high barriers to help-seeking, due to anti-Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender + laws and sentiment in the region.<sup>17</sup>

## Online sexual abuse

Online sexual abuse of children is growing through the use of Darknet networks, which enable anonymised access to peer-peer content sharing, and the use of live-streaming technology.<sup>18</sup> In the Philippines, which is recognised as the ‘global epicentre’ of the livestream sexual abuse trade, officials have expressed concerns that COVID-19 containment measures are increasing the risks of online sexual abuse.<sup>19</sup> Even before the pandemic, there was a 1000% increase in cases of naked, sexualised and abused children between 2017 and 2018.<sup>20</sup> Most victims are 12 years old or younger and in 90% of cases they are girls.<sup>21</sup> In 70% of cases, abuse is carried out by people known to the victim, with 50% being parents to the children.<sup>21</sup> Reportedly some parents do not consider livestreaming abuse or realise it is illegal because the offender is not able to touch the child.<sup>22</sup>

## Trafficking of women and children for forced sexual exploitation

Trafficking for sexual exploitation disproportionately affects women who make up 72% of victims.<sup>23</sup> The internet has facilitated a rise in sex trafficking, with nearly 845 trafficking victims in 2017 in the USA recruited through internet platforms and nearly 8% of active online federal sex trafficking cases involving online advertisements for sex.<sup>24</sup> COVID-19 is likely to increase the risk of trafficking for forced sexual exploitation as anti-slavery operations are put on hold, victims are less able to escape and seek help and the number of people vulnerable to exploitation increase.<sup>25, 26</sup>

## Drug trafficking

Sex trafficking and drug trafficking are often linked, with women trafficked for sexual exploitation used to traffic drugs.<sup>27</sup> Many women in Latin America who are involved in drug trafficking come from a background of physical or sexual abuse, violence and low levels of education.<sup>27</sup> Poorer women are often recruited to deliver drugs with no protection and left to fend for themselves if caught.<sup>28</sup> Reportedly, women working as “drug mules” are often purposefully set up by drug cartels to get caught in order to distract from more serious drug trafficking elsewhere.<sup>29</sup> Women face long sentences if they are caught and the threat of sexual abuse behind bars.<sup>28</sup> Once caught, their families are also vulnerable to extortion and abuse by the drug cartels these women previously worked for.<sup>28</sup> Children often suffer sexual exploitation as a means of enforcing compliance with drug cartels.<sup>30</sup>

## Violence associated with illegal firearms

Large-scale organised crime is linked to increased circulation of small arms, and the circulation of small arms is positively correlated with violence against women. In the USA, abusers are five times more likely to kill an intimate partner if they have access to a firearm.<sup>31</sup> Between 2004 and 2013, 239 sex workers were murdered in Colombia.<sup>32</sup> In 40% of cases, the murder was committed using a firearm.<sup>32</sup> The presence of a firearm also exacerbates the power dynamic that enables abusers to coerce and intimidate women.<sup>31</sup> Firearms have also been used during rape, trafficking, forced prostitution, sexual violence and assault and deter people from intervening to try and assist the victim.<sup>33</sup>

## Case study: SOC related violence against women human right defenders WHRD

In 2012 the journalist Khadija Ismayilova became a target of blackmailing in Azerbaijan after she reported on claimed ties between President Aliyev's family and a lucrative construction project in the country.<sup>34</sup> Secret cameras were put in her bedroom and used to document intimate photographs and videos. The blackmailer threatened to spread the photos if she continued to report on the claimed ties. After she refused to do so, Ismayilova was subjected to a smear campaign by newspapers which spread the photos and videos claiming they demonstrated her “immoral” character. Ismayilova was also threatened with a knife by a male family member after he discovered the content.<sup>35</sup> The authorities failed to respond appropriately to her case and instead, Ismayilova was arrested in 2014 and charged for several criminal offences, including corruption.<sup>34</sup> In January 2019 the European Court of Human Rights found the Government of Azerbaijan had violated her right to privacy and failed to protect her by refusing to investigate her case.<sup>36</sup>

## Interventions

### Entry-points to addressing SOC & VAWG

There is limited systematic evidence of what works to address the intersections of SOC and VAWG. There are examples of gender sensitive SOC programmes and approaches, which provide opportunities to address VAWG (see below). **Entry-points** to address SOC and VAWG in different sectoral programming include:

- **Rule of Law** programmes to strengthen legal structures and law enforcement to protect against and prosecute VAWG crimes.<sup>2</sup>
- **School-based** programmes to prevent SOC and VAWG by supporting children to develop non-violent attitudes and behaviours, and raise awareness on e.g. child sexual exploitation and abuse, including online crimes against children.<sup>2</sup>
- **Anti-slavery and anti-human trafficking** programmes often include a component of awareness raising targeting those at risk of modern slavery and human trafficking, including women and youth.<sup>3</sup>
- Research on trafficking (from Albania and the UK) has highlighted the importance of **whole-of-family approaches** to address issues such as domestic violence, discrimination and substance abuse.<sup>2</sup>

### Mainstreaming gender in SOC programmes

The HMG Guidance Note on Gender & SOC<sup>4</sup> outlines how **gender can be integrated throughout the SOC programme cycle**, which highlights several opportunities to address direct and indirect linkages to VAWG. For instance, tackling gendered root causes of SOC, including addressing VAWG within groups at risk of being engaged in SOC. It also recommends offering health and VAWG response services to women engaged in and victimised by SOC, which can serve as an entry point to support their exit and rehabilitation.



UNODC resources on mainstreaming gender in different programme areas

#### Case study: The Stamp out Slavery Programme

DFID's [Stamp out Slavery in Nigeria \(SOSIN\) Programme](#) (2018-2023) aims to strengthen government and civil society response to human trafficking and modern slavery in Edo state. The programme includes a Challenge Fund for civil society organisations (CSOs) to support innovative and gender sensitive approaches to address social norms that are accepting of human trafficking and slavery. The fund requires implementing partners to have gender expertise and collect gender disaggregated data to understand and address gender specific drivers and vulnerabilities of women who consider migration that may put them at risk of trafficking, and have specific strategies to reach women and girls at most risk of trafficking for sexual purposes.<sup>4</sup>

In 2019, the programme launched a campaign, the 'Not for Sale' campaign that ran for six weeks on multiple channels (e.g. TV, radio, social media) and through events, targeting young women vulnerable to trafficking, to encourage them to explore opportunities to stay in Nigeria. An evaluation found a **25% increase in young women that considered different ways to stay in Nigeria**, instead of migrating overseas to work illegally. A learning from the initiative is that communications strategies should also target those with influence over young women's decisions to migrate or not, including parents and teachers.<sup>37</sup>

#### Case study: Framework to support women to exit gangs

Women who want to leave a gang risk facing great danger. Based on a study<sup>5</sup> of women's involvement in gangs in South Africa, researchers propose that interventions work at three levels:

- **Immediate actions** that provide women opportunities to exit. For instance, running women-only activities in the gang areas that link women to outside actors.
- **Medium-term interventions** to prevent recruitment into gangs, e.g. through promoting positive female role models.
- **Longer-term programmes** that address structural conditions that push girls and young women into joining gangs, e.g. focusing on job providing opportunities for women.

### Links to further resources

- The UK Government's Stabilisation Unit (2019) Gender and Serious and Organised Crime, HMG Guidance Note
- UNODC (2020) [Mainstreaming Gender in Organised Crime & Illicit Trafficking Projects](#), Gender Brief for UNODC Staff
- UNODC (2020) [Mainstreaming Gender in Corruption Project/ Programmes](#), Gender Brief for UNODC Staff

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