

A globe is the central focus, showing the continents of Africa and Europe. In the foreground on the left, a large, light-colored wooden chess piece, possibly a king or queen, is partially visible. The background is dark and out of focus.

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CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL STRATEGIC ANALYSES

## **Women in Organized Crime**

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**Research Paper No. 24**

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## **Why has the role of women in organized criminal groups changed considerably in the last two decades?**

Women are the center of the family and most of the times they have the ability to affect the males near them. Although the civil society in some countries is still male dominated, it is obvious, that the position of woman in the modern world has changed dramatically in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Not only the equal rights between males and females have been established in a great majority of countries, but also a radical change has appeared to the role of women from housewives to activists. Women are equally educated to men, they are employed and they have achieved a noteworthy change of their position in the society. However, recently, there has been renewed interest in the sharp rise of the involvement of women in organized crime. For some specialists, organized crime and the underworld were activities connected to males, while women had a non-existent or rudimentary role in organized criminal groups. Before the 1990s in many countries (e.g. Italy), the judges did not even incriminate women for their involvement in Mafia because it was a general truth that females were not accepted in criminal groups because they were not capable of acting violently (Arsovska and Allum 2014). Furthermore, even in our days, there are scholars and experts who believe that the involvement of women in criminal groups is insignificant and that women are not active members of these groups, but sometimes they could play a supportive role. However, previous research has established that a great number of women are being connected to organized crime not only as “beholders” or supporting members but also as leaders. Female Mafiosi/criminals, manage businesses, take care of the family, launder money, keep secrets or even more kill the enemies and lead.

The purpose of this paper is to review recent research into the role of women in organized crime and how this role has changed especially since the late 1990s. At first, we are going to give a definition for organized crime and present the involvement of women in crime generally. Secondly, we are going to discuss the role of women in specific types of organized crime: the Italian Mafia, drug trafficking (especially in the United States and Mexico) and human trafficking; similarities, differences and how this role changed in our days. In the end, we are going to come to the conclusion that despite the differences between the main roles that women have in several organized criminal groups, what is common in most cases is the desire to change the position of woman in modern society and gain a high leveled socioeconomic status.

In order to begin, we should analyze further the term 'organized crime'. The term is difficult to be defined and sometimes the definitions have some differences between each other. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) define organized criminal groups as: "a group of three or more persons that was not randomly formed; existing for a period of time; acting in concert with the aim of committing at least one crime punishable by at least four years' incarceration; in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit." Although all organized criminal groups act in order to gain money, most of them differ in their structure, culture, history, membership, management and ideology. An example that is going to be further analyzed is the Italian Mafia and its different types. More specifically, the Sicilian Mafia is different than the Neapolitan Mafia. Sicilian Mafia is not based on kinship where families have blood ties and it is 'male dominated' and the structure is stricter (Arnot and Osborne 2002). By contrast, Neapolitan Mafia is based on blood-ties and 'famiglias' and the structure is more flexible (Allum 2007).

Now, these different kinds of structure, means and ideology between organized criminal groupings lead also to a different role of women in them. There are types of organized crime such as drug trafficking, where women have a protagonist role nowadays and there are other types such as Sicilian Mafia, where women have a secondary or non-existent role. But, it is wiser to start our analysis with the role and the involvement of women in crime generally in order to understand further the idiosyncrasy of female criminals.

During the centuries, organized criminal groups were based on male participation. The Italian Mafia was based on 'men of honor' while women were staying silent and they were not allowed to talk or get involved with the Mafia's activities (Arnot and Osborne 2002:25, Pizzini-Gambetta 2007). As Arnot and Osborne (2002) mention, it was believed that women were too emotional for being members of the Mafia and they were also unable to keep secrets. This is why it is said that for a long period of time women were involved with 'powerless' types of crime such as prostitution (Arsovska and Allum 2014). The question that emerges at this point is if women are less violent than men and if they are unable to get involved with as many criminal activities as men. Firstly, there are studies that show that women were involved in organized crime since the 1900s (drug trafficking) (Carey 2014). In 1920s women may be responsible for the 60% of drug trafficking between the United States and Mexico in a drug world that it is thought it was handled by males (Carey 2014:14). Later, during the 1970s these women started using their chance for equality, they wanted to have financial benefits and most importantly do not be based upon their men (Carey 2014). In Italy, although it was a democratic

European country, things were different and women were depending upon men of the family (father, husband, brother) while the patriarchal society was strong and the role of women was the upbringing of the children (Paoli 2003). As long as it concerns the psychological synthesis of women who were committing crimes, it should be mentioned that there are scholars and experts who strongly insist that these women were committing a crime as long as the feminism was increased, employability and resources were being available for women and as females were demanding equal rights to men (Simon 1975:107). While others, underline the fact that women who were involved in crimes did it because of the wrong role models and “sex-role stereotypes” of the society, which undermine the role of women and lead to sex discrimination (Kriegler 2012). It is of great importance to underline the opinion of Allum (2007:23) that there are cases in which women that have been used as victims from the men of criminal organizations (e.g. rape and domestic violence), are more likely to get involved with criminal activities such as Mafia (Pizzini- Gambetta 2007). Their desire to take revenge for these activities sometimes lead women to violence that is expressed in a more cruel way than men. Or in other cases, the childhood and later in the life as an adult in an environment connected to crime can lead to violence and participation in organized crime. For example, most of the women that were from Mafia families they were commanded to get married to a Mafiosi of another family (Pizzini- Gambetta 2007:82).

As it has already been mentioned, Italy was believed being a country that the underworld remained male dominated until recently, when women started playing a role in Mafia in some areas of the country. The first appearance of the Italian Mafia was in the 18<sup>th</sup> century with Camorra activating in Naples and in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the Sicilian Mafia (Coluccello 2016). The Italian Mafia is the biggest business in Italy and one of the biggest in Europe (almost 70\$ billion per year from drug trafficking) and it is a mix of tradition and modern organized crime (Coluccello 2016). The Italian Mafia is a “secret society with specific bonds of loyalty and a well- defined hierarchy of control, and act in pursuit of gain, reputation and security,” it is “an ‘organization for illicit trafficking’ which makes it an ‘enterprise’ that operates between the legal and illegal markets” with “an organization for control of the territory’ of the local societies in which they are embedded” (Sciarrone and Storti 2014:42). The role of women in Italian Mafia differs from one group to another and it depends on the area and the ideology of each criminal organization. It is claimed that the women of Mafia usually had a passive role in the organizations and they were trying to raise their sons in order to make them proper Mafiosi in the future, while they were providing only psychological support to the men of the ‘family’

(Cayli 2016). Of course, the opinion that the women of Mafia were not aware of the illicit activities of their husbands is not correct. Women in Mafia families were totally aware of the activities of the family and furthermore most of the times they were trying to support or get involved with these activities in many ways (for more see Fiandaca 2007).

The Camorra is the Neapolitan Mafia where women have been major players (Allum 2007). The organization has a flexible structure and there is a lack of hierarchy while there are blood ties in the families (Allum 2007:9). The changes in the society and the procurement of more rights, led women in Camorra to get seriously involved with this criminal group and take an active role. As Allumi (2007:10) mentions, the Camorra war in the 1970s and 1980s had as a result the imprisonment of many male members of the group while others were killed and this forced women to defend their husbands and take their place in the organization if they should. So, what should be mentioned is that women in Camorra changed their engagement with the criminal group during the decades and from a minor role they achieved an active and sometimes leading role, especially in the cases that the men of the family died or were imprisoned.

The Calabrian Mafia and 'Ndrangheta has accepted the involvement of women in the organization but this role is more complicated. 'Ndrangheta is based in Calabria and represents a combination of modernity and tradition in Italian Mafia (Coluccello 2016, Siebert 2007). Perhaps, 'Ndrangheta is the strongest criminal group in Italy while it has broadened its connections in Europe and the whole world with drug trafficking (Coluccello 2016). Members of 'Ndrangheta are also connected with blood ties and this makes it more difficult for the organization to decline, because family members will not easily betray each other (Siebert 2007:26). Women of 'Ndrangheta play a significant role when they want to force the family members not to become state's witnesses, especially during the 1990s when this type of 'betrayal' was common. Furthermore, one of the women's duties is the raise of their children within the tradition of 'vendetta' and violence (Siebert 2007). At this point we should underline the fact that although women in 'Ndrangheta have an active role in the organization, they are still under the control of the men of the family and they are not fully members of the organization, not like in the Neapolitan type of Mafia (Siebert 2007). This has as a result a "pseudo- emancipation" that shows that women are still based on their husbands and the men of the families and they do not have the same responsibilities and rights with them, even though they have a more active role in the society and by extension in the underworld (Siebert 2007).

The Sicilian Mafia is different than the others and is being characterized by traditional elements that want the women out of the organization. Cosa Nostra is one of the biggest organized criminal groups in Italy and it is based in Sicily. In the Sicilian Mafia men are being characterized as 'men of honor' and they are not connected with blood ties while women have been excluded from the criminal activities (Arnot and Osborne 2002). The men of Sicilian Mafia believe that women are the reputation of Mafiosi; this is why they prefer to keep their wives out of the organization and respect them. This could be the reason why Cosa Nostra's rules include that prostitution activities are forbidden and also cheating their wives is unacceptable (however it is not proven that these rules are followed) (Arnot and Osborne 2002:25). Women in Cosa Nostra represent the honor of the men and they are precious members of the society, too emotional and nonviolent that are unable to take part in the criminal activities. In addition, it is remarkable that only a few women have been killed during fights between the Sicilian Mafia, while only if sometimes men believed that their women are unfaithful, they have killed them (Arnot and Osborne 2002). Of course, as the society is being changed, the role of women in organized crime has also changed but as it has been proven that the underworld of Sicily is still 'a men's world' (Varese 2011, Pizzini- Gambetta 2006).

The world of drug trafficking in U.S.A., Mexico and countries in Europe is different than the world of Italian Mafia. Women have participated in drug trafficking since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and now they lead businesses and illicit organizations. Drug trafficking is one of the most profitable illicit businesses in the world; cannabis, cocaine, heroin etc. are being trafficked in a daily basis from Africa, Mexico and the Eastern World to North America and Europe. The role of women in drug trafficking is significant, while women from the local market created networks that helped them make their own transnational businesses (Van San 2011). In Mexico and the U.S.A. borders, women were working in their husbands' businesses and most of them were poor, illiterate and they were dependent and attracted to dangerous men, while they loved the fancy life that was described in 'narcocorridos' (Van San 2011:283, Carey, 2014). In other parts of the world such as Curacao, the involvement of women with drugs started in the 1990s, while most of them were married to drug traffickers, or they already belonged to criminal families (Van San 2011). The role of women started being more active when the drug trafficking from and to Netherlands was evolved. The economic difficulties of the Curacao women were the main factor that led them to the drug trafficking (Van San 2011:287). As the time was passing and women from all over the world started to take control of their lives and getting involved with the financial sector, including the underworld, money, a glamorous life

and the social status were the main motives that led women to create legal businesses (e.g. nail salons, boutiques etc.) in order to launder money and facilitate the illicit trade of drugs (Carey 2014). The networking that women have achieved, helped them being evolved also in transnational organized crime and raise their children (more specifically their sons) by teaching them the characteristics of the trafficking (Van San 2011). Furthermore, the fact that many of their husbands abandoned them or were imprisoned was a motivation for those women to start their own businesses in order to be independent (Van San 2011:288, Campbell 2008). At this point, it is important to mention that at first, these women were totally dependent on their men's income. If they were about to lose this income then it was impossible for them to have the life that they were asking. So again similar to Mafia, the opinion that women were not aware of their men's criminal activities or they were not part of them is unsubstantial, if someone takes into consideration the fact that women were actually pressing their husbands to keep being involved in illicit drug trafficking in order to maintain their families (Van San 2011:289).

It is more than obvious that the role of women in organized crime; local or international is significant and that women have achieved not only to get involved with the underworld but also to strengthen their place in it within the time. Women are not only members of the world of drugs or Mafia but also in the world of human trafficking, one of the most common types of organized crimes. "Human trafficking is the exploitation of people under the threat or use of force or another form of control" and it can be referred to prostitution and sex trafficking, organ trafficking etc. (Siegel and de Blank 2010:437). In Nigeria, women play an important role in human trafficking networks. Some of these networks are local while others are international and they operate throughout the world (Becucci 2008). Nigerian women and also women from other poor countries are trying to find a better place in Europe in order to have some financial benefits. Their involvement with prostitution and later with human trafficking was a way to 'make easy money' (Siegel 2013). At first, they started as prostitutes and later on they started creating their own small businesses with human trafficking; they were bringing girls from Africa in Europe in order to work as prostitutes (there are many cases of girls who did not know that they were supposed to work as prostitutes) (Siegel 2013:60, Hubschle 2013:37). These women (known as 'madams') "lead criminal organizations and plan their activities by giving orders to subordinates, coordinating human trafficking, managing sex workers and controlling finances" (Hubschle 2013:37). The small businesses sometimes were developed into large human trafficking networks that are connected not only with the sex industry but also the transnational organized crime and trafficking of organs and children (Hubschle 2013).



Furthermore, it has been proven in the past that human trafficking is connected with drug trafficking. According to Hubschle (2013:40) there were some cases in Africa where sex workers in Namibia were smuggling drugs to the mainland. The facilitation of mobility from one country to another was helpful for the women who wanted to escape from their homeland and have financial benefits in Europe, even though sometimes they did not know that they were victims of human trafficking and that they were going to work as prostitutes in European countries. Of course not only the African world has been connected with human trafficking. Women in central Europe (e.g. the Netherlands in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century), the former Soviet Union and the Balkans started recruiting other women in prostitution by playing an important role that sometimes could be the 'contact' between the criminal network and the family of the victim (Siegel and de Blank 2010:438). It is of high importance to be mentioned that the organized crime in countries of South Africa or other blighted areas has been increased for different reasons than the western societies. More specifically, the lack of resources, the poverty and the corruption have forced those people to search some ways in order to gain money without considering the fact that these ways could be illicit. Women in Africa did not interfere with human trafficking in order to gain a glamorous life (something that has influenced a lot of women in Latin America and Europe) but in order to survive and find a better future in Europe. This phenomenon can also prove that in these cases we are not talking about emancipation that could give more freedom to women in order to stop being dependent on the men and fight for their rights, connection with criminal activities in these cases is a way of survivor.

In Europe and more specifically in Italy the period during the 1990s and until today has been crucial for the involvement of women in Mafia. The traditional society of Mafia landings has accepted most of the times the women's involvement in organized crime as the only solution after the imprisonment or death of a great percentage of the Mafia bosses (Squires 2015, Mazzini 2016 et al.) According to sources, even Cosa Nostra that is a more traditional and hardcore organization concerning the participation of women has changed during the time and women may be members of the organization (Day 2015). It is then more than obvious that the anti mafia tactics and the increase of the 'state's witnesses' have as a result the increase of 'Godmothers'. Furthermore, as long as the economy was flourishing and more resources were available the participation of women in crime was increased. In the area of drug trafficking as it has already been mentioned, the participation of women has started a long time ago and the reasons were different than those of Mafia women. The neediness and the limited opportunities

for women in the countries of Latin America and other parts of the world forced women into drug trade. After some years, the gigantic amount of money that the drug trafficking was providing led more and more women into the underworld. We should also underline the fact that in the countries of Latin America, the culture of 'narcocorridos'; music, movies etc. that show how those involved with drug trafficking, gangs and other types of crime live play a significant role of the augmentation of women's participation in organized criminal groups. The role models of women who have lived for a long time under the poverty are changing and the glamorous life of criminals make women either to force their men to get involved with the drug trafficking or to get involved on their own. But, women not only take part in illicit trafficking and Mafia activities, but have also an important role in human trafficking. Human trafficking, has been characterized as 'women trafficking' because most of its victims are women who are going to work in the sex industry. Women's role in human trafficking in Eastern Europe or South Africa varies; from the liaison between the victims and the traffickers to the bosses of international networks. Most of the times the motives are economic and women aim to have a better socioeconomic background, while the evolution of technology, the mobilization and the globalization are parameters that have helped in transnational organized crime. In other cases, the historical/ cultural background of the nation plays also a significant role according to Arsovska and Begum (2013:105); examples are the women of countries of the Balkans such as Albania that were used to be treated like "half man" or "dogs" and the domestic violence was allowable. This way, women started getting involved with organized crime in order to feel that they can also act in the criminal sector that was handled by men. The domestic violence and the unworthiness of women in these areas forced them to lethality in order to 'prove' their existence. The role of women in organized criminal groupings has changed dramatically since the 1990s. This decade was a period of time that affected this change for different reasons in each part of the world. The emancipation of women of course is crucial but it is not the only reason. Moreover, women in Europe and America had defended for their freedoms and rights many years ago and also women of South Africa in some cases have achieved to have an active role in the society (Arsovska and Begum 2013:95). Additionally there are experts who insist that women were active players of Mafia during its appearance but it has not been officially recorded because most of the times men did not want to seem as victims (Arsovska and Begum 2013, Arsovska and Allum 2014). In an era that organized crime was male dominated, men could not admit the involvement of women in it. To conclude with, in a world that keeps changing and the geopolitics and economics affect more and more not only the global chessboard, but also the individuals, then the examples that

now are taken as facts will change and the fight against organized crime will be more complicated and hard to produce.

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