Understanding the role of women in organized crime in South-Eastern Europe

OSCE Policy Brief

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Transnational Threats Department
OSCE Secretariat
Wallnerstrasse 6, A-1010 Vienna, Austria
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Foreword

Transnational organized crime is one of the most pressing security threats facing South-Eastern Europe and the wider OSCE area. Organized crime groups perpetuate violence, corruption and extortion, undermine public security, weaken institutions and harm economic growth and development. Beyond its security implications, transnational organized crime also erodes human rights and fundamental freedoms. In the **2020 Tirana Ministerial Council Declaration** on Strengthening Co-operation in Countering Transnational Organized Crime, the OSCE participating States reaffirmed their commitment to keeping the fight against transnational organized crime among the Organization's priorities.

Effective prevention and response strategies require a full understanding of the individuals involved in organized crime and the roles they play. Yet, the participation of women in criminal networks remains poorly understood and often overlooked. The 2023 OSCE study **Understanding the role of women in organized crime** marked an important step toward filling this gap by shedding light on women's agency within these structures.

This policy brief builds on that foundation to offer a regional perspective on women's involvement in organized crime, presenting trends, case studies and insights into their recruitment, participation and exit pathways from organized crime groups. This brief also sets out recommendations to support policymakers in integrating a gender-sensitive approach into strategies and actions to prevent and counter organized crime, ultimately strengthening the effectiveness and inclusiveness of these efforts.

Ambassador Alena Kupchyna

Co-ordinator of Activities to Address
Transnational Threats, OSCE Secretariat

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1. Introduction

South-Eastern Europe (SEE) has long served as a key transit zone for smuggling routes connecting Asia, the Middle East and Western Europe. Armed conflicts in the 1990s and the complex transition to new political and economic systems created fertile ground for organized crime networks to emerge and entrench themselves across the region.

The active role of women in organized crime groups (OCGs) in SEE remains underestimated and poorly understood. OSCE research reveals that women and girls are increasingly targeted by and recruited into OCGs, since they attract less suspicion. Women's roles range from couriers and foot soldiers transporting, concealing and distributing firearms and drugs, to facilitators of money laundering. Despite their significant involvement in criminal networks and roles in criminal activities, OSCE-gathered data has shown that women's agency is rarely recognized or acknowledged by criminal justice practitioners in SEE, with traditional gender stereotypes rendering these women largely invisible and undetected by law enforcement and prosecution services. This enables women to act with relative impunity, remaining under the radar of crime prevention and exit initiatives.

This brief provides policymakers and criminal justice practitioners with insights on how women and girls are recruited into OCGs, the roles they play inside such groups across criminal markets and the challenges they face in SEE when looking to exit criminal groups and access witness protection programmes. It provides targeted policy recommendations to support the design and implementation of gender-sensitive policies to effectively combat organized crime.

Key findings

RECRUITMENT: Women and girls often become involved in organized crime through family and social ties. Their recruitment is complex and nuanced, shaped both by socio-economic vulnerabilities and exploitation, as well as by the lure of "quick money" as portrayed on social media. Low levels of awareness of the drivers and trends fuelling women's recruitment lead to reduced scrutiny and fewer targeted interventions, ultimately undermining the effectiveness and inclusiveness of prevention programmes.

ROLES: Women hold important agency in various criminal markets and across the entire criminal hierarchy, including at the top. They act as decision makers, manage criminal operations and logistics, and are involved in laundering the proceeds of crime. OSCE-gathered data reveals that across the SEE region, traditional gender stereotypes and assumptions persist among criminal justice practitioners concerning women's involvement and roles in OCGs. As a result, women are often underestimated and, in some cases, remain entirely invisible and undetected by law enforcement. This allows them to operate with impunity within OCGs and across various criminal activities and markets.

EXIT: Women face significant barriers and challenges to leaving criminal networks, including limited opportunities to be safely accompanied by their children. The lack of recognition of their agency leads to their under-representation in — or complete absence from — witness protection initiatives, highlighting a significant gender gap. Yet, testimony from women can provide crucial intelligence when investigating and prosecuting organized crime cases.

Policy recommendations

1. Address gender biases in investigations of organized crime by enhancing the capacity of criminal justice practitioners to identify, investigate and prosecute women involved in organized crime through targeted, gender-sensitive training and awareness-raising initiatives;
2. Strengthen early identification of women at risk of recruitment into OCGs through a multi-stakeholder approach that actively involves civil society and enhances women's inclusion in prevention efforts;
3. Enhance the identification of women involved in organized crime and ensure their access to exit strategies and inclusion in witness protection initiatives;
4. Promote regional information-sharing, co-operation and the exchange of good practices on gender-sensitive approaches to combating organized crime, including by leveraging existing regional co-operation platforms.

The full set of recommendations is presented below in **Chapter 6**.

Methodology

Five OSCE participating States (pS) from SEE contributed data to this policy brief in the form of completed questionnaires, detailed case studies and presentations at a regional workshop organized by the OSCE in Belgrade, Serbia, on 2 and 3 July 2024.[1] These pS were Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia. This information complemented the data previously collected for the OSCE assessment report **Understanding the role of women in organized crime**, published in December 2023.

The quotes in this policy brief are drawn from participants in the above OSCE-organized regional workshop held in 2024, who consented to the use of their presentations, data and case studies.

1 Data provided by law enforcement practitioners during the **OSCE regional workshop** held in Belgrade, Serbia, 2–3 July 2024.

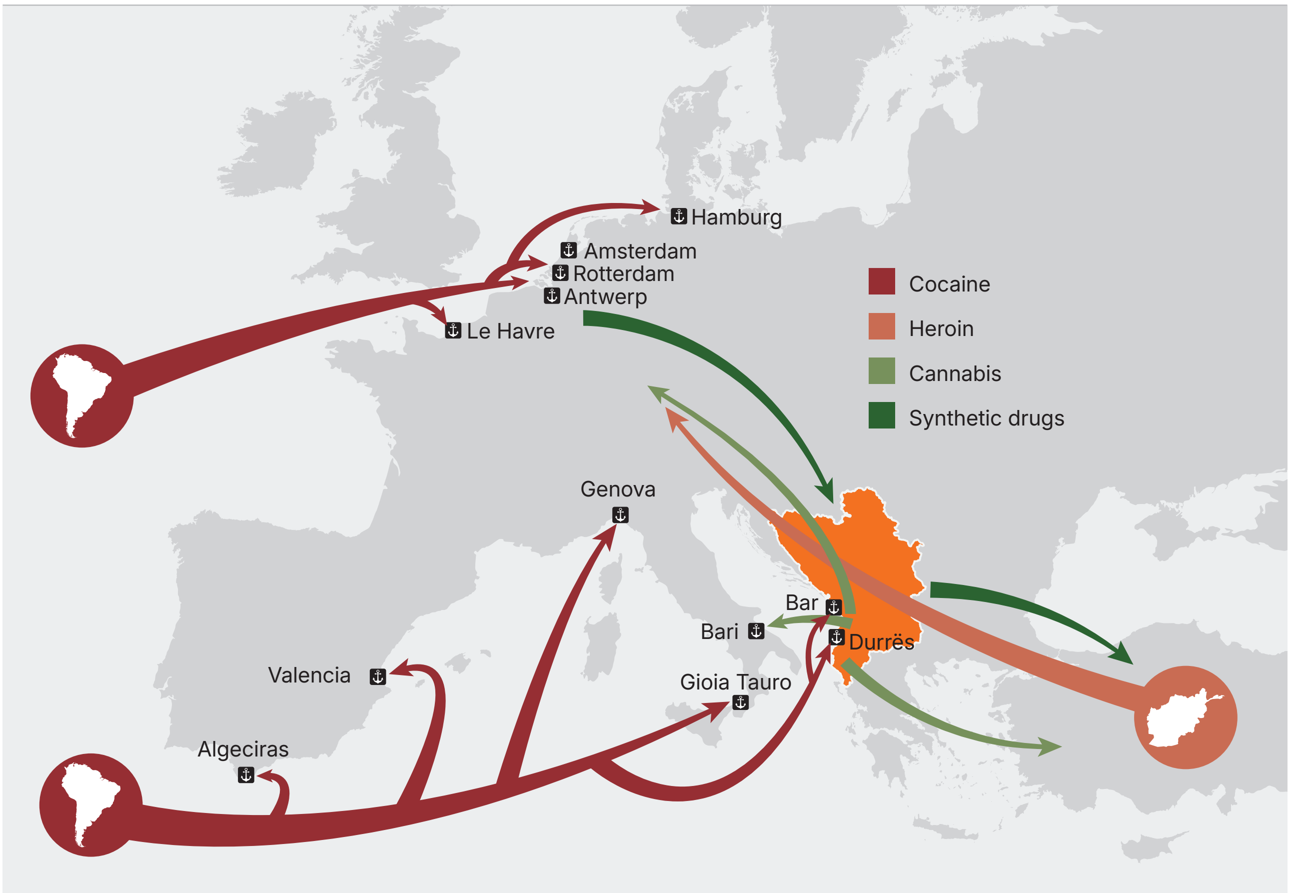
2. Understanding organized crime in South-Eastern Europe

Due to its strategic geographic location between major production and destination countries, SEE plays a central role in transnational organized crime (TOC), particularly as a transit hub for drug and firearms trafficking. The instability of the 1990s also created a power vacuum and weakened state institutions, allowing OCGs to expand and embed themselves across the region.

In 2024, a European Union Drugs Agency (EUDA) report underscored SEE OCG's significant role in various forms of serious and organized crime, particularly drug trafficking. The "Balkan route" remains a key corridor for smuggling heroin from Afghanistan to Europe, as well as for trafficking drug precursors from Europe to Central Asia. According to the EUDA, criminal networks originating from the region are deeply rooted in heroin supply chains, operating across EU Member States and providing essential logistical services such as storage and transportation.[2]

EUDA research also indicates that these networks are increasingly involved in large-scale firearms smuggling into the EU and are expanding their activities into the cocaine trade.[3] Over the last decade, OCGs from SEE, especially Albanian-speaking networks, have disrupted traditional trafficking models by controlling both the transport and supply of cocaine.[4] According to latest reports of the Italian Anti-Mafia Investigative Directorate (Direzione Investigativa Antimafia), these groups now co-ordinate shipments directly from Latin America and use targeted violence to maintain control and credibility — a defining feature of their business model.[5]

Map 1: Simplified overview of Illicit Drug Flows through South-Eastern Europe



For clarity, the internal circulation of drugs within South-Eastern Europe is not depicted. The map is for illustrative purposes only and aims to highlight general directions of trafficking flows; it does not indicate specific routes or hubs. Data are based on OSCE research and secondary sources, including Balkan Insight (2020) and GITOC (2022).

2 European Union Drugs Agency (EUDA) (2024): **EU Drug Market: Heroin and other opioids – Criminal networks operating in the heroin markets**.

3 European Union Drugs Agency (EUDA) (2024): **Cocaine increasingly attractive for a wider range of criminal networks**.

4 European Union Drugs Agency (EUDA) (2024): **Cocaine increasingly attractive for a wider range of criminal networks**; Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GITOC) (2025): **Cocaine Connections: Links between the Western Balkans and South America**.

5 Direzione Investigative Antimafia, **Relazione Semestrali**, Sem1, 2020; Sem 1, 2021, Sem 1, 2022; Sem 1, 2023.

With the increase in revenue from illicit trafficking, SEE has witnessed a parallel rise in illicit financial flows and money laundering activities.[6] OCGs are progressively infiltrating the legal economy to launder the proceeds of crime, using cash-intensive sectors such as casinos, hospitality, construction and real estate to do so. These investments allow them to not only conceal illicit gains, but also to expand their influence on local economies.[7]

A critical enabler of this process is corruption: OCGs exploit and infiltrate public institutions to gain access to confidential information, secure public contracts, or avoid investigation and prosecution. This convergence of organized crime and corruption poses a serious threat to the rule of law, economic stability and democratic governance in the region.

Map 2: Simplified overview of Illicit Flows of Small Arms and Light Weapons through South-Eastern Europe

For clarity, the internal circulation of weapons within South-Eastern Europe is not depicted. The map is for illustrative purposes only and highlights general trafficking directions; it does not indicate specific routes or hubs. Data are based on OSCE research and secondary sources, including GITOC (2024).

6 GITOC (2025): **Washing away crime – money laundering in the Western Balkans**.

7 Ibid, Balkan Insight (2024): **Crime Couriers: How Albanian gangs send their illegal profits back home**.

3. How are women and girls recruited into organized crime?

Data provided to the OSCE for this policy brief indicates that women and girls in SEE often become involved in organized crime through family networks or romantic relationships. It shows that when women are born or marry into organized crime families, they frequently assume more important roles within the criminal network and hierarchy, often acting as key advisers and decision makers.

In cases where women are recruited into OCGs without prior family or romantic connections, OSCE research suggests that their recruitment is often nuanced and complex. On the one hand, analysis of case studies provided to the OSCE shows that women often become involved in organized crime due to socio-economic inequalities and marginalization, or as a survival strategy to escape poverty or support their families.

Many women and girls involved in organized crime activities in SEE were previously victims themselves, particularly of domestic violence perpetrated by a family member or intimate partner.

This has important implications for understanding the victim–offender overlap[8] and the application of the non-punishment principle.[9] While practitioners across the region acknowledged the importance of identifying prior victimization, they reported that the practical application of the non-punishment principle across SEE remains limited.

On the other hand, practitioners report that recruitment is increasingly based not on direct coercion, but rather on the glamorized image of wealth and power promoted by OCGs through social media, music and pop culture.

OSCE evidence underscores that aspiring to a better life, financial gain, power, social status and a sense of belonging is exploited by OCGs, which use social media to create false promises of quick money and luxury lifestyles targeting both women and men.

Box 1 — Case study of a girl lured into criminality by older female peers and promises of a luxury lifestyle[10]

K., a 15-year-old girl from Kamza, Albania, became involved in criminality after being lured into a criminal network by older female peers who introduced her to a presumed lifestyle of luxury and freedom. Coming from a family affected by poverty and parental divorce, K. began skipping school, withdrawing from her family, consuming alcohol and repeatedly leaving home for extended periods.

These circumstances made her highly vulnerable to exploitation, ultimately leading to her being pressured or compelled to commit criminal acts. Such coercion illustrates the concept of “forced criminality”, a form of trafficking in human beings in which victims are exploited to carry out crimes under the control of traffickers.

Identified as a presumed victim of trafficking by social workers, K. received co-ordinated prevention and reintegration support, including psycho-social counselling, vocational training and family assistance. This support enabled K. to break free from her traffickers and end her involvement in criminality.

8 Despite a tendency to view perpetrators and victims of crime in binary terms, the relationship between prior victimization and offending is well established in criminological research. This phenomenon is commonly referred to as the “victim–offender overlap”. Evidence shows that, while not all victims of crime become offenders, the majority of offenders were previously victims themselves. Victimization can result in negative physical, mental and behavioural outcomes, and, in some cases, may contribute to subsequent offending.

9 The non-punishment principle affirms that victims of trafficking in human beings should not be prosecuted or otherwise penalized for unlawful acts they were compelled to commit as a direct result of their exploitation. It recognizes that such acts are often carried out under coercion or control of traffickers, and aims to prevent further victimization by protecting victims from criminal liability.

10 Case study received from the Child Protection Services of Kamza Municipality, Albania.

Practitioners emphasize the importance of prevention initiatives in disrupting the recruitment of women and girls into organized crime and highlight several key factors contributing to effective programmes. Early intervention — ideally before the age of criminal liability — and interagency approaches remain the most effective ways to prevent recruitment. These efforts should target the root causes driving women's involvement in OCGs, including socio-economic vulnerabilities and exposure to gender-based violence.

Another key component of prevention initiatives is the creation of counter-narratives to the glamorization of organized crime. This includes raising awareness among women and girls about the realities and dangers of organized crime, notably by leveraging the voices of people, especially women, with lived experience. Practitioners also emphasized the importance of educating women and girls about the false promises of "quick money" and teaching them the principles of sound financial management and independence to help them achieve success outside criminal networks.

4. What roles do women play in OCGs and criminal activities?

Women are reaching high positions and taking on significant roles [in organized crime]. Modern criminal organizations recognize and use the skills and abilities of women, making them integral members."

These women show great organizational and leadership skills, often surpassing their male counterparts in certain aspects."

Women are integral and invisible members [of OCGs]."

Women [are] not only victims, but also participants [in organized crime] and active at all levels."

The evidence collected for this brief indicates that women are involved in OCGs throughout SEE and across a broad range of sectors of the criminal economy. Their involvement spans the entire criminal hierarchy, with women acting as enforcers, managing operations and logistics, but also taking on leadership positions. The data also suggests a high rate of reoffending among women and girls across illicit markets and activities.

Drug trafficking

Drug trafficking remains one of the most profitable markets for OCGs in SEE. Due to its geographic location, SEE has emerged as a key trafficking and transit region for cocaine, heroin and morphine destined for Western Europe. While investigations have, until now, primarily focused on male actors, women also play important roles in drug trafficking and distribution.

Evidence collected by the OSCE shows that women and girls are increasingly targeted for low-ranking roles within drug trafficking operations, including drug transport, concealment and distribution. Practitioners across the region stressed that women represent an important asset for OCGs, since they are less likely to attract attention or detection by criminal justice authorities, including at border crossings. Women are often used to transport and hide narcotics in the event of another OCG member's arrest, and to provide the *façade* of a family unit when transporting narcotics in vehicles, especially across borders.

Women or girls as drug couriers are less suspicious and less likely to get the attention of the police."

Practitioners also report women's involvement in more sophisticated criminal activities, with women taking on important roles across the criminal hierarchy. In particular, women assume higher positions in family-based OCGs, often linked to their status as mothers, wives or sisters. This includes tasks such as the strategic planning of drug operations and trafficking logistics, as well as purchasing drugs, overseeing quality control and managing drug distribution.

Box 2 — Case study of a female organized crime leader orchestrating sophisticated international trafficking in narcotics[11]

The woman, M.C., was sentenced in Bosnia and Herzegovina to six and a half years of imprisonment for her role as the leader of an OCG involved in the illicit trafficking in narcotic drugs and murder. In addition to the prison sentence, the court ordered the confiscation of the items used in committing the crimes, as well as the proceeds derived from them.

M.C. organized and co-ordinated a sophisticated international drug trafficking operation spanning multiple countries. She orchestrated international transactions involving the purchase, transfer, transportation, possession, import, export, sending and delivery of marijuana, as well as the mediation in further international sales. Her operation moved drugs across Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and North Macedonia, utilizing a network of collaborators and methods aimed at avoiding law enforcement detection.

11 Prosecutor's Office of Bosnia and Herzegovina (2013): **Mirabela Čoker, Almir Helvida, Nermina Klobodanović and Elmir Imamović concluded plea agreements. Total proposed penalty exceeds 10 years of imprisonment and includes forfeiture of ill gotten-gain**

Trafficking in small arms and light weapons

> *What often happens is that they are in an emotional relationship with one of the members. They hide the weapons, traces of the crimes [and] hide the suspects, [but] they are not the direct perpetrators."*

> *Their role as enforcers is often overlooked due to traditional perceptions of women as less violent and aggressive."*

The 2025 Europol Serious and Organized Crime Threat Assessment (SOCTA) underlines that the Western Balkans remain a crucial source of illicit firearms trafficking into the EU.[12] Firearms are widely available in post-conflict areas, contributing to a persistent illicit market in SEE, with many firearms left over from the conflicts of the 1990s now being smuggled into the EU.[13]

Practitioners who contributed to this brief reported that OCGs increasingly use women to transport firearms, since they are perceived as being less likely to arouse suspicion.

At lower levels of the criminal hierarchy, women are frequently engaged as drivers or mules, transporting firearms both within and across national borders.

Women have also been identified as hiding weapons in personal belongings or vehicles, storing firearms in private residences, acting as intermediaries between suppliers and buyers, and facilitating communications within trafficking networks to arrange shipments. Their involvement is often overlooked by criminal justice actors due to persistent gender stereotypes that view women primarily as victims and non-violent actors.

OSCE evidence also shows that women can hold important managerial roles in firearm trafficking, overseeing operations and logistics, leading communication with suppliers, managing timelines, co-ordinating deliveries and ensuring secure transport routes.

These functions often draw on strong organizational and communication skills, with women's actions integral to keeping trafficking operations efficient and discreet.

Box 3 Case study of a woman holding a leading role in firearm trafficking[14]

N.S., the wife of a high-level member of a criminal group from SEE, was sentenced to prison in Montenegro for repeatedly trafficking, possessing and selling large numbers of weapons — including pistols and automatic rifles — to OCGs for the purpose of committing murders. She played a significant role within her husband's criminal group, managing operations and overseeing logistics. She was responsible for recruiting new members and for procuring, transporting, selling and distributing firearms to members of other OCGs in Albania, Germany and Montenegro. N.S. orchestrated a sophisticated operation, exploiting legal business structures to carry out her activities. Between April 2019 and February 2020, 28 firearms were illegally sold to members of various OCGs by her network.

Trafficking in human beings

Women's agency in trafficking in human beings (THB) is complex and multifaceted. While it is often marked by a victim–offender overlap, women also exercise independent agency, linked in particular to family dynamics and romantic relationships.

Globally, the number of women prosecuted and convicted for THB-related offences is significantly higher than for other types of TOC.[15] One explanation is that women involved in THB often occupy low-ranking positions within criminal networks, which typically involve direct and visible contact with victims or customers. Such tasks place them on the "front line" of criminal operations, since they are more visible during surveillance, raids and undercover investigations.

12 Europol (2025): **Serious and Organized Crime Threat Assessment. The changing DNA of serious and organised crime.**

13 Ibid

14 Data provided by law enforcement practitioners during the **OSCE regional workshop** held in Belgrade, Serbia, 2–3 July 2024.

15 UNODC (2020): **Female Victims of Trafficking for Sexual Exploitation as Defendants: A Case Law Analysis**; European Council/Council of the European Union (2021): **The EU's work to combat human trafficking**.

This finding is supported by the data collected for this brief. In SEE, OSCE evidence shows that most women engaged in THB operate in lower-level roles such as maintaining control over victims, advertising services, handling bookings and collecting the proceeds of crime. Practitioners also report that traffickers in SEE exploit women's social skills: female perpetrators tend to appear less suspicious or dangerous to potential female victims, and are therefore often used to recruit them. These activities not only increase their visibility to law enforcement, but also leave them with fewer layers of protection compared to higher-ranking members, making detection and prosecution more likely.

> *In human trafficking, women often recruit and manipulate victims, using psychology and emotional intelligence to control them."*

Case studies highlight the complex nature of women's roles in trafficking activities, revealing nuanced forms of agency and a frequent victim–offender overlap. In many instances, women who were initially victims of trafficking become involved in the recruitment and control of other victims as a means to escape their own exploitation. Such circumstances should be considered during prosecution, with recognition that women's actions often stem from coercion rather than criminal intent. Application of the non-punishment principle in such cases is crucial for avoiding secondary victimization.

But women's involvement in THB can also reflect independent agency, with leading roles in trafficking not necessarily linked to prior victimization. Instead, these women often have pre-existing connections to OCGs — whether through birth or marriage into criminal networks — and may assume elevated positions as key advisors or decision makers, occupying central and managerial roles within trafficking operations. In such roles, they may oversee recruitment strategies, manage operations and co-ordinate the financial or logistical aspects of trafficking activities. This highlights the complexity of female agency in THB.

Box 4 Case studies on women's agency in THB: victimhood, complicity and familial ties[16]

In the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the case of Š.M. illustrates the complex realities faced by victims of THB who become involved in criminal proceedings. Š.M. had been exploited in the sex trade and, in an attempt to escape and end her own exploitation, she became involved in trafficking-related activities. She was ultimately charged alongside her pimp for organizing prostitution. A plea-bargain agreement resulted in a suspended sentence. During the hearing, the prosecutor acknowledged that Š.M. met all the criteria to be considered a victim of THB. However, this recognition had no impact on her criminal liability, since the relevant legislation at the time did not include the principle of non-punishment for victims.

This case is a clear example of the victim–offender overlap, in which a victim of exploitation is simultaneously treated as a perpetrator. Š.M.'s actions were not driven by criminal intent, but were rather the result of coercion and a desperate effort to end her own victimization.

A different reality is presented by another case, in which a woman exercised independent agency in the context of THB. In the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, N.J. and R.J. were convicted of organizing THB for the purpose of sexual exploitation. The two were in a romantic relationship and N.J., a woman, played an active and leading role in the operation. She was responsible for managing the online profiles of women on the "City of Love" website and for facilitating contacts with clients. In some instances, she also recruited female victims directly.

16 Through its Trail Monitoring Programme, the OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina has identified several examples of women's involvement in THB.

Money laundering

> *Women as suspects in financial crime [are not] related to men. They are their own masterminds."*

> *[Women] occupy important roles such as managing financial flows, especially overseeing income administration and the transfer of money, both physically and through banking institutions."*

> *We also analysed the involvement of [female] suspects in relation to specific criminal acts, and what we noticed is that their role is most common in […] so-called financial crimes. What is importan t to highlight is that they have no connection to men in the commission of these crimes. […] It even happens that they are the organizers, meaning they are not just members of such criminal groups, but the masterminds behind the entire execution of the criminal acts."*

Money laundering is a key activity of OCGs, since it enables them to transform money generated from illicit activities into supposedly legitimate profits.

Data collected by the OSCE in SEE reveals that women play a significant role in such operations. They are involved in administering finances, overseeing the transfer of money through banking and financial institutions, and laundering funds for other members of their organizations.

Women also use positions in the entertainment industry to conceal illicit earnings. To further obscure true sources of money, women also participate in corrupt activities, such as infiltrating public institutions — including law enforcement — to facilitate the laundering process and protect criminal interests.

Data provided by pS for this study shows that, while the proportion of women convicted of most crime types remains relatively low compared to men, financial offenses stand out as an exception. This highlights a distinct pattern of gendered involvement in the financial dimensions of organized crime activities.

In Serbia, for example, the proportion of male suspects in organized crime cases between 2019 and 2023 ranged from 86% to 93%. In contrast, women made up 71% of suspects in financial crimes and money laundering in 2020, and 56% in 2023.[17] According to data made available to the OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina on high-profile organized crime cases involving money laundering, of 95 individuals accused across 16 cases, 23 were women (data from July 2021 to July 2025). Of these women, one was convicted and one acquitted at trial; the other criminal proceedings were ongoing at the time of writing this report, which reflects the lengthy nature of many financial crime cases.

Box 5 — Challenges to prosecuting money laundering cases and proving women's involvement[18]

Prosecuting money laundering remains challenging, and proving women's involvement is even more difficult. Money laundering cases are notoriously complex, requiring investigators to trace and prove the flow of illicit funds, link them to underlying criminal activities, and establish the connection to the individuals involved. These challenges are amplified when the boundaries between legal and illegal business activities are blurred, or when illicit proceeds are moved through multiple intermediaries, shell companies or layered financial transactions. The growing use of cryptocurrencies further complicates detection and prosecution, as they allow for faster and anonymized cross-border transfers.

17 Data provided during the **OSCE regional workshop** held in Belgrade, Serbia, 2–3 July 2024.

18 Data provided during the **OSCE regional workshop** held in Belgrade, Serbia, 2–3 July 2024, and primary data from the OSCE (2023) report: **Understanding the role of women in organized crime**.

The OSCE documented several cases in which women played important roles in laundering proceeds for OCGs, particularly in the context of family-based networks. In these cases, proving the women's active involvement was extremely difficult since the financial assets were often registered in their names, albeit without a clear paper trail indicating their decision-making or direct control. When convictions were indeed secured, women were typically prosecuted for lower-level offences, such as acting as nominal bank account holders or company directors, since their roles as organizers, strategic planners or major beneficiaries of the laundering schemes could not be proven in court.

Corruption

Corruption plays a crucial role in enabling OCGs to thrive by facilitating territorial control, securing impunity and enabling access to public contracts often used to launder criminal proceeds. While international research has primarily focused on how corruption disproportionately affects women as victims, particularly in accessing public services, far less attention has been given to women's agency in corruption activities. Data collected by the OSCE for this brief indicates that in SEE women are not only affected by corruption but are also actively involved, including in high-level corrupt practices linked to organized crime. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, for example, a woman OCG leader organized a sophisticated international drugs and firearms trafficking operation. Not only did she use and order violence to secure her interests, she employed corruption and infiltration within the police.[19] Serbia has recently witnessed an increasing involvement of women in high-ranking corruption positions. In the first half of 2024, four out of six cases of high-level corruption and abuse of power involved women.[20]

Role of violence

Violence is a key part of the activities of OCGs, with groups frequently using violence, including homicides, to intimidate and threaten rival OCGs, and to control and expand their territories. SEE has experienced a rise in violence and killings linked to escalating conflicts between OCGs, particularly regarding the control of the cocaine trade.[21] Such violence often fuels a cycle of retaliation rooted in entrenched notions of honour, betrayal and revenge within regional criminal cultures.

Traditionally, violence has been viewed as an exclusively male phenomenon, with women seen as more passive or non-violent. However, evidence collected for this policy brief shows that women have also engaged in or ordered acts of violence in SEE, especially related to conflicts linked to drugs.

At a regional workshop organized by the OSCE in 2024, practitioners from across SEE reported that women can play a decisive role in fuelling such cycles of violence. They emphasized women's active participation in violent offences, including orchestrating vendetta killings. This is particularly evident in family-based OCGs, where women — often in the roles of mothers or wives — have ordered executions as acts of retribution. In other cases, women have directed the planning and logistics of such killings, seeking to avenge murdered relatives, or to exert and expand their influence in crime networks through intimidation and targeted violence.[22]

Practitioners also explained how women use their social skills to gain the trust of targets and lure them into vulnerable situations under the guise of a romantic meeting. Such encounters have been staged to ambush members of rival groups, leading to threats, assaults or even murder. Women were also reported to have taken active roles in planning such ambushes, co-ordinating logistics and drawing victims to locations where they could be attacked.

Despite this, convictions of women for serious offences such as assaults, threats and killings remain low across SEE. Practitioners noted that proving women's involvement is often difficult, since they are rarely the ones "pulling the trigger", but rather act as the masterminds behind violent acts — the strategic "brains" of such operations.[23] Gender stereotypes also play a significant role, since women are still widely viewed as non-violent, making them a persistent blind spot for criminal justice systems.

19 Data provided during the **OSCE regional workshop** held in Belgrade, Serbia, 2–3 July 2024.

20 Ibid

21 Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) (2020): **Bad Blood: A War Between Montenegrin Cocaine Clans Engulfs the Balkans**.

22 Data provided by law enforcement practitioners during the **OSCE regional workshop** held in Belgrade, Serbia, 2–3 July 2024.

23 Data provided by law enforcement practitioners during the **OSCE regional workshop** held in Belgrade, Serbia, 2–3 July 2024.

5. What challenges do women face in exiting organized crime?

OSCE research shows that women in SEE face a range of challenges and barriers when attempting to exit criminal networks. These include emotional ties, concerns about how to protect and take care of their children when leaving OCGs, trauma, financial dependency, fear for their lives and limited access to witness protection programmes. Practitioners emphasized that for women in higher roles within criminal networks — particularly in family-based OCGs — leaving is especially difficult. In such cases, criminal activity is closely intertwined with family life, making disengagement from both the criminal business and personal relationships extremely complex.

> *Women face more difficulties and have a harder time leaving OCGs due to family and emotional ties with other members of the group, as well as threats to family members."*

Women often struggle with separating from their families while ensuring the safety and well-being of their children. Practitioners noted the heavy psychological toll, especially the trauma many women carry as a result of long-term involvement in criminal environments. Financial dependency was identified as another critical barrier, especially for women in elevated roles in family-based OCGs, who may be accustomed to high incomes and related lifestyles. The prospect of losing financial security can deter attempts to disengage from OCGs. Practitioners stressed the importance of investing in vocational and financial literacy training to empower women to break free from criminality and achieve financial independence.

Women attempting to exit OCGs also face serious threats of violent retaliation, as well as the risk of isolation. Evidence collected for this report suggests that this issue is particularly persistent in SEE, where countries and communities — especially those linked to family-based OCGs — are small and close-knit. Relocating is difficult because of small populations, with the danger of being identified remaining high. Creating a new identity and building a new life is therefore often challenging. Practitioners emphasized the importance of multi-stakeholder approaches to support women in safely exiting organized crime and rebuilding their lives.

> *This challenge becomes even bigger in a small country [...], where everyone knows one another, with few places to hide. These women will face prejudices, which will make it more difficult to reintegrate into society. This requires working with them directly, as well as with society."*

Another key challenge emerging from the data is the significant lack of access to witness protection initiatives for women across the region. Such initiatives are still relatively new, having only been established in the early 2000s, and are still developing (see **Table 1**).

Evidence from SEE shows that these programmes still almost exclusively target and include men, with women remaining under-represented or entirely absent as co-operating perpetrators. This is largely due to the lack of recognition of their roles and agency within OCGs.[24]

When women are included, it is typically as the wife or girlfriend of a male criminal under protection, or as a witness to crimes, rather than as independent actors and perpetrators in their own right.

This underscores that women in SEE continue to face unequal access to support in exiting organized crime and to receiving protection. Practitioners highlighted the need for strengthened regional co-operation on witness protection, including tailored support for women.

Table 1: Date of the establishment of specialized witness protection programmes in South-Eastern Europe

	Albania	Bosnia & Herzegovina	Montenegro	North Macedonia	Serbia
Date of Establishment	2016	2004	2005	2005	2005

Source: OSCE (2025). Authors' analysis of questionnaire responses and open-source information.

24 Data provided by law enforcement practitioners during the **OSCE regional workshop** held in Belgrade, Serbia, 2–3 July 2024.

Women's testimonies as intelligence to disrupt organized crime

Practitioners from SEE emphasized that women's insider testimonies can play a crucial role in disrupting organized crime. This intelligence can help investigators and prosecutors to understand the structure, function, operations and alliances of OCGs, assisting them with the collection of the relevant evidence necessary for building strong cases and bringing perpetrators to justice.

“ *Women disclose fundamental information on criminal networks.”*

“ *Women are partners of main [organized crime] players, as for example the father or brother: their role is in the entire chain of function of operations and communication — their knowledge is therefore valuable for investigators.”*

“ *Women have a crucial role in organized crime and therefore also have crucial information on all actors inside the criminal group. Women are close to the boss; it is good to use this source.”*

“ *Women are excellent witnesses. They know what and how organized crime [groups] operate.”*

While practitioners across the region recognize the potential of women as collaborators in combating TOC, they report that women are still rarely identified, targeted or included in witness protection initiatives. This underscores the urgent need to address this gender gap and to develop gender-sensitive initiatives that respond to the specific needs of both men and women — including women with children — to ensure inclusive and effective exit and witness protection processes.

Box 6 Case study on women's insider testimony[25]

A case from Bosnia and Herzegovina highlights the benefits when a woman involved in organized crime at a higher level co-operates with the state. In this case, a woman was granted immunity and became a key witness for the prosecution, disclosing critical information about the OCG's operations, including THB, forced prostitution and drug trafficking. Her testimony enabled the prosecution to obtain evidence that was instrumental in uncovering and understanding the group's criminal activities — which generated financial gains of more than EUR 1.5 million — and in securing convictions of its leaders.

25 Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Case number: S12K02855618K.

6. Policy recommendations

Drawing on the evidence collected for this study, the following recommendations can inform and guide gender-sensitive actions to prevent and disrupt organized crime:

Recommendation 1

Address gender biases in organized crime investigations by enhancing the capacity of criminal justice practitioners to identify, investigate and prosecute women involved in organized crime through targeted gender-sensitive training as well as awareness-raising initiatives.

Actions in line with this recommendation could include:

- Developing and institutionalizing **comprehensive, gender-sensitive training modules** focused on identifying and investigating women in OCGs;
- Creating **specialized training materials on the victim–offender overlap**, with emphasis on identifying prior victimization and applying the non-punishment principle;
- Delivering **scenario-based interagency training** to equip criminal justice practitioners with the skills necessary to recognize and address the role of women in criminal networks. To be sustainable, such courses should be integrated into wider training programmes;
- Establishing **regional platforms for practitioners** to exchange good practices and experiences related to handling cases involving women in organized crime.

Recommendation 2

Strengthen early identification of women at risk of recruitment into organized crime through a multi-stakeholder approach that includes civil society organizations, and increase women's inclusion in prevention efforts.

Actions in line with this recommendation could include:

- Providing **cross-sectoral training** to criminal justice actors, social services, educators and civil society organizations on early indicators of vulnerability to recruitment and effective intervention mechanisms;
- Developing **awareness-raising campaigns** and **peer-education programmes** that include the voices of women with lived experience to inform women and girls about the realities and dangers of involvement in organized crime;
- Promoting women's **financial literacy and vocational training** to empower them to pursue alternatives to organized crime by fostering economic independence, security and stability;
- Strengthening partnerships between **state institutions and civil society organizations** to build community resilience and promote inclusive strategies.

Recommendation 3

Enhance the identification of women involved in organized crime and ensure their access to exit strategies and their inclusion in witness protection initiatives.

Actions in line with this recommendation could include:

- Delivering training to enhance the ability of criminal justice practitioners to **proactively identify women involved** in organized crime, and connect them with appropriate exit programmes, including through judicial and non-judicial pathways;
- Supporting the development of **gender-responsive exit and reintegration programmes** that address psychological trauma, financial dependency and childcare responsibilities;
- Enhancing the awareness of law enforcement officials regarding the **potential of women as key witnesses**, thus ensuring they are treated as independent actors and not merely in relation to male counterparts;
- Improving access to **witness protection programmes for women**, with tailored support mechanisms that address both physical security and social reintegration.

Recommendation 4

Promote regional information-sharing, co-operation and the exchange of good practices on gender-sensitive approaches to combating organized crime, including by leveraging existing regional co-operation platforms.

Actions in line with this recommendation could include:

- Leveraging existing regional co-operation mechanisms — including those supported by the OSCE, such as the **Permanent Conference of Organized Crime Prosecutors** and the **Balkan Asset Management Interagency Network**[26] — to ensure **gender-sensitive information exchange** and case coordination;
- Enhancing **cross-border collaboration** on witness protection, with protocols and standard operating procedures that include gender considerations and facilitate relocation and reintegration;
- Facilitating regular **regional exchanges** on gendered trends in organized crime, bringing together law enforcement, judicial and civil society actors to share insights and update practices;
- Encouraging systematic **collection and disaggregation by sex of data** on organized crime involvement to better inform policy responses.

26 More information on the network: **Balkan Asset Management Interagency Network BAMIN**

References and data sources

Primary data

The primary data presented in this policy brief was collected through questionnaires, interviews and targeted presentations at the OSCE-facilitated regional workshop held in Belgrade, Serbia, on 2 and 3 July 2024. Institutional respondents and contributors came from various criminal justice institutions, including police and prosecution authorities, as well as social services, as specified below (see **Table 2**).

Additionally, the case studies and primary data from SEE gathered for the OSCE report **Understanding the role of women in organized crime**, published in December 2023, were used for the analysis.

Table 2: Overview of agencies contributing to this study

PARTICIPATING STATE	CONTRIBUTING AGENCY
Albania	▪ Albanian State Police ▪ Special Prosecution Office against Organized Crime and Corruption ▪ Child Protection Services of Kamza Municipality
Bosnia and Herzegovina	▪ Prosecutor's Office of Bosnia and Herzegovina ▪ Ministry of Internal Affairs / Administration for Organized and Serious Crime, Republika Srpska
Montenegro	▪ Ministry of the Interior / Police Directorate
North Macedonia	▪ Ministry of Internal Affairs
Serbia	▪ Ministry of the Interior / Directorate of Criminal Police ▪ Public Prosecutor Office for Organized Crime

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Abbreviations

TOC	Transnational organized crime
EUDA	European Union Drugs Agency
OCGs	Organized crime groups
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
pS	(OSCE) participating States
SEE	South-Eastern Europe
THB	Trafficking in human beings

Notes

OSCE
Organization for Security and
Co-operation in Europe