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# Women in Organized Crime

## ABSTRACT

The involvement of women in organized criminal activities such as street gangs, mafias, and illegal transnational markets, including human trafficking, human smuggling, and drug trafficking, is an important but understudied subject. Gendered studies and feminist theories can improve current knowledge and provide important new insights. They can enhance understanding of women's roles, behavior, motivations, and life stories in all forms of organized crime and challenge traditional and established ideas about victims, perpetrators, violence, and agency. Women, in all those settings, occupy both passive, subordinate roles and more active, powerful ones. However, ideas that greater emancipation, labor force participation, and formal equality of women in our time have fundamentally affected women's involvement in organized crime have not been validated. Borders between victims and perpetrators are often blurred. More research is needed on the effects of globalization and technological change, on the salience of conceptions of masculinity in relation to organized crime, and on conceptualization of violence in women's personal lives and criminal actions.

The gender gap became a key issue in criminology in the second half of the last century. The gap is that women commit fewer of most kinds of crimes than men do and their offending careers are different, particularly in relation to violent and more serious crimes (Steffensmeier and Allan 1996; Pitch 2002; Heidensohn and Gelsthorpe 2007, pp. 391–94). The gap seems even more pronounced in relation to organized crime and many forms of white-collar crime (Daly 1989).<sup>1</sup> That crime and criminal

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<sup>1</sup> Some scholars (Ruggiero 1996; Passas 2000; Vande Walle 2002) argue that the distinction between organized and white-collar crime, considered as forms of economic crime,

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organizations are overwhelmingly dominated by men, with women typically playing mostly minor or auxiliary roles, has long attracted criminologists' attention (Adler 1975; Simon 1975; Daly 1989; Simpson 1989).

Women are involved in many forms of organized crime: in street gangs, in mafia organizations, in transnational crime, in adult criminal gangs, and as mules in drug and human trafficking. A Canadian report, one of the few at the country level on the presence and roles of women in organized crime (including some forms of white-collar crime), shows that the number of women convicted of participating in, committing, or instructing<sup>2</sup> some form of organized crime is very low. The majority of women charged and convicted of being involved in organized crime "participated"; only one was involved in commission of a crime (Beare 2010). This report, based on data from 1997 to 2004, seems to confirm the low involvement of women in organized crime and the auxiliary roles they play.

More recent studies, accepting that women's involvement is considerably less than men's, ask new questions and explore new issues. Contemporary research on women in organized crime tries to understand to what extent the apparently substantially lesser involvement of women results from a lack of research, gendered operation of the criminal justice system, or other factors. This includes trying to understand whether women engage in organized crime for the same or different reasons than men and, even if women's involvement is comparatively low, whether and, if so, why their roles and functions are apparently different.

The emergence of feminist criminology and gender studies was fundamental in raising new questions and focusing attention on female delinquency and the gender gap in general and in relation to organized crime. It gave rise to new work that sought to understand why women are

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has been blurred by globalization and neoliberalism and that comparable issues concerning women's behavior, gender patterns and stereotypes, and concepts of masculinity arise in both. I consider here only organized criminal activities and groups and leave white-collar crime for another day.

<sup>2</sup> The analysis is based on cases of women charged and convicted under the Canadian Criminal Code, which defines organized crime thus: "A 'criminal organization' means a group, however organized, that is composed of three or more persons in or outside Canada and has as one of its main purposes or main activities the facilitation or commission of one or more serious offences that, if committed, would likely result in the direct or indirect receipt of a material benefit, including a financial benefit, by the group or by any of the persons who constitute the group." There are different levels of involvement: participation, commission, and instruction.

traditionally less involved in crime than men and to investigate gendered features of their criminality and their criminal justice system experiences.

The gendered perspective in analyzing female involvement in organized crime raises fundamental issues that I explore in this essay. Are women usually low-level actors, and are they always excluded from leading roles? Should “leading role” be reconceptualized to take gender differences into account? Are women’s roles as offenders and victims adequately differentiated? How do broader social, economic, and cultural contexts, including the level of female emancipation in a given society, affect females’ participation in organized crime?

These questions have received diverse answers, as I explain below. Controversial issues include the meaning of “playing a leading role,” usually understood to imply use of power and sometimes violence; the significance of broader processes of emancipation; and the blurring of boundaries between active, independent agents and victims.

These controversies relate conceptually to questions about what “leading roles” means, what “violence” and “victim” mean, and what methodologies and information are available to study them. Some studies seem to look for women who replicate male roles. Others, taking a gender perspective, look for specific female qualities and attitudes that should reshape conceptualization of what a “leading role” is. Some recent studies using a gendered perspective, for example, challenge the traditional view that women seldom play important roles in organized crime or have only recently become leading figures. Other studies emphasize the need for more nuanced conceptualization of what being a victim means, and for reconceptualization of violence.

History and changes over time matter. Dina Siegel (2014) argues that female participation in organized crime has not suddenly risen. Women have traditionally been important in these organizations, she says, but their roles have only recently gained visibility and become a recurring subject of research. Her and others’ recent cross-national and national work shows that women in many different countries during the past century played visible and leading roles in criminal organizations, including in violent activities (e.g., Lavin 2003; Smith 2013).

It is often unclear, however, whether these women, sometimes described in almost heroic ways, really performed powerful roles in criminal organizations such as Italian and Russian mafias, Mexican drug cartels, and Japanese yakuza, and whether they exemplify women acting as independent agents or whether, despite their apparent independence and

autonomy, they were controlled by men and subjugated by traditional, masculine, cultural norms and stereotypes. Varese (2017), who discusses women who reached higher positions in Italian, Russian, and Japanese organized crime groups, and others who have studied other organizations offer more complex and nuanced accounts of women in higher roles (e.g., Dino 2007, 2010; Ingrascì 2007*b*, 2014; Siebert 2007, 2010; Campbell 2008; Fleetwood 2014).

Research methodology and sources of information matter. Statistical data, in particular relating to arrests and convictions, do not adequately represent involvement of women in organized crime. However, this is often the primary or only source of information available, particularly concerning women involved in organized crime organizations and illegal markets. A different approach, relying more on qualitative methodologies, including interviews, document and content analyses, and historical research, can shed brighter light. The most interesting contemporary research uses qualitative methods, particularly interviews and life histories, that seem especially informative for efforts to grasp differences and understand motivations. Despite difficulties in getting access to participants in organized crime organizations, these are probably the best methods to use in studying female involvement in organized crime and to study organized crime in general (Rawlinson 2000). Statistical data are not of much use for answering these questions. Reliance primarily on qualitative methods is more likely to enrich understanding of the complexities of women's involvement, the nature of their criminal activities, their links and relationships with men, and their motivations for joining and leaving criminal organizations.

In this essay, I explore the literature on women's involvement in organized crime and discuss key themes. I first summarize debates about criminological theories and concepts and how they might be helpful in understanding female delinquency in general and in organized crime. I emphasize the theoretical importance of feminist perspectives and gendered approaches.

In the next sections, I review the literature and discuss open questions about the involvement of women in criminal organizations, especially in street gangs, Italian mafia groups, and some illegal markets. Work concerning illegal markets mostly focuses on women's roles in human trafficking, smuggling, and drug trafficking. There is of course overlap between criminal organizations and illegal markets. Women in gangs and mafia organizations are involved in the same activities they perform in

illegal markets not dominated by those organizations. However, the presence of women in gangs and mafia groups, differently from the presence of women in illegal markets, has been the subject of extensive research that raises important theoretical and empirical issues. It warrants particular attention. In drawing this distinction, I accept a broader, though controversial, definition of organized crime that includes criminal activities performed by groups or networks in a systematic and organized way. In each section, I address several questions. What are the characteristics of female involvement? Why do women engage in organized criminal activities or enter criminal organizations, and how do their criminal careers unfold? What makes their participation in illegal markets or criminal organizations different from men's? How do conceptualizations of a "leading role" and of violence change when women's experiences are taken into account?

### I. Conventional Theories of Criminology and Female Offending

Influential criminological theories were long tailored to understand and explain a male phenomenon; little attention was paid to female criminality. Most theories are male-centered, although serious theoretical and empirical efforts have been made in recent decades to incorporate a gender perspective and redress the traditional invisibility of women. Traditional theories may be helpful in understanding the gender gap, but to understand it better and to understand female delinquency, traditional concepts need to be adapted to encompass feminist approaches that take into account the gendered nature of society and power relations in the family and the larger society (e.g., Heidensohn 2006; Heimer and Kruttschnitt 2006; Heidensohn and Gelsthorpe 2007; De Coster, Heimer, and Cumley 2013; Burman and Gelsthorpe 2017).

Giordano, Deines, and Cernkovich (2006), drawing on the Ohio Serious Offenders Study, a long-term follow-up of girls and women, conclude that classical criminological theories need to be revised in ways "that tend to emphasize uniquely gendered processes" (p. 36).<sup>3</sup> This is

<sup>3</sup> It is still controversial whether in order to explain female offending we need to develop a new set of independent feminist criminological theories, as proposed by Smart (1976) and Cain (1990) or whether an adaptation or review of theories developed to understand males' violent and antisocial behavior is sufficient (Giordano, Deines, and Cernkovich 2006).

even more necessary in relation to the gender gap in more serious types of crimes, which has always been wider than in other forms of crime (Steffensmeier and Allan 1996), and in understanding patterns of female involvement. The organizational dimension of organized crime adds new considerations that result from the networks and power relations within which women operate. Hierarchies, roles, and types of functions shape the roles of women in organized crime and in its transnational dimensions. Studies of female offending in general provide useful context, but better understanding of women involvement in organized crime will require development of new concepts and categories, particularly concerning their roles and the types of criminal activities in which they participate.

Broadly speaking, women engage in crime mostly as a result of circumstances they share with men, including poverty, low levels of education, blocked opportunities, unemployment, and troubled family backgrounds. Globalization, and in particular the interconnected processes of depauperization of the global South, migration, changes in family structure, and related crises of gender identity make these circumstances more complex, serious, and widespread (Hagedorn 2005; Moore 2007; Franko Aas 2013). Studies adopting a gender perspective, however, show that those factors may operate differently for males and females, that women suffer more from discrimination because of gender inequalities, and that those criminogenic factors may operate in different ways for women and men. This is true both for individual crime and for organized crime.

In this section, I discuss new insights that build on traditional criminological concepts and new arguments to explain the gender gap or understand female delinquent behavior in a gendered perspective. I focus on more gender-specific studies that are premised more on feminist concepts than on traditional criminological theories. I discuss here concepts and approaches developed to understand the gender gap and female delinquency in general. They offer important insights for efforts to understand women's involvement in organized crime.

Control theories, including those elaborated in Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) and Hirschi (1969), emphasize internal and external controls and posit that self-control and social bonds restrain people from committing crimes. The gender gap may result from differences in control of women by parents, or more generally by social structure, and by stronger attachment of women to social bonds. Some research has shown a gender-differentiating process of social bonding in which girls are more influenced than boys by some forms of bonds, although the results from empirical

research are somewhat inconsistent (De Coster, Heimer, and Cumley 2013, pp. 316–17). The balance of power between parents in a family seems to influence attachment bonds. Power control theory builds on traditional gender-neutral control theories from a gendered perspective, analyzing differences in attachment bonds related to power relations between fathers and mothers, reaching the conclusion that women in patriarchal families are less likely to engage in crime than are women in families with more balanced power relations between parents (Hagan, Simpson, and Gillis 1987).

Differential association is a gender-neutral theory of crime that posits that criminal behavior results from learning experiences. People exposed in social interactions to associations favorable to delinquency and crime are more likely to engage in it, varying with the frequency, intensity, duration, and persistence of associations (Sutherland 1947). Early associations favorable to crime in an intimate context such as the family are the most important for understanding why people engage in criminal behavior. Sutherland claimed that women are less likely to engage in delinquency because socialization processes and stronger controls on their lives make contacts with a delinquent environment less likely. There is empirical evidence supporting this view, summarized by De Coster, Heimer, and Cumley (2013, p. 323), showing that boys are more influenced than girls by peer associations and above all that boys' violent behavior is influenced by association with violent peers. This may explain why women are less involved in violence.

Learning theories have been reinterpreted in a gender perspective by Heimer and De Coster (1999). They showed that girls are not only more controlled than boys are by their parents, but that the learning process itself is gendered. In patriarchal societies, girls are more often acculturated to values of nurturance, passivity, dependence, and weakness than in other societies. Consequently, in thinking about learning processes, we need to consider not only definitions favorable to delinquency but also definitions of gender roles.

Although Ingrassì (2007*b*) did not set out to test any particular criminological theory, her work on women in Italian mafias refers to the importance of the learning experiences of both men and women growing up in a mafia "clan." Studies of women in Italian mafia groups, as I show below, provide important insights into gendered learning mechanisms and active roles that women play in transmitting criminal values within mafia families.

Strain theory and related ideas about blocked opportunities, relative deprivation, and poverty that conflict with conventional cultural goals are also gender-neutral. The different socializations of men and women concerning the importance of economic success and personal achievement may result in conditions of strain that work differently for women and men (Gilligan 1982; De Coster, Cornell, and Zito 2010). General strain theory, and particularly the work by Broidy and Agnew (1997), suggests that males and females may experience different types of strain and that emotional reaction to strain might be gendered. With the development in mainstream criminology of more gendered approaches, it became clear that women can be affected by the same class-based structural conditions that affect men, and attracted by the same cultural goals, but in different ways (Giordano, Deines, and Cernkovich 2006).

Labeling theory offers another common explanation of the gender gap. Starting from the premise that crime is often a result of a process of criminalization and resulting stigmatization and that deviance and crime are socially constructed, labeling theory posits differences between females and males that result mostly from law enforcement practices that treat women more leniently, aiming to limit, minimize, or avoid their involvement in the criminal justice system (Allen 1987). This approach does not help us understand why women engage in criminal behavior, or their different criminal patterns, but sheds light on women's lesser visibility in crime and differences in criminal justice processes.

The criminal justice system affects women's participation and roles in organized crime in two ways. First, although controversial, out of date, and lacking empirical clear evidence (Heidensohn and Gelsthorpe 2007, p. 399), the argument of "chivalry" by police, prosecutors, and courts toward female offending (Pollak 1961) may help explain why women in crime are often invisible. Second, how particular laws are enforced may affect criminal activity or a criminal organization in ways that sometimes keep women invisible and other times cause them to play more important roles. An example, which I discuss below, occurred when unprecedentedly severe law enforcement measures against Italian mafias in the 1980s and 1990s resulted in women playing more important organizational roles and shrank the traditional gender gap.

Women's greater or lesser visibility in the world of organized crime is thus sometimes a product of officials' decisions whether to report, arrest, and prosecute women and sometimes in legal or law enforcement changes that modify structural needs of criminal organizations. Other studies em-



phasize that deviant and criminal women, even when treated more leniently, suffer from a double stigmatization (Heidensohn 1996; Pitch 2002) resulting from their gender and their criminal activities. Ingrassi (2007*b*) provides examples of this double stigma on women in Italian organized crime.

Labeling theory, and related contemporary approaches such as cultural criminology, are useful in exploring other aspects of women's involvement in crime and in organized crime. Examples include the social construction and media representations of female offending, particularly in gangs and organized crime organizations.

## II. Emancipation and Gendered Approaches

Studies of women in crime reflect a wide array of approaches that range from adaptations of traditional criminological theories to more explicitly feminist or gendered perspectives that focus on factors that distinctively characterize female behavior and on feminist concepts. Some of these approaches reject the view that women, even when offenders, should be thought of as victims and emphasize women's capacity to behave as active agents, particularly concerning serious violence (Morrissey 2003).

The earliest important theorizing about women and crime was offered by Freda Adler (1975) and Rita J. Simon (1975). Their "emancipation" theory hypothesized that women's lesser criminality resulted from their restricted opportunities in the public sphere rather than from inherent differences between men and women. They predicted that gender gaps would shrink when women participated more actively and independently in the labor market and in the public sphere more generally. Adler expected involvement in violent crime to increase as women became less affected by cultural stereotypes of women's passivity and weakness. Simon focused on the effects of increased economic opportunities available to women in the labor market. Structural equality should mean that differences between genders and gendered behavior would blur and that women would become more involved in property crime.

These early feminist views were soon, and still are, criticized for oversimplifying relationships between women and crime, for their assumption that the causes of male and female offending are the same and develop in the same way, and for lack of supporting empirical evidence (Steffensmeier 1980; Pitch 2002; Heidensohn and Gelsthorpe 2007). The predictions Adler and Simon made proved to be wrong. Subsequent

empirical evidence has shown that the gender gap remains remarkably large for both minor crimes such as shoplifting and more serious criminality including involvement in organized and white-collar crime.

Simon and Adler's predictions about criminogenic effects of women's greater emancipation and fuller participation in the labor market also proved to be wrong. The increased presence of women in highly skilled jobs, for example, did not result in significant increases in women's involvement in traditional white-collar crime. Emancipation neither closed the gender gap nor changed existing gendered patterns in the types of crimes women were more and less likely to commit. Women's involvement in crime did not much change following greater emancipation in part because of "institutional sexism in the underworld" (Steffensmeier and Terry 1986, p. 304); illegal markets replicate general patterns of male dominance and gender stratification. This stratification is stronger for activities such as violence that require male "skills" including physical strength and ability to deal with competition, conflict, and organizational complexity.

Official data show some narrowing of the gender gap, but greater social and economic equality of women is not the reason. Women are mostly charged with minor crimes such as drug sales, frauds, and property crimes that are often products of poverty. Continuing inequality is more responsible than increasing equality for increases in female delinquency (Schwartz and Steffensmeier 2008; Beare 2010, p. 10).

Most of the literature on crime by women rejects emancipation theory in favor of gender-specific approaches, but it continues to offer an important frame of reference. Recent studies of women's seemingly more significant roles in Italian mafias, including in financing and administration of businesses and properties, reject emancipation theory but describe greater female emancipation in the whole society as a factor that might explain why some women acquire more significant roles (Siebert 2007; Ingrassi 2007*b*; Beare 2010).

Much of contemporary feminist criminology has shifted emphasis in efforts to explain the gender gap and differences in male and female delinquency from the effects of emancipation to the influences of patriarchy and gender inequality. This emphasis contributes to efforts to explain sexual and physical abuse in terms of men's power over women in a society that remains fundamentally dominated by patriarchal values. Lesser female delinquency is seen as a reproduction of the marginal roles that women perform in the conventional world. That marginality is said to explain why

women are underrepresented in the criminal world and disproportionately engage in minor or powerless forms of delinquency such as shoplifting and prostitution (Messerschmidt 1986).

Ideas about patriarchy, despite a lack of strong supporting empirical evidence, have contributed substantially to the evolution of research on female delinquency and a shift toward “intersectionality” perspectives that combine gender with other significant factors such as class and race.<sup>4</sup> They emphasize the importance of how particular organizational contexts are gendered (Zhang, Chin, and Miller 2007). Taking intersectionality seriously requires willingness to view gender differences as resulting simultaneously from inequality and other structural conditions such as race and class. The intersectionality perspective at the same time enriches and challenges feminist criminology and gendered approaches to female offending, not only for its theoretical complexity but also for feminist criminology’s difficulties in locating gender in a multidimensional paradigm (Burman and Gelsthorpe 2017, p. 216).

Chesney-Lind (1989) and Chesney-Lind and Sheldon (2004) offered a feminist perspective that focuses on the different effects of patriarchal society on the lives of men and women and on how distinctive female experiences can explain the gender gap and women’s delinquency. One important factor is familial sexual and physical abuse; it is often associated with deviant female careers that include misbehavior, transgression, delinquency, and crime. Abuse and violence in the family and later in the criminal milieu are often starting points in sequences of negative factors that explain female involvement in crime generally and in some criminal organizations (Giordano, Deines, and Cernkovich 2006).

Female victimization in violent male-dominated contexts sheds light on why women sometimes engage in offending as self-defense or as a coping strategy (Bottcher 2001). This is important in understanding women’s roles in organized forms of crime including gangs and mafia groups, and calls for replacement of traditional rigid distinctions between victims and offenders with more nuanced views.

From the very beginning, a gendered approach to women offending (and victimization) took into consideration how males’ experience in crime is shaped by expectations related to masculinity and the social construction

<sup>4</sup> Intersectionality theory requires not that women be “added” to a theoretical framework or that gender be treated as a variable in understanding crime, but that gender and gender relations be taken into consideration along with other variables such as class and race. Intersectionality theory asks different questions and challenges conventional theories (Yllö 2005).

of maleness (Cain 1990; Messerschmidt 1993; Connell 1995). This perspective is useful in improving understanding that gender roles are not “a fixed and determined set” (Burman and Gelsthorpe 2017, p. 215), but are part of a changeable process in which both masculinities and femininities are multiple and changeable.

Gendered hypotheses about women’s crime have moved away from an emancipatory perspective or from seeing it as a replication or subcategory of male behavior. Women’s crime is seen instead as an important phenomenon in itself. In this perspective, female delinquency is “rather a way of being and acting derived from history, long-term psychosocial processes, and the socializing processes that affect women” (Siebert 2007, p. 20). The focus is on how these characteristics shape women’s involvement in crime. Contemporary approaches emphasize gendered pathways to offending and, paralleling life-course studies, try to understand how lawbreaking unfolds in women’s lives and how much and in what ways this experience is affected by gender dynamics.

#### *A. Criminal Organizations*

In this section, I discuss female offending in gangs and mafia groups. There are, of course, other types of criminal organizations, but there is in these two fields a rich, gender-based, and often interdisciplinary literature that has enriched both criminology and gender studies in theory development, empirical variety, and depth. There are different types of gangs and mafia groups. I discuss here stable, long-term gangs and Italian mafia groups.

My focus is on women’s roles in these organizations, on their relationships with other members, on their criminal careers within the organization, and on the constraints and opportunities they experience, rather than on specific crimes in which they engage. The range of criminal behavior in these organizations is usually wide and often includes violent and property crimes organized collectively. There is some overlap with issues discussed in relation to illegal markets, given that many women in gangs or mafia groups are involved in drug dealing, human trafficking, and smuggling. Despite a shift in focus from criminal behavior to criminal organizations, the theoretical issues and scholarly controversies discussed above arise.

1. *Gangs.* Most US studies of women’s participation in collective delinquency concern gangs. Three patterns emerge. The first is membership in independent female gangs. Second is membership in mixed-gender

gangs that include female sections in predominantly male gangs. Third is the most traditional pattern of females as “auxiliaries” or “appendages” to male members. In this last case, female affiliation often arises from sentimental or kinship relations as girlfriends or sisters (Shelden, Tracy, and Brown 2013, p. 137).

Independent female gangs were first investigated in pioneering work by Ann Campbell (1984, 1990) in New York and by Carl Taylor (1993) in Detroit. They showed that women in female gangs rejected traditional female roles, used force and violence, and developed their own rules and values. They did not simply replicate or imitate male gangs. Taylor (1993, p. 48) claimed that “the gang generally does not differentiate between the sexes” and that women were not discriminated against within the gangs studied.

More recent works try to develop a better understanding of women’s roles and convey more nuanced pictures, challenging the images both of powerful female gang members (who are rare) and of girls as appendages (Miller 1998, 2001; Moore and Hagedorn 2001; Vigil 2008).

These studies show that women join, participate in, and leave gangs for some of the same reasons as men, but also for different ones. Like men, women join because of limited legitimate occupational and educational opportunities, or because of neighborhood characteristics and gang exposure (Miller 1998, 2001). However, they also join because of subordination to men and the “powerlessness” of underclass membership (Campbell 1990, p. 173), because of serious family problems and lack of parental supervision, and because of the presence in gangs of boyfriends, siblings, cousins, and friends (Miller 2002).

There are thus some gender-specific reasons why women join gangs. Needs for protection and support may be stronger for girls than for boys; neglect, abuse, and similar family problems play an important role (Moore and Hagedorn 2001). Gangs may seem to be a “safer” space for girls escaping abuse in the family, and a source of identity (Batchelor 2009). Friendships and love relationships are other important motivations. Miller (2002, p. 91), adopting a gender perspective, showed that women felt a sense of empowerment in joining a gang despite the risks of victimization and abuse. Gangs were thought to be refuges from sexual exploitation and abuse, and to offer protection from the harshness of life on the street.

These studies also investigate whether female delinquent activity differs from that of males. Gender roles in conventional society tend to be

replicated in gangs. Women in gangs are less involved in criminal activity in general than men, and in violent crime and homicide in particular, but are also less involved in noncriminal activities such as hanging around, drinking, and fighting. A few studies have concluded that there is no great difference between girls and boys in their involvement in minor crime and drug selling, but that criminal activities within the gang are influenced by gender roles expectations (Miller 2002, p. 87).

Similar findings have been reported in the United Kingdom by Batchelor (2009), who shows how violence, both verbal and physical, is committed by girls, particularly against other girls. A history of violence in the family and therefore a high level of toleration of violence, as well as a search for excitement and adrenaline were found in this study of gang girls in the United Kingdom. Violence was not only a way to replicate male behavior, but a consequence of specific contexts and particularly of the ideologies of working-class femininity: "Subordination and agency are simultaneously realized in young women's lives, and thereby demonstrates that there is no such thing as the essential 'gang girl'" (Batchelor 2009, p. 408).

Since female criminality in mixed gender gangs is influenced by perceptions of appropriate male and female roles, serious violence by females is less common (although fighting is a value for girls also), and firearms use is rare. Drug selling is common among girls, although patterns vary between gangs, and women can play very different roles.

Studies of violence by women in gangs tend mostly to discuss replication of male patterns of violence. This is different from studies I discuss below on violence by females in mafia organizations. They typically employ more sophisticated gendered analyses of the diverse ways violence can occur.

The gang literature uniformly shows that joining a gang has more serious consequences for females than for males, because violation of gender norm expectations results in additional social sanctions for women (Moore and Hagedorn 2001). Women are subjected to discrimination and blaming in their own family or community for violation of both behavioral standards and gender stereotypes, particularly in some ethnic groups (Moore 2007; Vigil 2008).

Another reason joining a gang may have more serious consequences for girls than for boys is that what girls expect to be a safer space can become a space of violence and abuse (Miller 1998, 2002). The gang world replicates gender inequality in the larger society and makes women more

vulnerable to violence and abuse. Finally, reasons for leaving a gang are different for boys and girls because motherhood plays an important role for girls.<sup>5</sup>

Recent studies that take account of intersectionality explore how gender is interconnected and reshaped by class and race. Vigil (2008) shows that membership by both girls and boys in Chicano gangs in Los Angeles can be explained by “multiple marginality” (combinations of such factors as massive immigration, low employment, poor neighborhoods that affect family structure and stability, school success, deviance, and involvement in crime) but that gender operates as an additional “marginalization factor” for girls.

Latina girls in traditional Mexican families experience stronger gender inequality because of rigid gender stereotypes and patriarchal dynamics. These stereotypes recur in Chicano gangs, and women occupy subordinate status. More independent girls are stigmatized both within and outside the gang. Even girls who are not passive auxiliaries of male gangs and play important, though supportive, roles experience discrimination and moral judgments, especially when they engage in unconventional sexual behavior. Vigil’s (2008) studies confirm that girls join gangs for the same reasons that boys do, but that stress in the family has a bigger effect on female gang membership, a history of sexual abuse is more common among female gang members than male gang members, and gang membership is more stigmatizing for females than for males.

The studies on women in gangs prompted a debate between some scholars who saw gang affiliation as liberating for women and others who stressed the “social injury hypothesis” (Joe and Chesnay-Lind 1995; Hagedorn 1998, p. 387). Proponents of the liberation hypothesis start from Adler’s (1975) idea that criminal activities can express emancipation and liberation for women and from Taylor’s (1993) studies of females in gangs. They assert that girls are not discriminated against in gangs and that joining a gang is a factor in their emancipation. Proponents of the social injury hypothesis stress that joining a gang is not a sign of emancipation because women suffer the same or worse forms of discrimination

<sup>5</sup> Hagedorn (1998, p. 388) found that “more than 98 percent of the 176 women who were the founding members of six Milwaukee female gangs left the gangs by the end of their teens. . . . Two thirds of the women became teen mothers and more than 90 percent were mothers before their mid-twenties.” The literature on desistance of women from gangs and from crime in general is not very well developed.

and sexual victimization in the gang as in the larger society (Hagedorn 1998; Moore 2007; Vigil 2008).

Women with any type of gang affiliation are more at risk than nongang girls of violence, abuse, and dependence, and suffer more from anxiety and depression than do their male counterparts. Initiation rituals and sexual violence seem to be common in a variety of North American gangs, but also in other countries, as Moore's (2007) accounts of biker gangs in New Zealand show.

Some studies embrace ideas from cultural criminology. They emphasize that gangs, redefined as "street organizations," represent a positive form of resistance for members, thereby giving women in gangs a different role. Brotherton and Barrios's (2004) and Brotherton's (2008) studies of the Almighty Latin Kings and Queens (ALKQ) challenge the view that women are "appendages" to men and describe a gendered resistance. "Many woman saw the gang as a resource while they strived both for increased autonomy and to fulfill traditional family obligations in economically distressed and culturally marginalized environments" (Brotherton 2008, p. 64). Women, Brotherton wrote, played important roles in influencing shifts from criminal activities and violence toward more prosocial and communitarian collective action. Even in the ALKQ, however, women were glorified as "the backbone" of the group and framed according to gender stereotypes. Motherhood and female qualities were emphasized, but sexual violence and abuse were not rare.

Similar patterns emerge in many studies of women in organized crime, especially in mafia groups, as I show in the next subsection.

2. *Italian Mafia Groups.* Italian mafias represent a highly specific form of organized crime, deeply embedded in history, tradition, ritual, and distinctive characteristics, and a complex phenomenon that has been the subject of extensive research. The complexity of the main mafia groups is expressed by this definition: "Systems with specific authorities, regimes, and structures, each of these systems interact with its environment, which consists in turn of other subsystems: political, judicial, economic, social, and so on; this interaction is necessary precisely because of the lack of autonomy in the systems themselves, which have no impermeable borders" (Principato 2007, p. 289). All these features shape the extent and characteristics of women's involvement; it has changed across space and over time and varies among the different mafia groups.

Women were long considered to be invisible in Italian mafias. Most recent criminological, historical, anthropological, and gender studies,



however, show that women often play important private and public roles that are essential to the organization's survival. Even when not directly involved in criminal activities, they contribute to the cultural transmission and protection of the family and its values (including criminal ones).

We know much more about the roles of women because of research that draws upon information from recent mafia trials and interviews with sentenced women. These sources fueled a new field of research on mafia, including on the roles of women. We know much more now than in earlier times about the internal functioning of mafia groups, and the extent and nature of female participation.

Ingrascì (2007*b*) summarized widely agreed reasons why women became visible in the 1970s. First, changes in the structure, nature, and organization of mafia groups generated shifts toward more entrepreneurial and transnational activities (Savona and Natoli 2007; Catino 2020). Second, broader emancipation and higher levels of education of women in Italy affected women in mafia families.<sup>6</sup> Third, and most important, stronger law enforcement targeting of mafia activities and enactment of harsher laws challenged mafia organizations. Organized crime groups responded by becoming more professional, smaller, more flexible, and less violence-oriented, and the roles of women became more important (Ingrascì 2007*a*, 2007*b*; Savona and Natoli 2007).

Emancipation of women resulted in higher levels of education for women in Italy, including women in mafia families. That is why women in mafia organizations acquired some administrative and financial roles. These roles did not conflict with their subordinate position, however, because they did not challenge traditional male values and because these new roles became necessary to respond to law enforcement pressures that affected male bosses. First, women in mafia families became owners of real estate and bank accounts in order to avoid confiscations under the "Rognoni-La Torre" law that targeted the finances and property of mafia bosses. Second, women began to play more operational and active roles because heightened law enforcement pressures in the 1980s and 1990s resulted in male leaders being arrested or killed or having to flee. There was a shortage of people in leading positions. Women of the family,

<sup>6</sup> Varese (2017, p. 122) is more skeptical. He acknowledges that mafias (not only Italian ones) are flexible organizations that can adjust rapidly to changes in the external environment, but observes that their structural embeddedness in sexist societies makes them very slow to accept women's emancipation.

in a culture in which kinship and family are the roots of the organization, could be trusted to represent the absent boss (Siebert 2010, p. 22; Ingrasci 2007*a*, 2007*b*).

That women replaced men who were arrested did not necessarily mean they acquired independent roles. They remained “guardians of the male powers,” ready to return to their more invisible world when the rightful owners of those powers returned (Ingrasci 2007*b*, pp. 78–79), and never really occupied or replaced men in powerful positions (Ingrasci 2010; Gribaudo 2010; Siebert 2010). Women, for instance, play active roles in ‘Ndrangheta but there are no examples of units or clans in which the leaders were women, or of official affiliation of women through mafia rituals;<sup>7</sup> that remains a male privilege. This, together with women’s exclusion from management of violence, allows little possibility of powerful roles (Varese 2017). However, there is evidence of changes across time and space, as I explain in the next subsection.

*a. Women in Cosa Nostra, ‘Ndrangheta, Camorra, and Sacra Corona Unita.* Differences in women’s experiences in the main Italian mafia groups relate to differences between the groups. Women affiliated with the Sicilian Cosa Nostra are traditionally considered to be loyal and subordinate wives, daughters, and sisters in the more rural, archaic, ritualistic, and hierarchical structures of Cosa Nostra compared with other mafia groups.

Studies of Calabria’s ‘Ndrangheta, which shares many organizational features with Cosa Nostra, show that women have become more actively involved in tasks that require skills, education, courage, and independence (Siebert 2007, p. 37; Ingrasci 2007*a*, 2007*b*, 2014). For both exogenous (changes in women’s condition in Italian society) and endogenous (changes in the structure of mafia groups) reasons, women in ‘Ndrangheta clans acquired significant roles and even some power. Ingrasci (2007*b*) explained how that happened. In the past, they had worked in drug trafficking, in subordinate positions as mules and dealers, and, though rarely, as organizers of drug dealing (as with Maria Serraino, whose story I tell below).

Women seem to play the most important roles in the Camorra (Gribaudo 2010; Allum and Marchi 2018).<sup>8</sup> The Camorra is a network of

<sup>7</sup> Women in ‘Ndrangheta can cooperate not as official members but in auxiliary roles as “sorelle d’omertà” (Ingrasci 2010, pp. 44–45).

<sup>8</sup> The research was based on analyses of judicial documents and on interviews with 4 of 20 female state witnesses in 2015.

groups with loose affiliation and, at least originally, was an urban phenomenon (Allum 2007; Catino 2020). Other developments and processes are important: demographic changes (fewer children), the introduction of maximum-security regimes in prisons for mafia-affiliated prisoners, and increased seizure and confiscation of assets. A wave of arrests and convictions during the 1990s opened new roles for women, even if mostly in subordinate positions. Under the maximum-security prison regimes, for instance, family visits were less restricted for women. They were more easily able to have direct contact with imprisoned bosses than were other mafia members. Camorra also in those years expanded its activities and became active in drug markets that required more entrepreneurial skills (Allum and Marchi 2018, p. 363).

Allum (2007, p. 16) concluded that “women in the city clans appear to have become more active and visible over the last ten years. When a power vacuum appears, intelligent women take over, they no longer merely defend their men but become active players.” It remains unclear, however, whether this is genuine female emancipation. Gribaudo (2010) claims that women in Camorra clans have more autonomy than in other Italian mafia groups and sometimes play active roles and use violence, including homicide, but that this does not necessarily mean that they exercise real power without male approval. According to Gribaudo, however, things are changing for younger generations, and it is foreseeable that gender and power relationships may change.

The participation of women in the *Sacra Corona Unita* has been much less studied. Its origins are more recent, and other groups’ influence, especially *’Ndrangheta* and Camorra, is important. Women became more involved mostly because of the incarceration of many male bosses. The prison terms of many *Sacra Corona Unita* leaders were long, but they continued to rule the organization from inside, using women visitors as messengers (Massari and Motta 2007).<sup>9</sup> Women in the *Sacra Corona Unita*, however, also played more skilled and partly autonomous roles. Massari and Motta (2007), on the basis of analyses of judicial documents, describe women acting as money collectors and managing and organizing

<sup>9</sup> Massari and Motta (2007, p. 57) describe women’s roles as messengers: “Given their weekly meetings with relatives in prison, members regularly turned to women to deliver notes for these relatives and were later promptly informed of the results of conversations or decisions. Similar dynamics were seen during trials, in which women were almost always present in the audience, profiting from the chance to communicate with their men. In some cases, these women’s homes became meeting places where matters of special interest were decided and referred later to the jailed family member.”

extortion, drug dealing, and cigarette smuggling. They played these roles mostly because of the need to replace an absent clan boss and following the boss's instructions (Massari and Motta 2007, p. 58).

Occasionally women managed more important activities or acted as administrators of sectors of the criminal market. A few acted as *consigliere*, making decisions about significant issues affecting the group including conflict resolution, vengeance planning, and distribution of roles and power. However, Sacra Corona Unita exhibits the usual mix of tradition and modernity and exemplifies the ambiguous and complex roles that women play in mafia groups.

*b. Roles That Women Perform in Mafia Groups: From Private, in the Shade Activities to the "Lady Bosses."* The variety of roles that women perform has been analyzed in great detail, mostly on the basis of judicial materials and interviews with women offenders. Many of these roles are essential to the functioning and survival of the organization but are not necessarily criminal in nature.

Dino (2007, p. 75) distinguishes among social, family, communication, and education roles and shows that women are both victims and perpetrators of "vendetta trasversali," or symbolic instruments used to counteract police control and judicial authorities. Considering these roles, and taking account of social, demographic, geographical, and criminological factors, Dino built a typology of women in mafia organizations: traditional wives who satisfy stereotyped expectations, women who are active participants in the organization, women who show a high degree of independence and autonomy and sometime oppose the mafia clan, women who are companions and lovers, and women who are mafia victims (Dino 2007, p. 76). Ingrascì (2007*b*) offered a narrower distinction between public and private roles and analyzed in depth the few figures who became strategically important in mafia organizations or who opposed mafia values as state witnesses.

Most women play low visibility but fundamental background roles as "the final links in the chain of the criminal organization" (Ingrascì 2007*a*, p. 50). They help maintain the logistical infrastructure of the group, provide services and assistance in the background, and support the social consensus that mafia groups foster.

Women also play more passive and private roles. Analyzing Cosa Nostra and 'Ndrangheta groups, Ingrascì (2007*b*, 2014) described the importance of family. Mothers play the most important role in cultural transmission of mafia values and codes of behavior, a function made

especially important by the frequent absence of males. Mothers transmit and sometimes inculcate mafia values and proper gender roles. Pizzini-Gambetta (1999) showed the significant role of women, particularly in the past, in providing emotional support to men, acculturating children into mafia values, and keeping the family functioning within the values and lifestyles of the mafia codes.

Ingrascì (2007*b*, p. 11) argues that these behaviors illustrate successful operation of differential association theory, because value transmission occurs in a private setting over a long period and starts early in life. Not only nurturing and care taking are involved. Mafia values include a culture of violence that women transmit and protect, including the “pedagogy of vendetta” (Ingrascì 2014, p. 65). Women inculcate and reinforce the importance of reacting violently to other clans’ attacks. Women keep memories of wrongs alive and routinely perpetuate the narrative of violence and the rituals of “vendetta” (Ingrascì 2007*b*, p. 25; see also Varese 2017, p. 126). Women are thus important figures in the chains of bloody murders that occur in mafia organizations, particularly during clan wars. This role is mostly performed in domestic settings, through conversations with relatives and friends; everyday violence dominates and shapes the lives of these women.

Mafia organizations use arranged and forced marriages to maintain power and control, strengthen networks based on blood ties, enlarge the size of the “cosca,” and even celebrate a peace after a conflict among different clans (Ingrascì 2014, p. 67). Women in organized marriages are usually passive objects (Ingrascì 2007*b*, p. 42). A rigid code of honor, based on control and violence, permeates the lives of many women involved in mafia groups; they are controlled not only by their men but also, when the men are absent, by the clan. Many cases of missing women turn out to involve women who were killed for breaking the code of honor (e.g., by committing adultery).

These archaic practices and cultural codes exist alongside other less passive features of women’s lives. Participation in criminal activities, sometimes in leading positions, has not been unusual. Occasionally women have been acknowledged as “sorelle d’omertà,” a role that is not comparable to that of a male affiliate.<sup>10</sup> In any case, women who reach high positions are

<sup>10</sup> That women are not allowed to become formal members of mafia groups (not just Italian ones), a process of ritual initiation, is the main reason why Varese (2017) doubts that women play full roles as active members.

rare. It is questionable whether they really exercise independent agency and power.

Ingrascì (2007*a*, 2007*b*, 2014), Siebert (2007), and Dino (2010) have offered case studies of women who appeared to be true bosses. The most famous is Maria Serraino, whose role was described in detail in witnesses' testimony and in investigative materials related to the Giovine-Serraino 'Ndrangheta clan, analyzed in depth by Ingrascì (2007*a*, 2007*b*). The clan moved from Calabria in the 1960s to a neighborhood of Milan that became its headquarters.<sup>11</sup> Connections with relatives and affiliated clans in Calabria remained active. The clan in Milan established a significant European network that was active mostly in transnational drug trafficking. Maria Serraino appeared not to be acting as a temporary replacement for a missing male but to be involved in decision making and in leading roles at the transnational level, activities for which, including murder, she was sentenced to life imprisonment.

Other women in the clan included her daughter-in-law and her granddaughter, Marisa di Giovine, who grew up in England with an English mother in a nonmafia family but moved to Milan to work with her father. Rita Di Giovine, Maria Serraino's oldest daughter, became a state's witness after she was arrested; it is from her interviews that we learned about her clan and the condition of women in it.

Journalistic accounts made these women visible to a larger public; the press referred to them as the "Mafia rosa" (pink mafia). The sensationalization expresses a traditional way to interpret female delinquency: following an old idea by Lombroso, women who engage in crime are "more criminal" than is normal. Emphasis on these "lady bosses," compared with the stereotype of the invisible, passive wife, exacerbates the dualism through which female crime has often been interpreted (Ingrascì 2007*b*, p. 100). However, even in these cases, women were allowed to play those roles only when they did not challenge traditional mafia values. "The underworld code requires that the woman, even when she shows a clear tal-

<sup>11</sup> 'Ndrangheta has spread more in recent decades than other Italian mafia groups into nontraditional mafia areas including northern Italy and elsewhere in Europe. On the mobility of mafia, see Varese (2011) and Calderoni et al. (2016). There is almost no research on how dispersion of Italian mafia groups affected female involvement in criminal activity. For an exception, see Allum (2016). However, there is evidence that internalization of illegal business required a change in the traditional structure of the organizations and contributed to more significant involvement of women in less passive roles.

ent as a leader, is always acting alongside a man” (Ingrascì 2007*b*, p. 71).

*c. Emancipation, Pseudo-Emancipation, or Persistent Inequality?* The variety of roles women play in mafia groups brings us back to the core issue in analyzing women in organized crime. Are these new roles evidence of real power in criminal organizations and of women’s liberation in the underworld, or are traditional gender roles replicated in new, more opaque forms? For sure, the extent and visibility of women in mafia groups have increased as a consequence of greater participation by women and more punitive judicial attitudes (Ingrascì 2014, p. 64).

Maria Serraino highlights ambiguous aspects of the emancipation hypothesis. Interviews with her daughter Rita by Ingrascì (2007*b*) shed light on these powerful female figures. Serraino always needed male approval for her actions and was repeatedly beaten by her husband. Rita was repeatedly raped by her brother beginning when she was nine. Her account confirms that even powerful women in an ‘Ndrangheta clan experience everyday violence; that their leadership roles are consequences of crises, not the rule; and that often they were given those roles only because their activities would be less scrutinized by the police than those of men (Ingrascì 2007*a*, p. 51). In the end, even in a mafia group in which women sometimes play apparently remarkable roles, it is difficult to find evidence of meaningful emancipation or liberation.

Ingrascì (2007*a*, p. 52) refers to pseudo-liberation in a world dominated by men and their values. Female power is usually provisional even when women successfully participate in criminal activities such as extortion that involve violence and intimidation (Principato and Dino 1997; Ingrascì 2007*b*).

Other scholars write of “feminization” in the case of Camorra, denying that a real process of internal emancipation is occurring (Zaccaria 2010). Some describe temporary delegation of power, a term first proposed by Principato and Dino (1997) and subsequently used widely in studies of women in mafia groups. Still others remain skeptical about roles women play. Pizzini-Gambetta (2009) and Varese (2017) argue that women in mafia groups never “administer” the use of violence, are always subordinate, and are allowed to participate only because of family ties.

Allum and Marchi (2018, p. 367) argue that use of the word emancipation, even when modified by “pseudo” or “ambiguous,” is misleading: “Despite their apparent sentimental independence and professional ascent, a more attentive look at the processes of female involvement in

the Camorra reveals some elements that point in the opposite direction, unveiling a deeply rooted male-centered and male-dominated mentality which seems to persist at the heart of the whole criminal system” (p. 368).

Women in Camorra, Allum and Marchi (2018, p. 375) write, despite having seemingly more unconventional lifestyles and despite the extent of their involvement in mafia activities including violence, are involved only as a “reserve army,” as “soldiers on standby.” The reality is not emancipation but only the use of “human resources for the clan” (p. 377); it is irreconcilable with a liberation hypothesis.

Similarly, Gribaudo (2010), who analyzes the roles of women in Camorra groups, including those who commit homicides and acquire some autonomy, concludes that emancipation is not the right word to describe the conditions of women still in between modernity and tradition. Similarly, Fiandaca (2007, p. 4) asked, “Are we in a real sense dealing here with a form of expressive emancipation in a passage from cultural tradition to modernity? Or is this a form of ‘partial,’ ‘incomplete,’ or ‘apparent’ emancipation characterized by a persistent hybridization between tradition and modernity?” This is a recurring and still open question concerning women in organized criminal organizations. Mafia organizations, their family-based structures, their rigid social control (also on men), and the narrow worlds in which lives are constrained do not justify description of the conditions of these women’s lives as “emancipated” (Siebert 2010).

*d. Women Who Leave.* Italian law permits remarkably milder sentences for informers and offers a protection program that includes the possibility of starting a new life under a new identity. These have proven to be powerful tools against Italian mafias. Desistance or withdrawal from a mafia group is not easy, however, because of high risks of retaliation. Many state witnesses and relatives of witnesses have been attacked or killed.

Women in mafia organizations sometimes support their partners’ decisions to cooperate with the judiciary. Women sometimes play a role in persuading their men to cooperate. Support by wives or partners is essential in helping men deal with challenges and complexities of living a clandestine life (protected by the state) and build a new identity. Brazilian Maria Cristina De Almedia Guimaraes, wife of the well-known former mafia boss Tommaso Buscetta, is an example. Her support was indispensable to his cooperation (Ingrasci 2007b, pp. 140–41).

A remarkable number of women have left their mafia families and become state witnesses. They do so for diverse reasons. Some cooperate not



because of a transformative process of redemption but to reaffirm a core mafia value: vengeance. This sometimes happens after a male family member, usually a husband or partner, sometimes a son, has been killed by a rival group. These women express their roles as protectors of the values of the clan and cooperate only to achieve vengeance they cannot otherwise obtain.

Other women, described by Ingrasci (2014) as “agents of change,” experience a transformative process that leads them to become state witnesses. Female emancipation, challenges to mafia culture and violence expressed by antimafia associations, and reactions of civil society have helped women leave the clans and enter into protection programs. The numbers are small but are increasing gradually.

This is a difficult process for already vulnerable women. Some, persuaded by family members to stop cooperating and leave the protection program, end up being killed or committing suicide. Only a few women have successfully navigated the cooperation and protection processes and achieved new lives (Ingrasci 2014, p. 76).

Concerns about children provide reasons both to leave the mafias and to remain (Dino 2010), but there are others. Leaving an organized crime group is risky. Many women are unable to accept the risks and use other coping mechanisms and survival techniques within the family to protect themselves and their children.

The decision to cooperate often results from realization of a need to escape the violence and control of the family and the clan. Those cases reflect an emancipatory process associated with an interior change of perspective, often provoked by the killing of a loved one. It is not the wish for vengeance that animates such women, but the need to escape from fear and everyday violence. These women choose innovation over continuity. “Women who collaborate demonstrate their ability to capitalize on the emancipatory influence acknowledged by the whole of society, being agents of change on two levels: one of self-determination and the other of transmission” (Ingrasci 2014, p. 79) of a different model of being a woman.

Emancipation is easier for women who were never seriously involved in their men’s criminal activities or whose natal family was not part of a mafia clan (as is true of some women who support their men’s decisions to cooperate). Sometimes the decision to cooperate is a first step in a long and risky process that results in true emancipation and initiation of a new life.

Becoming a *pentita* is harder for women than for men. “In a situation marked by dependency, becoming a protagonist demands a special effort, an even greater effort. Acting for oneself in the first person has, in these cases, to be invented from scratch; there are no tradition or cultural models, there are no examples to emulate, no known paths to follow” (Siebert 1996, p. 87). Becoming a state witness is not a normal aspect of desistance from crime but an extreme one. It requires fundamental changes and abandonment of one’s identity and implies complex psychological dynamics (Cayli 2016).

These women are often anxious to talk to researchers. Their stories provide incredibly rich source materials.

### *B. Women in Organized Illegal Markets*

Organized crime encompasses a wide variety of criminal behavior engaged in by groups in systematic and more or less structured ways. Definitions and delineations among different criminal activities of organized crime groups have always been difficult to specify, as have borders between legal and illegal markets. Globalization and the spread of neoliberal policies have blurred the traditional “distinction between organized crime groups violating the law and deviating from conformity, and legal business allegedly complying with official rules” (Vande Walle 2002, p. 279). This has contributed to conceptualization of a new organized crime category, transnational crime, which embraces a variety of collective criminal behaviors, sometimes defined as “transit crimes.” They include human trafficking, human smuggling, drug trafficking, fraud, and money laundering (Kleemans, Kruisbergen, and Kouwenberg 2014).

The transnational character of much organized crime has helped shed light on roles and functions of women but poses new challenges to traditional and feminist criminological theories. “Today, organized crime is increasingly transnational and the role of women should be analyzed specifically in regard to transnational flows, new markets, products, and clients, and international migrations” (Siegel 2014, p. 57).

A comparative approach, a gender perspective, and a qualitative and interdisciplinary methodology are especially likely to be fruitful in understanding women’s involvement in transnational organized crime. Local peculiarities and specific contexts must also be taken into consideration; there are significant differences in women’s involvement across countries and cultures.

Although transnational organized crime includes a wide range of criminal enterprises, I discuss women's involvement only in specific illegal markets: human trafficking, smuggling, and drug trafficking. Many studies of the role and presence of women in drug trafficking, however, focus on national markets that operate in an organized way but mostly or only at the local level.

1. *Human Trafficking.* Human trafficking is one of the "fastest growing criminal enterprises" (Blank 2013, p. 55). Women are involved in diverse ways as offenders and as victims, in particular in trafficking for sexual exploitation. Most research on women focuses on them as victims, and only in recent years have their roles as offenders begun to receive attention.

At the international level, and notwithstanding the low reliability of cross-national studies based on national arrest and conviction data, women seem to be involved at higher rates as offenders in human trafficking than in other types of transnational crime (Broad 2015). The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) reported that women investigated for trafficking in persons, in 2016, were 31 percent, and that 38 percent were convicted (UNODC 2018, p. 35). Numbers are particularly high in the Balkans, above all in Moldova, Romania, Ukraine, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. In some of these countries, Surtees (2008) found that starting from 2004, the majority of recruiters were female; the same was true in African regions. Dutch Prosecution Service data for 2011–15 show that 17 percent of people suspected of human trafficking were women, with higher percentages in some periods and in trafficking for sexual exploitation (Wijkman and Kleemans 2019). The data from these two sources are not comparable for geographical, definitional, and methodological reasons, but they show that women's involvement as human trafficking offenders is substantial.

Trafficking is "viewed as a process, involving recruitment, transportation between countries or within one country, and control in the place of destination" (Blank 2013, p. 58). Women are involved in almost all these stages. They seem to be especially successful in some key activities such as bookkeeping, money laundering, and above all recruiting, which requires persuasive skills, and victims tend to trust women more than men (Surtees 2008, p. 45; Beare 2010, p. 49).

Beare (2010, p. 50), drawing on a Europol report, describes more detailed roles: providing false or counterfeit identity and travel documents; corruption of law enforcement officers or other civil servants; management

of “safe houses”; working as pimps; ownership or management of premises or properties where victims are exploited such as bars, nightclubs, brothels, factories, hotels, construction sites, and farms; collection, delivery, and distribution of the profits of trafficking; money laundering; and management of assets and crime proceeds.

These activities vary between countries and with the types of organization involved. Human trafficking provides a wide range of seemingly gender-neutral criminal activities for women, but most studies show that women do not play leading roles. Responsibility for the organization of the criminal enterprises and control of gains mostly remain male business (UNODC 2014, 2016).

National studies show the same results, with a few exceptions I discuss below. Wijkman and Kleemans (2019) mostly confirm that female offenders play low-level roles in the Netherlands (housing victims, controlling victims, exploiting, confiscating documents and passports). However, this could be misleading and result at least partly from defense lawyers’ efforts to minimize women’s roles in order to increase their chances of acquittal.<sup>12</sup> An earlier, more limited study of female traffickers in the United Kingdom provided somewhat similar results concerning women’s involvement at lower levels (Broad 2015).<sup>13</sup> Thus, while human trafficking presents criminal opportunities for women worldwide, more in some areas than in others, it appears to be uncommon for women to acquire leading roles.

This may be different in some places including Ghana, Nigeria, and some parts of the Balkans. Women from Nigeria and Ghana seem to have achieved significant positions in organization and management of prostitution and human trafficking, particularly when they act as “madams” who control the transit process (Siegel and de Blank 2010; Hübschele 2014).

Arsovska and Begum (2014) studied West African and Balkan women involved in a variety of transnational organized crime activities on the basis of a “multicultural feminist perspective.” Their findings challenge competing stereotypes of the weak and subordinated victim and the “femme fatale.” The multicultural emphasis assumes that places have specific

<sup>12</sup> The study is based on Dutch Prosecution Office files of women over 18 years old who were a suspect and convicted of human trafficking during 1991 to 2016. The files do not give full accounts of individuals’ behavior and motivations.

<sup>13</sup> The study relies on quantitative data on females convicted of human trafficking from 2004 to 2008, augmented by a qualitative analysis.

features and peculiarities that include the history of the country or area from which women come. The study, based on existing literature, international reports, and police files, looked at Nigerian and Ghanaian women working as bosses in human trafficking for sexual exploitation and at two groups of Balkan women, one Slavic and one based mostly in Albania and Bosnia.

The Nigerian women were independent agents who possessed substantial autonomy. So did the Slavic Balkan women who were typically of higher social status than the Albanian and Bosnian women who occupied less powerful roles in the same market. Compared with other Balkan countries, Albania and Bosnia have stronger patriarchal cultures and traditional patterns of deeper female subordination. Arsovska and Begum (2014, p. 106) concluded that “it is impossible to utilize one theory of female criminality to explain the variety of trends” and that each analysis needs to be context-specific.

Lo Iacono (2014) studied the mobility of Nigerian women in the Italian sex market and found that roles of victims and perpetrators were intertwined. There was no clear dichotomy. Female Nigerian offenders in human trafficking for sexual exploitation often earlier had been victims.

McCarthy (2019), who studied women in human trafficking in Russia, likewise argues that both a gender perspective and empirical analyses of the context are necessary to overcome traditional stereotypes. She found that female Russian traffickers could be successful as organizers or co-organizers (and not necessarily with male partners) of human trafficking for sex, labor, children, and human organs.

There is scholarly disagreement about the autonomy of women in human trafficking markets, but findings are more consistent about reasons why women become engaged. Most are from deprived backgrounds and became involved through family or kinship networks. Poverty and blocked opportunity seem to be important worldwide, as do kinship networks and previous or current relationships with men involved in the illegal market. Wijkman and Kleemans (2019) summarized motivations: being afraid of male co-offenders’ reactions, need and willingness to cooperate with a partner, and becoming an offender in order to cease being a victim. Thus, only some of the reasons for becoming involved in human trafficking are similar for men and women (poverty and blocked opportunities in their country); others are gender-specific.

These studies shed light on an important issue concerning women in organized crime generally: the often blurred boundaries between victims

and perpetrators. Women who become perpetrators often have earlier been victims. Becoming a perpetrator sometimes offers escape from being sexually victimized and abused (Broad 2015). Surtees's (2008) study in the Balkans offers further evidence of these intertwined roles for women, showing that some female recruiters were unaware of the risks of exploitation for the recruited women, or were "former or current trafficking victims who were obliged by their traffickers to return home and recruit other women, often under the scrutiny of people working for the trafficker to ensure compliance and prevent escape" (p. 44).

2. *Human Smuggling.* Human trafficking and human smuggling overlap, but neither sexual exploitation nor mafia involvement is normally an element of human smuggling (Campana 2020). Sometimes, however, when smuggled persons are not allowed to move freely on reaching their destinations or when they have financial problems, they become trafficking victims (Blank 2013).

There are fewer studies on female involvement in human smuggling than in human trafficking, even though a pivotal study in the development of a gender perspective on women in organized crime involved smuggling. Following Steffensmeier's (1983) observation that the organizational context is fundamental to understanding women's involvement in organized crime, and adopting a gender perspective that emphasizes the market's organizational structure, Zhang, Chin, and Miller (2007) investigated Chinese human smuggling through 129 interviews, including 23 with participating women.

Particular features of the market facilitated women's involvement and helped them achieve leadership positions. One was that clients tended to rely upon women more than on men because smuggling was not locally viewed as a crime but as a sort of social service. Helping someone migrate was seen as a service to the community, and women were more comfortable providing a service than they might have been doing something seen as antisocial. Community acceptance functioned as a form of neutralization

Other factors affected women's involvement, including Chinese cultural norms that support women's work in the labor market, and increases in divorce rates and women's consequent needs to support themselves, sometimes by illegal means (Shen and Antonopoulos 2016). Family relationships were the most common factor that led women to enter this illegal world, together with needs for money and pursuit of independence and excitement. Shen and Antonopoulos concluded that gender stratification was limited and that women played important roles in a predominantly male

illegal activity and were involved in a variety of tasks, and not only in less powerful and more marginal capacities.

Kleemans, Kruisbergen, and Kouwenberg (2014) tested Zhang et al.'s gendered market hypothesis and could not confirm it in other contexts, such as human trafficking for sexual exploitation, fraud, and money laundering. They examined a wider range of criminal activities categorized as organized crime, using files and data from the Dutch Organized Crime Monitor.<sup>14</sup> They found that involvement of women in organized crime activities was more a matter of networks and trust than of blocked opportunities, and was related to complexity and transnationality. Complexity requires more individual skills and individual access. Social embeddedness and "brokerage" (the capacity to serve as "bridges" among isolated networks) may help explain when and under what conditions women play a role.

The hypothesis that particular markets are gender-specific was not confirmed. Women were involved in a variety of activities (mostly low-level but also sometimes in leading positions) and in different markets. Their involvement was more "a question of (individual) capacity and individual access" and was better explained by social embeddedness and brokerage (Kleemans, Kruisbergen, and Kouwenberg 2014, p. 28). A study of Nigerian madams working not in smuggling but in human trafficking for sexual exploitation also showed that brokerage capacity, networks, and relational systems at the transnational level help make women more successful (Mancuso 2014). However, the literature is small and the findings are best described as suggestive. More especially qualitative research is needed.

3. *Drug Trafficking.* Theoretical controversies concerning human trafficking and smuggling recur in studies of the role of women in drug trafficking nationally and transnationally. Most attention centers on women's roles either as leaders with full agency or as support players in a mostly male business. Differently from human trafficking and smuggling, however, there is a fair amount of drug market research based on female offenders' accounts of their experiences.

The reasons women start careers in the drug market are partly the same as men's and partly different. For women from deprived backgrounds, needs for money and access to drugs for personal consumption are

<sup>14</sup> Data refer to 247 women investigated for activities, mostly "transit crimes," in organized groups. They constituted 11 percent of all people involved.

important. Beare (2010, p. 57) found that women involved in drug trafficking in Canada were mostly nonwhite, socially marginalized, and in desperate need of income. Economic needs led them to become involved. Other reasons are more gender-specific. For instance, Fagan (1994, 1995) found that drug selling, when it generated enough income, enabled women to avoid working as prostitutes.

The gender stratification that characterizes organized crime markets generally tends to be replicated in local and transnational drug trade markets. Most research concludes that women usually play less powerful roles than men and perform less important activities. Women are often considered to be unreliable, weak, and unable to deal with the code of the street.

Women in drug smuggling often work as “mules” and take high risks for very low rewards (Boyd 2006). They almost never play important organizational roles or make independent decisions, their status is low, and they are more often a victim than an independent agent (Fagan 1994; Maher and Daly 1996; Denton and O’Malley 1999). Maher (1997), using an intersectionality perspective, showed that gender inequality was reproduced in the street drug market, limiting women’s opportunities and placing them in disadvantaged positions compared with men. She also showed, however, that female lawbreakers were not always passive victims of male domination.

An increasing number of studies show that in some circumstances, and varying with characteristics of the market, some women perform active roles in drug trafficking and acquire more leading positions, and not only because they are friends or partners of men. Not all drug markets are the same. Denton and O’Malley (1999, p. 528), in a study of female drug dealers in Melbourne, found that the more fragmented, smaller, and locally based the market, the greater the likelihood that women occupied leading positions. Other factors associated with women’s success included their reputations, their social networks, support from families and friends, personal skill, and a “business acumen” (p. 528). Women seemed to suffer less discrimination in smaller markets in which they operated as capable agents and where they could use their female resources and skills, not only to survive, but to acquire some independence. They attract less police attention than do men and can survive better in the illegal world (Denton and O’Malley 1999; Denton 2001).

Recent studies emphasize that women can play important roles in drug trafficking criminal organizations. More complex, organized, and trans-



national markets may be more susceptible to greater female involvement in autonomous and independent roles (Siegel 2014). Some women described in the literature acquired legendary auras and apparently dominated illegal drug markets and managed violence. Examples, such as Griselda Blanco (“the cocaine cowgirl”), leader of a successful drug market between Miami and Medellín (Smith 2013), and similar figures in other markets, have been cited to illustrate that women can operate successfully in drug trafficking (Siegel 2014, pp. 54–55; Martín 2015) and should be able to do so in other illegal markets.

Fleetwood’s (2014) qualitative study on drug mules provides rich and especially well documented evidence of the independent roles women, under some circumstances, can play in international drug trafficking. This study shows that small, flexible, and temporary groups, based on connections among the people involved, either by kinship, friendship, or ethnic networks, allow women to be active agents and not just passive victims.

Anderson (2005), studying dimensions of women’s power in illegal drug markets, proposed a new theoretical framework to help understand their positions. She analyzed four core activities that women routinely perform in drug-dealing organizations (housing and sustenance, purchasing drugs, subsidizing male dependency, and participating in drug sales). She demonstrated that women are sometimes powerful actors in the drug world and that their activities are crucial, although often misunderstood. What is important, she says, is how the roles women play in the organizations are interpreted.

Anderson (2005, pp. 372–73) calls for rejection of the dominant narrative of women as victims and passive actors and urges that “empowerment” (defined as the ability and competence to influence and achieve desired outcomes) and “agency” (defined as the ability to benefit others as well as the self, and in terms of actions that bring about these outcomes) can help give visibility to their roles. This reconceptualization is conceived not only in relations of dominance and control, but also as a “competency and ability to achieve desired ends” that “empowers” women in this context (Anderson 2005, p. 372).

This work raises interesting issues about “supportive roles.” A supportive role, in a gendered perspective that gives values to female skills and competencies, is not marginal and could be as powerful as a decision-making position. In any case, supportive roles are fundamental for survival of an organization; without them organizations could not function and survive (Anderson 2005).

Grundetjern and Sandberg (2012), drawing on life stories of convicted female drug dealers, demonstrate that women can use creative strategies and try to “transcend a marginal position” (p. 633).<sup>15</sup> Smartness and female skills can help women obtain successful entrepreneurial roles: “being a woman can even be an advantage” (Grundetjern and Sandberg 2012, p. 623). Even if men dominate this world, women find ways to survive and gain visibility and respect. Strategies for coping with their marginal positions are mostly based on assuming and replicating male values.

Grundetjern and Sandberg (2012) try to find a third alternative that incorporates both the “traditional victim approach and the contemporary empowering approach to female drug dealers” (p. 624). They focus on “street capital,” which “points to the importance of early socialization and the practical rationality involved when people start dealing illegal drugs” and “also develops a middle position between individual agency and structural constraints, which is essential to understand the position of female dealers” (p. 625). Street capital is easier for males to accumulate than for females, who need to develop strategies to survive the imbalance.

Holligan and McLean (2019), in a similar study, studied women in a drug market in west Scotland through an intersectionality lens. They emphasize how changes in urban informal economies after postindustrialization affect these practices. They conclude, however, that there is no hope of “liberation” for women in this world and that their subjugation to overarching violent masculinity remains strong. This resembles some findings about the roles of women in gangs.<sup>16</sup>

The most recent literature argues against generalization, in order to avoid stereotypical representations of women in the drug market either as poor victims or as successful operators working in the shadow of powerful male drug dealers. Most important, however, is attention to the context, its history and culture, and roles performed.

Campbell’s (2008) study of female drug smugglers on the American-Mexican border sheds light on the roles women play in a market shaped by a deeply patriarchal and violent culture. Even in this context, women play a variety of roles: a few who are freely involved and exercise agency,

<sup>15</sup> Grundetjern and Sandberg (2012, p. 626) single out four strategies: desexualization, violent posture, emotional detachment (self-identification with male values, attitudes, and behaviors), and service-mindedness (a more gender-neutral role of “entrepreneur” or “seller”).

<sup>16</sup> As in this case, the study of women in the drug market often relates to women’s activities in gangs.

who acquire power and become models for others; middle-level women who succeed but do not experience real empowerment; and women in marginal roles, associated with low-level male smugglers, who are the most victimized. In general, this world is dominated by males; abuse and violence are common, above all for middle- and low-level women. Chances to operate freely and independently are few and occasional (Campbell 2008).

### III. Conclusion

Reinterpretations of conventional theories of crime through a gender perspective often describe the female offender as a woman who is “sexually abused by a stepfather or other male relative; runs away from home to escape from the abuse; engages in illegal activities as a survival strategy; comes into contact with other males who either foster or demand further involvement in illegal activities, including prostitution; may self-medicate with drugs and/or alcohol to cope with the abuse and other demoralizing experiences she has encountered on the street, including violence from a male partner” (Giordano, Deines, and Cernkovich 2006, p. 22).

In this essay, I characterize the criminal experience of women in organized crime groups somewhat differently. Some things, such as the common experience of sexual abuse before or while participating in criminal groups, may be the same. This is the most common characteristic of women who participate in organized crime groups, from gangs and drug dealing to human trafficking and mafia groups. Some women enter into criminal groups mostly as a survival strategy. This may be commonplace in drug trafficking and street gangs, but it is not for other forms of organized crime, particularly for women involved in mafia groups because of family connections.

Kinship and love relationships are fundamental to understanding female involvement in organized crime. This seems to be true for human trafficking, smuggling, and participation in street or drug gangs, and it is the rule for involvement in Italian mafia groups. The case of Marisa di Giovine, Maria Serraino’s granddaughter, is illuminating. Despite having grown up in England, completely apart from a mafia environment, she chose to return to Italy when she was 18 and to enter the clan run by her grandmother and father (Ingrascì 2007*b*). This shows not only the power of kinship but also how seductive and attractive organized crime’s promises of a glamorous and rich life can be.

Siegel (2014) discusses other interesting case studies such as Nigerian “madams” who made money in the sex industry, demonstrated their success in their home communities, and became role models for other women. The allure of easy money, jewels, expensive cars, and other status symbols can lead young women, not differently from young men, to dream of a different and better life. Understanding of how these successful role models are conveyed and how they influence other women’s criminal choices can draw on traditional concepts of cultural goals and limited opportunity, but would benefit from insights from cultural criminology and from analyses of the power of representations of crime engagement as a path to a glamorous and exciting life (Siegel 2014, p. 63).

Another understudied subject that requires attention is the relationship between women and violence in organized criminal groups. According to Pizzini-Gambetta (2009, pp. 270–71), “as long as women need to delegate violence I doubt that matriarchy will replace patriarchy in mafia or camorra groups since violence and command cannot be parted in that industry. When competition among Camorra families strikes, weapons count more than networking abilities.”

Studies of women in mafia groups show, however, that women sometimes (if temporarily) replace men in leadership roles and achieve the power to command violence and killings. In one case, described by Grubaudi (2010), women belonging to two Camorra clans in conflict organized and carried out a shooting in which four women of the other clan were killed, and one was seriously injured. This is, however, quite unusual. Women exercise their (small) fraction of power differently than men do, and the capacity occasionally to use violence does not necessarily mean real empowerment. Studies of how women in Italian mafia groups perform violence, for instance in keeping the narrative of violence alive and engaging in the “pedagogy of vendetta,” demonstrate this gender difference (Ingrascì 2007*b*, 2014; Varese 2017). Violence, in mafia cultural codes, also means threats and not only real physical violence.

Violence may be less important in other forms of organized crime. Female drug dealers studied by Denton and O’Malley in Melbourne seldom needed to use violence, either because it was unnecessary or because they could be persuasive in other ways.<sup>17</sup> This and similar studies show three important things about relations between women and violence: first, use

<sup>17</sup> The same happens for recruiters in human trafficking or smuggling, as the studies I discussed show.

of violence depends on the characteristics of the market; second, women “may operate effectively [in a drug market] without conforming to male-centered visions of what is needed in the business” (Denton and O’Malley 1999, p. 521); and third, women seldom use violence but use other forms of intimidation. This resembles the female Chinese smugglers studied by Zhang and colleagues who avoided violence not because of unwillingness or inability, but because their activity implied different techniques. In short, adopting a gender perspective to understand women’s violent behavior in organized crime implies a need to reinterpret violence not only as replication of male behavior but as a product of different socialization processes and of personal experience of victimization.

Another subject that needs fuller investigation is how the condition of being both victims and perpetrators of violence affects women in organized crime. Studies of gangs and drug-dealing groups have explored this in depth, but we need to know more about how growing up in a violent environment affects women’s lives, particularly in mafias and in transnational forms of organized crime.

Women in mafia groups, gangs, and illegal drug markets are often exposed to sexual violence and intimate partner abuse. These women, like most of their men, also experience violence in the community, and particularly in communities dominated by mafia groups in which violence permeates everyday life. Few studies<sup>18</sup> have explored how this exposure to violence affects women’s violent behavior in organized crime. Findings in other fields, such as Ayuero and Burbano de Lara’s (2012) on the “violence in chains” that characterizes the lives of children and adults in deprived Argentinian barrios, offer a useful theoretical framework for conceptualizing violence in more thoughtful ways.

Other issues deserve attention. One concerns desistance from involvement in organized crime. The milieu shapes desistance processes in distinctive ways, because networks (sometime family networks) are involved. Desistance requires not only withdrawal from criminal activities but often breaking a kinship network that may react hostilely or violently, and abandoning a whole life experience. There is a literature that explores female desistance from mafia and gang involvement, but studies of desistance from organized crime (e.g., Bovenkerk 2011) are gender-neutral.

<sup>18</sup> Siebert (2007, p. 25) mentions how women experience violence in their surrounding environment and proposes an analogy to living in times of war.

Other important relevant issues are unexplored, unclear, or controversial. The role of globalization processes has been explored only scantily, mostly in studies of human trafficking and smuggling or transnational gangs. How globalization processes affect female offending and whether its influence is gender-neutral or gender-specific remains unclear. Moore (2007), who analyzed women in gangs in the context of globalization processes and in the economic, cultural, and social crisis that globalization provokes, raised interesting theoretical issues, but they were not based on empirical research findings.

We need more case studies, for more countries, and for different kinds of organized crime to understand how globalization affects the experiences of women. For drug trafficking, it would be important to understand how new online markets influence the involvement of women. More broadly, how will this restructuring of illegal markets, which implies moving away from “the code of the street” and its violence, affect female offending.

A related question is how women are affected by movement of mafia groups from their original areas to nontraditional ones. Of the cases I discussed, only Maria Serraino achieved a leading position in a mafia group that moved to northern Italy. Do local conditions in a new area reshape women’s participation, or are their roles not influenced by the operational context?

Finally, studies on women in organized crime would benefit from emphasis on masculinity and male values, considering how significant they are in these contexts, and particularly in criminal organizations such as mafia groups and gangs.

Three takeaways: First, the gender perspective on gender relations, gender characteristics of markets, and the distinctiveness of female experience in organized crime have provided critical and fundamental insights. Second, this perspective challenges traditional distinctions between victims and perpetrators and conceptualizations of criminal activity. Concepts of agency and rational choice are challenged. Women’s experience in almost all forms of organized crime shows that traditional roles may be blurred; some women are simultaneously victims and perpetrators; modernity and tradition often coexist. The variety of functions women perform shows that they can participate in criminal activities without taking action, simply by supporting and reinforcing background conditions without which the criminal activity cannot survive. Third, the emancipation hypothesis was definitively wrong. Emancipation may help explain

why women in organized crime sometimes play more important roles, but gender inequalities tend to be replicated and sometimes amplified for women in criminal organizations. This does not mean that women are only passive and invisible agents. Women can be seen to be performing important roles when a gendered framework of analysis is adopted and when female subjectivity is taken into account.

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