

FEMINIST CRIMINOLOGY AND WOMEN IN ORGANIZED CRIME: A THEORETICAL EXERCISE

 *Ana Guerreiro* *

 *Sílvia Gomes* **

 *Pedro Sousa* ***

Abstract

Since the 1970s, there has been an increase in the number of studies focused on women offenders. However, those associated with organized crime are still rare, despite the evidence of cases of women actively involved in criminal groups and playing particularly prominent roles.

This article aims to present an integrated review of the known literature that emphasizes the presence of women as offenders in organized crime groups. To this end, we (i) discuss how academia evolved from an androcentric perspective to a feminist criminology approach, and (ii) outline the role played by women offenders in the context of organized crime and their functions inside the group.

Keywords: Feminist criminology, women, female offenders, gender studies, organized crime.

Resumo

Criminologia feminista e mulheres no crime organizado: um exercício teórico

A partir da década de 1970 verificou-se um aumento no número de estudos sobre mulheres ofensoras. No entanto, os estudos que colocam as mulheres no centro do debate

* School of Criminology and Research Centre on Crime, Justice and Security (CJS), Faculty of Law, University of Porto; University of Maia (ISMAI), Porto, Portugal.
Postal address: CJS – Rua dos Bragas 223, 4050-123 Porto, Portugal; ISMAI – Av. Carlos de Oliveira Campos, 4475-690 Maia, Porto, Portugal.
Electronic address: ana.esteves.guerreiro@gmail.com

** Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice, Nottingham Trent University (NTU), UK; Interdisciplinary Center for Social Sciences – CICS.NOVA Lisboa, Portugal.
Postal address: NTU – 50 Shakespeare Street, NG1 4FQ Nottingham, UK; CICS.NOVA – Colégio Almada Negreiros, Campus de Campolide, 1099-085 Lisboa, Portugal.
Electronic address: silvia.damotagomes@ntu.ac.uk

*** School of Criminology and Research Centre on Crime, Justice and Security (CJS), Faculty of Law, University of Porto, Porto, Portugal.
Postal address: Rua dos Bragas 223, 4050-123 Porto, Portugal.
Electronic address: pasousa@direito.up.pt

do crime organizado são ainda raros, apesar de já haver registo da presença de mulheres envolvidas ativamente em grupos criminosos e a desempenhar papéis particularmente relevantes.

Este artigo tem como objetivo apresentar uma revisão integrada da literatura que destaca a presença de mulheres ofensoras em grupos do crime organizado. Para tal, (i) discutimos como a academia evoluiu de uma perspectiva androcêntrica para uma criminologia feminista e (ii) delineamos o papel desempenhado pelas mulheres no contexto do crime organizado e as suas funções dentro do grupo.

Palavras-chave: Criminologia feminista, mulheres, mulheres ofensoras, estudos de género, crime organizado.

Résumé

Criminologie féministe et femmes dans le crime organisé : un exercice théorique

À partir de la décennie de 1970, il a eu une augmentation dans le nombre d'études sur des femmes offenseuses. Cependant, les études qui placent les femmes au centre du débat sur le crime organisé sont encore rares, bien qu'il y ait des femmes activement engagées dans des groupes criminels et jouant des rôles particulièrement importants. Cet article a comme objectif de présenter une revue intégrée de la littérature qui met en évidence la présence de femmes offenseuses dans des groupes de crime organisé. À cette fin, (i) nous discutons la façon dont l'académie a évolué d'une perspective androcentrique à une criminologie féministe et (ii) nous décrivons le rôle joué par les femmes dans le contexte du crime organisé et comment elles fonctionnent au sein du groupe.

Mots-clés : Criminologie féministe, femmes, femmes offenseuses, études de genre, crime organisé.

Introduction

In recent years, the phenomenon of female crime has garnered increasing social, political, and academic attention. Building on its multidisciplinary features, criminology has made efforts to explain the causes of crime and the reasons why some individuals are more prone to commit crimes than others (Messerschmidt 1997; Burgess-Proctor 2006). However, for many years, criminology systematically rejected women offenders' experiences, and male offenders were preferentially studied. This trend changed in the 1970s when gender began to receive greater academic and scientific attention in this field of studies. Since then, studies have started to explore whether and why there are different ways men and women commit crimes, and to understand the reasons for their criminal involvement (Walklate 2004).

For this purpose, the emergence of feminist criminology was extremely critical. It accumulated almost 50 years of a considerable body of gender-focused work, growing steadily in all countries in the 1980s and 1990s (e.g., Adler 1975; Simon 1975; Heidensohn 1985; Carlen 1988). Particularly in Portugal, this set of knowledge started in the 1980s and 1990s, and continued throughout the years

(e.g., Carmo & Fráguas 1982; Beleza 1984; Cunha 2002; Matos 2007; Duarte 2012; Gomes & Granja 2015; Duarte & Guerreiro 2018; Gomes 2014; 2018; Gomes & Duarte 2018; Leote de Carvalho, Duarte, & Gomes 2021).

However, the approach to crime from a gender perspective requires further investigation (Britton 2000) and renovated lenses (Potter 2015), particularly in terms of violent crime, such as organized crime (Selmini 2020). Organized crime is a key theme in 21st century security (Galeotti 2004). The emergence of new trends in crime brought about by globalization has led to a deeper development of organized crime (Viano 2010). However, there is still limited study of what role gender plays in this particular and complex area of crime (Beare 2010). Due to its violent characteristics, organized crime is often associated with male offenders (Viano 2010; Siegel 2014; Catino 2020) and, for a long time, studies on women's participation in it were absent. Very recently, a new wave of gender scholars, mainly from Anglo-Saxon countries, has been studying this phenomenon and found that important positions in criminal networks are occupied by women (e.g., Marotta 2004; Hübschle 2014; Siegel 2014; Wijkman & Kleemans 2019).

Based on an integrated review of the known literature on women and crime, and specifically organized crime, this article develops a theoretical exercise on the contributions of feminist criminology for the study of female offenders. It reflects especially on the involvement of women in organized crime and the roles they play inside criminal groups. To achieve this purpose, the article is divided into three main sections. The first section reviews the evolution of women and crime studies, focusing on the different perspectives of gendered crime and exploring the importance of feminist criminology to uncovering the invisible role of women in crime. The second section focuses on studies about the involvement of women in organized crime, providing a state-of-the-art overview of this phenomenon. The third section discusses and integrates these two sets of literature and evidence: on the one hand, how the literature on women and organized crime contributes to feminist criminology and to gender studies, and, on the other hand, how it informs and is informed by general debates in criminology. The article concludes that further studies about gender and organized crime are needed, especially focused on qualitative methods, since these can explain in-depth the reasons and mechanisms behind women's involvement in criminal groups.

1. Women and crime: From an androcentric perspective to the feminist criminology approach

For years, criminology remained one of the most androcentric social sciences (Carlen 1988; Messerschmidt 1997; Walklate 2004), since its theoretical and empirical study was focused and built on men's criminal activities and failed to address female participation in crime (Carrington 2013). This traditional mainstream approach

exists since the beginning of the criminology field of studies, when research was mainly concerned with control and punishment, men and boys being the main objects of study (see Cohen 1955; Sutherland & Cressey 1974; Garland 1990).

Some studies addressed women's involvement in crime, namely from biological and psychological perspectives (Walklate 2004). Cesare Lombroso's work greatly contributed to the dissemination of the biological approach. Lombroso and Ferrero (1893) conducted skull measurements on a group of Italian prisoners and studied their facial features to create a criminal typology for women. This was subdivided into 8 types: a) born offenders or prostitutes, b) occasional offenders, c) hysterical offenders, d) passionate offenders, e) suicidal, f) lunatic offenders, g) epileptic, and h) morally insane. This typology rests on the reproduction of stereotypes related to female crime and delinquency (Heidensohn 1985), namely the view of women as mad and sexual. In addition, and despite the types created, the authors believed that for a woman to commit a crime she had to go through a process of 'masculinization', which was translated into the internalization and the presence of a set of typical masculine traits (Lise 1994). Supporting this view, Otto Pollack (1950, cit. in Treadwell 2006) stated that women are biologically weaker, not only physically but also psychologically, arguing that they are greatly influenced by their reproductive cycle. However, a distinguishing characteristic in Otto Pollack's argument is that women may commit the same crimes as men, but in a more sophisticated manner.

The need to develop knowledge about crimes committed by women, going beyond determinism and questioning the social order, namely what men or women are expected to be or do, has led criminal sociology to focus on women's crime, looking at how people are related to society and how this could lead to crime (Leal 2007). Nonetheless, it was with the emergence of feminist criminology in the 1970s that the presence and the role of women in crime started to become unveiled (Gomes & Duarte 2018; Wang 2021).

Sporadically, there were some reflections on the sex ratio of offending, which strengthened the consensual idea that gender is the most consistent finding in terms of the participation of men and women in crime (Messerschmidt 1997; Potter 2015; Leote de Carvalho, Duarte, & Gomes 2021). For example, Sutherland and Cressey (1974, 129-130) stated that "no other trait has as great statistical importance as does sex in differentiating criminals from noncriminals. (...) The variations in the sex ratio in crime are so great that it can be concluded that maleness is not significant in the causation of crime in itself".

The increasing engagement of women in crime, as observed in the statistics, has greatly contributed to opening the study of women in crime, and to raising new questions about the gender gap in crime research (Selmini 2020). Among these questions were the differences in criminal participation of women and men, as well as the seriousness and the frequency of this participation (Becker & McCorkel 2011). Altogether, this led to the emergence of feminist criminology.

In the 1960s, a group of feminists, realizing that their social role was based on what Simone de Beauvoir (1980) called *the Other*, came together in a movement that aimed to put an end to the male hegemony (Andersen 2005). This movement promoted the quest for gender equality, pushing for the active inclusion of gender in various social structures (Matos & Machado 2012). It also had a branch in criminology, criticizing the lack of inclusion of women in the study of criminality (Carrington & Death 2014). On the one hand, women were absent from crime studies and, on the other, when they were present, their transgressive experiences were completely misconstrued, framed within gender stereotypes, and labeled as doubly deviant (Scarborough & Sin 2020) both for their crimes and for transgressing their social role (Miller 2014).

Adler (1975) and Simon (1975) were pioneers in researching female crime. Both contended that women's lower participation in criminal activities could be explained by their domestic roles and their limited opportunities (Chesney-Lind 1986; Britton 2000). In their works, the authors challenge the academic world to break traditional gender links. Adler (1975) argued that women's illicit behavior emerged from their adoption of masculine behavior in the wake of the women's liberation movement in the 1960s and 1970s in the USA. The internalization of such behaviors, according to Adler (1975), allowed them to break down the boundaries of the private sphere and enter the world of work, thereby increasing their power. However, there was no broad consensus about this perspective and critiques appeared from feminists, arguing that this explanation continued to focus on masculine characteristics (Morris & Gelsthorpe 1991). This thus became known as the *Masculinization Theory* (Adler 1975). Simon (1975) explained female criminality based on the *Opportunity Theory*, according to which women's involvement in crime was a function of the different opportunities faced by women and men. According to this perspective, women experience social inequalities and commit crimes to achieve the same opportunities as men. This view has also been heavily criticized for neglecting the structures and experiences of women's lives as grounds for committing crimes. Although these perspectives were pioneering and drew attention to the lack of crime studies that considered gender or even had a gender lens, they did not pay attention to the specificities of gender in the field of criminology (Carrington 2013). Even today, the masculinization theory is brought into several studies. For instance, some authors have argued that female involvement in crime is a result of women's socialization being similar to men's, leading women to have expressions of masculinity (e.g., Dodge 2007; Shoemaker 2010; Garcia & Lane 2013).

According to Daly and Maher (1998), the field of feminist criminology is divided into two main periods. The first focuses on comparative studies and aims to fill gaps in the literature about the topic, seeking to inform about women's presence in the criminal justice system (e.g., Mallicoat 2018). The second includes studies that aim to understand what leads women to engage in crime, intersecting

previous experiences of victimization with the current offenses (e.g., Batchelor 2005; Appleby 2013). This resulted in the emergence of the concept of “blurred boundaries of victimization and criminalization” (Daly 2010), which means that sometimes victimization and offending are not distinct concepts but, rather, overlap since the offense can stem from a previous victimization.

The work of Chesney-Lind (1986), Carlen (1988), and many other researchers (see Messerschmidt 1997; Gomes 2014; Granja 2017; Frois 2017), fits in this second group. Chesney-Lind (1986) argued that the premises for criminal practice can be found in economic difficulties, family victimization, and belonging to a lower social class by exploring theories of marginalization. Accordingly, women of the lower class, or those who have suffered from victimization within the family context, would be more prone to commit crimes. In a study on the relationship between crime, women and poverty carried out by Carlen (1988) with a sample of 39 women offenders, 32 women reported having been poor throughout their lives. However, only 12 suggested that poverty was the cause for their criminal conduct. The other women mentioned other reasons for committing the crime, such as desire for excitement, alcohol or drug abuse, and the need to manage domestic expenses.

As Daly and Chesney-Lind (1988, 507) suggested, at the end of the 1980s criminology was finally awakening from its “androcentric slumber” thanks to feminist critiques. With the influence of critical criminology, new research directions emerged in the field of women and crime studies, leading to the rise of the intersectional perspective, which became a central topic in feminist studies in the 1990s (Burgess-Proctor 2006; 2014). At the beginning, critical criminologists underemphasized the importance of gender, despite developing the discipline through significant research on social inequalities and crime. Later, other innovative, critical and feminist research about gender and intersectional analyses of crime were undertaken (Cook 2016). Intersectional criminology is a theoretical approach which argues that crime involvement needs to stop being analyzed in a binary way and requires a critical reflection on the impact of interconnected identities in relation to power dynamics and to class and racialized inequalities (Potter 2013; 2015). According to this perspective, the analysis of the criminal phenomenon cannot ignore variables such as race, ethnicity, nationality and social class (Potter 2013; Parmar 2017; Gomes 2018). This perspective was first advanced in the late 1980s by Crenshaw (1991), whose work demonstrates unequivocally that racial disadvantages are linked to other social vulnerabilities, such as being from a particular gender or race, and assuming these social gendered and racial roles (Kruttschnitt & Kang 2019).

Hence, one of the most important lessons from feminist criminology currently is that all female voices are important and reveal different perspectives of the same marginalized experiences (Cook 2016). This is the basis of the focus on ‘real women’, seeking to theorize women’s experiences and how they construct their identities from their discourses (Daly 2010; Mallicoat 2018). Feminism challenged criminology

to reject the androcentric perspective and to search for new opportunities for analysis about crime and victimization (Flavin 2001), while promoting studies focused on intersectional perspectives that take gender, race, sexuality and social class into account (Nowacki 2016; Parmar 2017; Steffensmeier, Painter-Davis & Ulmer 2017; Gomes 2018; Leote de Carvalho, Duarte, & Gomes 2021).

2. Women offenders in organized crime groups: Reasons for participation and roles assumed

Like general crime, violent crime, and specifically organized crime, are usually marked by a significant gender bias that has attracted the attention of criminologists for a while now. Briefly, organized crime is characterized by some attributes that are not necessarily cumulative: (i) a group of two or more people or three or more people – depending on the definition (UN 2000; Beare 2010), (ii) usually with pre-existing relationships between the different members (Pizzini-Gambetta 2014), (iii) who use physical and psychological violence, (iv) to obtain, directly or not, a benefit (UNODC 2010). Due to its violent operations, organized crime is generally associated with men (Siegel 2014), and men – because of their physical and psychological characteristics – may be seen as more likely to commit crimes (Gomes & Duarte 2018). Confirming this trend, a study developed by Kleemans and Poot (2008) demonstrates that, for the most part, organized crime offenders are men between the ages of 30 and 50 who have had contact with the criminal justice system before (Koppen, Poot & Blokland 2010). The stereotypical idea that women are educated to be well mannered and innocent persists (Durham & O’Byrne 2010; Leote de Carvalho, Duarte, & Gomes 2021), suggesting that they are fragile and docile, and thus less capable of engaging in violent criminal behavior, such as organized crime.

However, despite the very low reported statistics, women are indeed involved in organized crime and take part in many forms of crime, such as street gangs, mafia groups, and human and drug trafficking (Selmini 2020). According to Carroll (2001), in 1990 it was recorded that there was only one woman in the Italian mafias, whereas five years later there were already 89 women. It is essential, however, to take these numbers with some caution as the absence of women from crime statistics does not necessarily mean that they are not present in these criminal organizations, especially when considering very closed organizations like mafia groups. Furthermore, the roles women play within the criminal organization might make them more invisible to the criminal justice system. For instance, Europol’s Serious and Organized Crime Threat Assessment (SOCTA) 2004 report (p. 7) stated that one of the recent characteristics of criminal groups was the increasing number of female offenders, whose presence inspired greater trust in the recruitment process.

The first studies about women in organized crime began from a sexual perspective (Arsovska & Allum 2014; Block & Chambliss 1981), as women were seen through their performance on the sexual market. In fact, the analysis focused on the link between prostitution (performed by women) and organized crime (controlled by men). This not only corroborates Lombroso and Ferrero's work (1893), as it fits women into the criminal typology of 'born offenders or prostitutes', but also neatly captures the sexist view on this topic (Block & Chambliss 1981). Women were studied only in their role as victims and men as offenders (Carrington 2013).

In the last 20 years, the literature on organized crime has undergone a gender revolution, particularly with the key work developed by researchers such as Campbell (1990), Cunha (2002), Dino (2007), Principato (2007), Hübschle (2014) and Siegel (2014). They question the traditional elements present in organized networks and search for the role of women within them. In general, research on gender and organized crime gathers data from a wide range of sources, discussing the contribution of women's emancipation to female entry into the world of organized crime, the way women participate in criminal networks, and how gender stereotypes constitute barriers and/or opportunities for their entry and involvement (Pizzini-Gambetta 2014), especially in street gangs, mafia groups, and human and drug trafficking (see table 1).

Table 1
Women's participation in organized crime

Criminal Activity	Reasons for women's involvement in OC groups	Roles played by women in organized crime groups
Street Gangs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To find protection and support when running away from situations of neglect and abuse • Need to seek for opportunities through illegitimate means • Prior relationship with other members • Subordination to partners (usually men) • Serious family problems 	—

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Criminal Activity	Reasons for women's involvement in OC groups	Roles played by women in organized crime groups
Mafia Groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prior relationship with other members 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthening ties between mafia families through marriage • Transmission of values and good practices to offspring • Family connection to religion • Maintenance of social relations with the political class • Maintenance of men's reputation (wealth, status and power) • Financial management • Neutralization of the control of police authorities in case of suspicion
Drug Trafficking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poverty and inequalities • To provide family (financial) support • Prior relationship with other members • Early widowhood • Social exclusion • Personal option 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drug couriers • Operational and financial management of networks
Human Trafficking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kinship links • Lower social backgrounds • Fear of co-offenders' reaction to refusal • Cooperation with the partner for love • To get away from prostitution • Need of feeling of belonging to the group • Self-protection and family protection • To obtain certain material resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Financial and accounting management • Recruitment, transport and management of potential victims • Management of properties where victims are exploited • Messengers • Management of sexual exploitation • Forgery of documents

Source: Information based on the studies on women in organized crime (see Guerreiro 2022).

Overall, research points out the emancipation of women and the growth of drug trafficking as two of the major reasons for their involvement in criminal organizations (Marotta 2004). The first reason is closely aligned with Adler's (1975) masculinization theory, according to which the liberation of women would give them the right to behave like men, including being violent and prone to crime. However, other authors determined as a starting point for the entrance of women into criminal networks the pre-established links with a man who is already involved in the network, who could be a father, brother, boyfriend, or husband (Block & Chambliss 1981; Pizzini-Gambetta 2014). Again, the male figure and the dependence of women on the male association to engage in criminal activity (Cook 2016) is brought to the front, now within the organized crime literature, to justify women's involvement in criminal networks. Regarding their active role in the network, and especially in the mafia, the literature shows that women only engage more autonomously when men are arrested, escape, or die (Selmini 2020). Nevertheless, this does not necessarily mean that women definitively replace the role occupied by men. Most of the time, women remain the "guardians of male powers" during the period that men are away, returning to their previous role when possible (Ingrasci 2007, 78).

Regarding the second reason for female involvement in criminal organizations – the growth of drug trafficking – the work of Cunha (2002; 2005) shows that women are in the center of drug trafficking as a way of obtaining financial resources, often to support their family, developing the activity based on family and friendship relationships. In fact, several studies state that women's criminal practice is usually linked to poverty, and the drug market has given them many opportunities to earn money quickly, particularly as mules (e.g., Gomes 2014). Nonetheless, it is important to bear in mind that the reasons for female involvement in violent criminal behavior depend on the type of crime considered (e.g., Fleetwood 2017; Diviák, Coutinho & Stivala 2020; Guerreiro 2022).

In the same way, the roles women play in the criminal network are diverse and depend on the type of crime the organization engages in (Selmini 2020; Guerreiro 2022). If we look at street gangs, for example, women do not assume traditional female roles, but rather make use of violence to achieve their own objectives and the group's objectives (Campbell 1990). Moreover, some authors state that women running away from a life of neglect and abuse join gangs to find protection and support (e.g., Moore 2007). However, this can bring more violence and abuse because membership in some of the gangs entails initiation rituals involving violent acts (Moore 2007).

In drug trafficking, the roles played by women inside criminal groups are usually less powerful than those played by men, despite facing high risks as they often work as "mules" (Boyd 2006), which does not mean that these roles are not important. Beare (2010) found that women involved in drug trafficking in Canada are desperate to have income, which sometimes enables them to avoid sexual

work as prostitutes (Fagan 1995). There is already some research that also highlights women's powerful roles, mainly due to their creative abilities and intelligence, which can give them visibility and respect. As Grundetjern and Sandberg (2012, 623) state, "being a woman can even be an advantage" in the criminal organization.

According to studies on gender and human trafficking, offenders engage in criminal networks because of kinship links (Guerreiro, Gomes, & Sousa 2021) and lower social backgrounds, and women assume more marginal positions (Selmini 2020). In the work developed by Zhang (2011) about the sex industry in Tijuana, Mexico, 16% of pimps are women. They seem to have a special role in some activities, such as financial management, money laundering, managing properties where victims are exploited, and managing crime proceeds or the victim selection process (Beare 2010). Similar results were found in the studies developed by Siegel and De Blank (2010), Siegel (2014), and Wijkman and Kleemans (2019), showing that women play an active role in these structures, namely as messengers, mediators between the organization to which they belong and opposing organizations, and housing victims. The authors also identified the delicate line between victimization and offense, especially in the case of those identified as *madams*, who were, or even in some cases, remained sex workers.

Within the mafia, women's roles vary according to context and the type of the group. For instance, Cosa Nostra, a recognized mafia group, is exclusively male and characterized by strong traditional ideas based on gender. But the formal exclusion of women does not mean that they do not participate in the group's activities (Pizzini-Gambetta 2014). Examples of clandestine participation are the Sicilian and Calabrese mafias, which give great importance to women and see them as crucial to men's reputations. Women assume the role of transmitting good practices to descendants, namely, the value of silence and the practice of intra-network solidarity, which are fundamental to evade authorities (Marotta 2004). Allum (2007) further identifies another distinction between women participating in the Sicilian Mafia and the Camorra Mafia. While in the former women are subordinate to men and do not interfere in any male decision, in the latter they play a proactive role and are aware of the types of activities that partners and/or family members participate in (Catino 2020).

The roles women play in the criminal organization differ greatly. Although Hübschle (2014) considers that women's role in organized crime differs from men's in status and level of responsibility, these roles have different configurations and levels of importance when observing different crimes. The same is emphasized by Beare (2010), who argues that, despite women directly benefiting from the use of violence, they may assume management functions that can involve punishment, delivery of profits, and financial and accounting services.

3. Feminist criminology and organized crime: A prolific debate

Female crime was by and large ignored when criminology and criminal studies emerged (e.g., Carrington 2013). The turning point in this trend occurred with the feminist movements and feminist criminology, which brought new directions to academic research (Wang 2021). The issue of whether women commit crimes because of factors associated with gender is still inconclusive. Therefore, feminist criminology has called for new approaches that go beyond androcentric perspectives, by incorporating new ‘voices’ into the research (Heidensohn 1985). Dark figures are a commonplace in criminology, and statistical data about arrests, for instance, do not adequately represent women’s involvement in crime, as it mirrors the performance of the criminal justice system more than crime itself (see Gomes 2014). Thus, the inclusion and preference for other methodologies, especially qualitative methods, is essential to capture and represent women’s experiences and their intersected vulnerabilities (Messerschmidt 1997; Potter 2015; Cook 2016) in order to fully understand female crime (Rawlinson 2000).

Although research on women and organized crime gathers information from a wide range of sources, there is an overuse of judicial files and court decisions, as it is extremely difficult to access and gain trust in criminal organizations (e.g., Diviák, Coutinho & Stivala 2020). Also, research on the participation and the main roles women play in organized crime is still not very common, and it is focused, beyond the mafia, mainly on crimes such as drug trafficking and human trafficking. Many other crimes fall under the criminological concept of organized crime, such as property crime or economic crime (Guerreiro 2022). Nonetheless, this body of research makes a great contribution to feminist criminology and to gender studies. First, it makes women visible in a field that is theoretically and empirically mostly male. Then, it illustrates how women can engage in criminal activities considered to be traditionally male for being violent, and shows how they can have significant roles within the network. Some of the explanations for female involvement in organized crime groups are aligned with androcentric views – such as the emancipation thesis and the replacement of male (family) members – but we cannot ignore the fact that these studies are groundbreaking in this field of studies. Putting women at the center of the analysis and discussing their roles in a still predominantly masculine criminal network is noteworthy.

Furthermore, there are other important points that can be made from this review of studies on women and organized crime, which inform and are informed by other general debates. First, and in general terms, men are usually seen as those who dominate organized crime, using violence to obtain power, and women are allocated to low-level positions (Campbell 2008). These positions are greatly influenced by the ingrained social role that is mostly linked to care, education, and domestic tasks (Britton 2000; Durham & O’Byrne 2010). Second, the leading roles assumed by women do not have to be necessarily like those of the top of the chain.

For instance, financial and group managing roles can also be considered important and are not at the top of the organization. Even in supposedly secondary positions, women play a relevant role, and criminal groups often depend on them to exist (e.g., drug couriers) (Selmini 2020; Guerreiro 2022). Finally, another aspect worth mentioning is the existence of the blurred line between being a victim of organized crime and being an offender, which is sometimes the only exit strategy to escape a life of abuse (e.g., Batchelor 2005). This debate is not specific to studies on organized crime and has been at the center of the research on understanding criminal practice in the criminology field. However, the “blurred boundaries of victimization and criminalization” (Daly & Maher 1998) need to be addressed and overcome to clearly understand the involvement of women in crime (Burman, Batchelor, & Brown 2001; Batchelor 2007; Chesney-Lind & Jones 2010). In the end, more research with a feminist lens on other types of crimes that can be included in the scope of organized crime is needed. As argued by Burgess-Proctor (2006, 28), “the future of feminist criminology lies in our willingness to embrace a theoretical framework that recognizes multiple, intersecting inequalities”, since as power inequalities shape the social life, they also shape the criminal behavior.

Conclusion

This article presented a comprehensive reflection on the importance of feminist criminology for disclosing women’s participation in organized crime. The traditional androcentric views on criminal activity reinforce the subordination of women to men, with men remaining the key figures and women being minor agents, placed in secondary positions or as victims, and conceptualized as mad or in a sexualized way. From the 1970s on, with the emergence of feminist criminology, those views were progressively rejected, and a body of knowledge emerged around female crime. Nonetheless, stereotypical and circumscribed views about women have limited the research about their participation in violent criminal activities, such as organized crime. Although scarce, and in some cases also limited, the existing studies in this domain have affirmed the powerful and leading role of women inside criminal organizations.

The variety of crime typologies that shape criminal organizations holds the potential for further research in this field, particularly in Portugal. Additionally, since existing data comes mainly from quantitative methods, which, although useful, can be incomplete, it is essential to use other methods of in-depth research, namely qualitative research, as proposed by feminist criminologists. Qualitative research could explain the reasons behind women’s involvement, as well as their roles, in criminal groups (especially if the research is conducted directly with those women). In addition, the adoption of an intersectional perspective can help clarify and demystify their presence in criminal organizations.

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Ana Guerreiro. PhD in Criminology from FDUP (University of Porto). Guest lecturer at the University of Maia (ISMAI) and School of Criminology, University of Porto (FDUP). She held a Ph.D. FCT Fellowship (Ref. SFRH/BD/143202/2019) through the Research Centre on Crime, Justice and Security (CJS). Her main research areas are gender violence, gender studies, organized crime and prevention policies, with several national and international publications in scientific journals, books and book chapters.

Sílvia Gomes. PhD in Sociology from the University of Minho. Lecturer in Criminology at Nottingham Trent University (NTU, UK) and Researcher at the Interdisciplinary Centre of Social Sciences (CICS.NOVA, Portugal). Her main areas of research are focused on crime and media, prison studies, crime and ethnicity, social inequalities, intersectional approaches, and recently on prisoner re-entry, recidivism, and criminal desistance.

Pedro Sousa. PhD in Economics (ISEG, Univ. Lisbon). He is a professor at the Faculty of Law (Univ. Porto), where he serves as Director of the School of Criminology. Affiliated with the CJS Research Center, his research activity focuses on economic and financial crimes, costs of crime, organized crime, criminal networks, and evaluation of interventions in the justice system. His research work has been presented at conferences and published in international journals and books.

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