

Article

“It’s Not Just a Boys Club”—Exploring the Role of Female Offenders in Organised Criminal Groups Within Australia

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Abstract

Within the structure of organised criminal groups (OCGs), women were traditionally relegated to peripheral and support roles (e.g., mothers and partners), with men primarily engaged in serious forms of criminality. However, more recent research has highlighted the varied roles women occupy within OCGs, including as traffickers, recruiters, and strategic advisors. Within this growing field of research, the present study sought to explore the role of female offenders in OCGs within Australia through a gynocentric and intersectional lens. Drawing on a content analysis of 84 court judgement transcripts involving convicted female offenders between 2010 and 2024, this study centres women’s experiences within OCGs. The findings reveal that women occupy a spectrum of roles across a range of offences such as drug trafficking, money laundering, and fraud. Many offenders had histories of trauma, mental illness, and economic precarity, reflecting structural inequalities that shape pathways into criminality. The findings provide a preliminary understanding of female involvement within OCGs in Australia, including relational, survival-based, professional, entrepreneurial, and subordinate offenders. This study affirms the need for a gender-sensitive criminological framework that accounts for agency, coercion, and structural constraint. By focusing on the experience of women, the study contributes to a growing body of literature seeking to highlight the complexity and centrality of women’s roles within OCGs, while providing the groundwork for future studies.

Keywords: organised crime; organised criminal groups; gender; female offenders; Australia



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1. Introduction

The involvement of women in organised criminal groups (OCGs) has garnered increasing scholarly attention over the past two decades [1–8]. Traditionally, women in OCGs largely occupied peripheral or support roles, often as lovers, wives, and mothers) [9–13]. Within these patriarchal structures women were encouraged to distance themselves from criminality and uphold values and traditions associated with cultural and familial groupings [2,6,9,10,14,15]. However, more contemporary research has highlighted the extent to which women are involved in OCGs and their roles within these structures [11,12,16–27]. Comparable to their male counterparts, women in OCGs occupy a myriad of roles that are critical to the execution of complex illicit activities, with roles ranging from low-level drug mules to strategic facilitators [2,8,12,27–29].

Despite the growth in research, there is still limited insight on what role gender plays within complex crimes and, as a result, there is no consensus about the structural drivers that impact the role of women in organised crime [7,20,25,26]. Of note, the UNODC [30] has stressed the importance of gender mainstreaming in order to collect accurate data on

gender statistics and improve understanding of gender and organised crime. Therefore, approaching the phenomenon of organised crime from a gendered perspective requires further research, especially with regard to the role of intersectionality in female criminality [7,25,31,32]. Additionally, within this research landscape there remains a dearth of knowledge regarding the involvement of women in OCGs within Australia. To address this, the present article centres the experiences of women in order to explore their role in OCGs within Australia. This study will be the first to explore the criminal phenomenon through a gynocentric lens within an Australian context. Data for the study was obtained by analysing court judgement transcripts concerning female offenders involved in OCGs. The paper will present an overview of the existing literature on women in OCGs and will be followed by a discussion on the role of female offenders within OCGs in Australia.

1.1. Defining Organised Criminal Groups

Given the long-standing conceptual debates within criminology surrounding the term organised crime, the present study adopts the definition of organised criminal group as set out in the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organised Crime [33]. Debates defining the phenomenon of organised crime are often linked to the “failure to realise that there are diverse ways to conceptualise organised crime and that each approach can lead to different assessments of the very same situation” [34] (p. 34). As a result, some scholars have emphasised offender relationships [35–37], while others have focused on group structure and hierarchy [38] or the organisation of criminal activity and illicit markets [39–41]. This has resulted in over 150 conceptual definitions, often blurring the distinction between group structure and criminal enterprise [34,38,42]. Using various academic perspectives, ‘organised crime’ can be understood as a system in which offenders, tied together through a criminal group (either transient or long-standing) cooperate in order to engage in criminal offences that require a level of ‘organisation’ [43–45]. In defining ‘organised crime’, scholars have attempted to differentiate between the phenomenon of ‘organised crime’ and the groupings or structures involved in criminal markets, the ‘organised criminal group’ themselves.

The lack of consensus on whether organised crime should be understood primarily as the organisation of criminal activities and illicit markets, or as the structured groups that undertake these activities has shaped both scholarly and policy approaches [34,41,46]. This conceptual ambiguity has significant implications for how gender is analysed within OCGs. Where organised crime is framed in terms of criminal activity, gender tends to be obscured, as the focus is placed on the functions of illicit markets rather than the social organisation of groups [26]. Conversely, group-based definitions provide scholars with the space to interrogate internal hierarchies, kinship structures, and power relations; areas where gendered dynamics are more pronounced [8,23–27]. Definitional debates surrounding organised crime has resulted in a fragmented research landscape, where there is no agreed upon conceptual framework for examining gender within organised crime. In this way, the definitional ambiguity of organised crime does not simply produce theoretical inconsistency, it actively shapes the way gender is recognised, analysed, and theorised within organised crime scholarship. As a result, there are very few comparative studies on gender and women in OCGs [1–5,7,8].

Given the difficulties in defining the criminal phenomenon, many scholars have shifted their focus from the abstract concept of organised crime to the more concrete and legally operational concept of organised criminal group [41,47,48]. For example, Natarajan [47] suggests that it might be more accurate to view crimes committed by organised criminal groups not as ‘organised crime’ but instead as ‘crimes that are organised’. The UNTOC definition encapsulates this shift by identifying an organised criminal group as a structured

association of three or more individuals acting in concert over time to commit serious criminal offences for material benefit (Article 2). This definition does not require formal hierarchy or fixed roles, thereby accommodating both fluid and hierarchical forms of organisations [44,45]. More importantly, as a signatory to the Convention, the UNTOC definition aligns with Australia's judicial and legislative frameworks (i.e., court judgements) and thus reflects the institutional context in which the present study is situated. Moreover, it captures the dual emphasis found in the literature: the associational ties between offenders and the profit-driven criminal activity [43,49,50]. As such, the UNTOC definition provides a pragmatic and empirically grounded foundation for examining the role of women in OCGs within an Australian context.

1.2. Female Offenders: A Criminological Perspective

Historically, research on crime and deviant behaviour has been overwhelmingly androcentric, with theories of crime focussing primarily on male offenders [7,51–53]. However, this changed in the 1970s, when the notion of gender began to receive more attention within the field of criminology, in particular with the emergence of feminist criminology. Of note, Adler [54] proposed the 'masculinisation theory', in which it was argued that as women sought liberation and equality, they would inadvertently emulate traditionally masculine traits, including violent criminal behaviour. However, this theory has been criticised by later feminist scholars on the basis that it relies on a male-centred ideology and fails to consider the complexities and variabilities which underpin female criminality, including broader structural and sociocultural influences [7,55,56]. Masculinisation theory continues to inform contemporary scholarship, with some researchers arguing that women's involvement in organised crime stems from socialisation process that mirror those of men, resulting in the adoption of masculine-coded behaviours and traits [57,58]. Conversely, Simon's [59] 'emancipation theory' argued that the increase in female criminality can be attributed to expanding opportunities as a result of the women's liberation movement, instead of the adoption of masculine traits. Simon notes that historically men engaged in more criminal behaviour due to their advantageous social opportunities, expertise, and networks. Therefore, as "women become more liberated from hearth and home" their opportunities, capabilities, and social connections grow, thereby increasing the potential for criminality [59] (p. 1).

Later feminist theorists, including Chesney-Lind [60] and Carlen [51], redirected the focus towards structural marginalisation, trauma, and the socio-economic conditions that push women into criminality. Of note, Daly [61] highlighted that women often follow distinct pathways into criminality, often shaped by histories of abuse, victimisation, and economic marginalisation. Likewise, Crenshaw [62] emphasised the importance of intersectionality in shaping the criminal trajectories of women. Other criminologists have increasingly drawn upon life-course frameworks to explain female criminality. Sampson and Laub [63] noted that significant life events, such as victimisation, motherhood, or relationship breakdowns, can significantly influence a women's criminal trajectory. Similarly, Covington [64] argued that women's crimes are often relationally motivated, whether by attempts to maintain relationships, respond to abuse, or achieve autonomy. In effect, feminist criminology reframed female offending not as a 'biological abnormality', but instead as a rational, contextually situated response to gendered and structural inequalities. Subsequent academic inquiry has sought to understand if and why there are differences in the way men and women commit crimes and the factors leading to involvement in criminality [7,25,53,65]. In particular, more nuanced theories have since emerged, recognising the overlap between victimisation and offending, especially in the context of female criminality [61].

The narrowing of the gender gap in criminal behaviour should be linked to the increased financial instability experienced by women. Fundamentally, women turn to criminality, and organised crime in particular, due to marginalised economic circumstances, including poverty, job insecurity, and disadvantaged economic positions [60]. Guerreiro et al. [7] similarly observes that “the explanation of women’s roles in organised crime often neglects intersectional vulnerabilities,” such as class, race, and migration status (p. 51). Feminist perspectives reframed women not as passive participants or exceptional deviants, but as individuals embedded in complex social, economic, and patriarchal structures that shape their pathways into criminality and organised crime more specifically [25]. Selmini [25] argues that organised crime should be re-theorised through a gynocentric lens that not only adds women to existing frameworks but interrogates the androcentric assumptions that underpin them. Within the context of this study, feminist perspectives on organised crime provide a critical framework for evaluating and examining gendered roles within organised criminal groups. By using a gynocentric lens, such approaches challenge androcentric assumptions that have historically shaped the field. Without the contributions of feminist criminology, and further research, scholarly accounts of organised crime fail to adequately capture the nuanced and complex nature of gendered criminality within OCGs.

1.3. Role of Women in Organised Criminal Groups

Organised crime has traditionally been viewed as an inherently masculine domain, often characterised by violence, hierarchy, and territorial control [1,2,4]. This view has contributed to the persistent assumption that women only occupy marginal roles or simply do not engage in organised crime [28,66–68]. Limited statistical data and persistent “dark figures” in criminology have long obscured women’s involvement in organised crime [28,69]. However, more recent scholarship has challenged this orthodoxy by documenting women’s substantive, albeit often invisible, roles across various criminal enterprises [20]. While the rise in female involvement in organised criminal groups has been linked to broader social shifts, including globalisation, the erosion of rigid gender norms, and market flexibility [12,67,70–73], Allum [8] suggests that women have always been involved in mafia-like groups, but the tools and gendered language required to see them were absent from the discipline of criminology. Fundamentally, Allum [8] argues the role of women in OCGs must be examined within the context of public and private spheres. Unless women are actively involved in criminal offences, scholars fail to acknowledge their role and influence in private spheres and the overlap and interchange between the two.

Our scholarly understanding of women in organised crime has been overwhelmingly derived from research on Italian mafia groups, including the Cosa Nostra, ‘Ndrangheta, and Camorra. Historically, these groups were viewed as male-dominated due to ritualistic and structural exclusions [8,22,74–76]. However, women have played key roles in the domestic and operational function of these groups since their conception [6,8,25]. Women have been known to facilitate logistical support, maintain secrecy, launder illicit funds, and serve as communication intermediaries for imprisoned ‘mafiosi’ [6,22,25,27]. Women also play a key role in education and socialisation, where they have been found to encourage and influence the criminal behaviour of children [6,77]. For example, women, especially mothers, are vital in the transmission of mafia values and “codes of honour” to children to ensure the continuity of the group [6,16,17,22,25,78]. Children are taught the complex system of knowledge, beliefs, and codes of conduct that dictate the criminal lifestyle [56]. Fundamentally, women play a key role in passing down generational knowledge, values and practices, which are critical to the longevity of mafia groups, while also assisting in certain criminal activities [6,7,77]. These roles highlight the power and influence women have within the domestic (or private) spheres of OCGs [6,8].

In the rare occasion where women take on leadership or strategic roles (within the public sphere), their authority is typically situational and subordinate [13,74,78,79]. The agency and power of women in mafia groups is still highly dependent on the men within the organisations [11,80]. The power of women within Mafia groups is frequently delegated, temporary, and symbolically tied to the preservation of male authority [7]. Indeed, women often rise to prominence only when male members escape, are arrested or killed, reinforcing what Ingrasci [74] calls the role of “guardians of male power”. Even when women do assume autonomous leadership, they are still subject to patriarchal structures [25,81]. For instance, Maria Serraino, a prominent ‘Ndrangheta figure, was frequently abused by her husband, highlighting the limits of female agency and meaningful emancipation within mafia groups [25]. Such examples illustrate the notion of ‘pseudo-emancipation,’ which argues that a temporary, utilitarian rise in status does not challenge core patriarchal structures [6,82,83]. Indicating improved organisational positioning does not always correlate with increased power or autonomy for women. Therefore, the positioning and role of women in mafia-like structures should be viewed within the context of practical, familial, and symbolic functions [84].

Conversely, other research notes that women, much like their male counterparts, are present in nearly all types of organised criminal activities and occupy a spectrum of roles, including smuggling (drugs, weapons, humans), fraud, and money laundering [2,11,13,19–21,23,25,28,68,83]. Notably, women’s roles in less violence-intensive markets, such as human smuggling and sex trafficking, also appear more prominent [20,21]. For example, in Latin America women have become increasingly involved in extortion and drug trafficking, sometimes coerced through relationships with male criminals [67]. Bonello [85] notes that in 2014, there were 382 women in prison for extortion. However, this number more than doubled to 791 in 2017. In China and Mexico, women have been known to occupy managerial roles in sex trafficking groups, particularly in the acquisition of other women, which requires trust, discretion, and interpersonal finesse [20,21]. These findings suggest that market characteristics, such as the level of violence and interpersonal skills required, may influence gendered participation [12].

Drug trafficking represents the most common cause of female incarceration globally [69,86–89], affecting women in particularly acute ways. Early scholarship tended to characterise women’s involvement in drug markets as marginal, often confined to low-status roles such as drug mules and driven by socio-economic precarity and the feminisation of poverty [90–93]. Empirical studies confirm that a substantial proportion of women imprisoned for drug offences were apprehended as mules [3,94]. For example, data from 2018 found that 36 out of 96 (37.5%) foreign national women in Portuguese prisons were convicted for drug trafficking. In comparison, 221 out of 1259 (17.5%) foreign national men were convicted of the same offence [95]. Women within these roles are often exposed to significant risks without proportionate authority or autonomy, yet these roles remain vital to the function of such organisations [26,91]. The appeal of quick profits in drug markets, through modest and high-risk roles, is pursued primarily for survival rather than wealth. Social and economic vulnerabilities, including unemployment, early widowhood, and low wages, further contribute to women’s involvement [2,3,90–94]. Additionally, coercion by male partners or local criminal elements reinforces the gendered dynamics of criminal participation [29].

However, a growing body of research challenges this victim-centric narrative by illustrating that women increasingly occupy independent and significant roles in drug trafficking organisations [2,9,12,29,86,87,91,92,95]. Women’s roles extend beyond mule work, encompassing cultivation of drugs, such as cocaine and cannabis, chemical processing, recruiting and supervising couriers, guarding operations, and managing finances and

logistics [12,13,29,69]. These roles suggest a move away from a simplistic discourse of vulnerability [96], as women's positions within organised crime are increasingly varied and at times authoritative. Additionally, network analysis reveals that women in drug trafficking groups also occupy central roles, with some holding positions of high degree and closeness centrality, including brokerage roles [26,97–100]. These network positions suggest a level of gendered agency is not present in women who operate as mules or other high-risk positions. Overall, this body of research confirms women's participation in organised drug trafficking and suggests they may perform similar roles to men, including leadership and logistical functions [2,9,12,20,74,81].

In human trafficking, similar complexities exist. Women's involvement is frequently linked to kinship ties [27], adverse socio-economic conditions [101], and escape from gender-based violence [102]. These overlapping factors can often blur the boundaries between victimhood and offending. Within human trafficking networks, women often play less visible roles but are heavily engaged in recruitment due to their perceived trustworthiness, as women are more likely to trust other women than unknown men [21,103]. These roles are not merely supportive but essential to the functioning of trafficking networks. Women have also been found to operate as brothel managers, supervisors and financial controllers [19,21]. Gimenez-Salinas [104] found that there was a fairly even distribution of male and female offenders in human trafficking groups (50.7% and 49.3%, respectively), which is consistent with other studies highlighting the increased involvement of women in organised crime groups [19,23,25]. Zhang et al. [71] proposed the notion of gendered markets to explain the prominent role of women in human trafficking, in comparison to drug trafficking. They attributed this to the limited role of violence and territory as key features in human trafficking, the importance of interpersonal networks in facilitating trafficking, gender ideologies about work and care giving, and the notion of safety as a key concern for clients.

1.4. Women in Organised Crime: Victim vs. Offender

A significant development in the literature has been the shift from binary understandings of victim and offender. Daly [61] introduced the concept of 'blurred boundaries of victimisation and criminalisation', suggesting that many female offenders have histories of abuse, coercion, or socio-economic vulnerability. This is particularly evident in human and sex trafficking, where women often transition from being victims to perpetrators, or occupy roles that encompass elements of both [29,102]. The idea of the 'alpha victim' captures this continuum: women initially coerced or manipulated into criminal activities later take on active roles, sometimes as recruiters or enforcers (e.g., madams in sex trafficking groups) [66]. This overlap is also visible in the testimonies of incarcerated women, with around 70% noting that they were introduced to criminal activities through intimate relationships marked by abuse and dependency [88]. In these cases, involvement in criminality emerges as both a form of survival and a mechanism for coping with structural and interpersonal violence. Fleetwood [12] notes that women's choices are situated within gendered expectations, economic desperation, and social obligation. The concept of "narrative habitus" illustrates how women internalise and perform narratives of victimhood or deviance, complicating straightforward interpretations of agency and coercion [7]. Recognising this continuum is essential for understanding the complexity of women's involvement in organised crime and avoiding reductive classifications [66].

Another strand of scholarship addresses the symbolic nature of gender within criminal groupings. The literature has increasingly turned to the concept of gender performativity, drawing from Butler's [105] work, to interrogate how gender is enacted and reproduced within organised crime. Daly and Maher [106], for instance, documents how women in the heroin trade in New York City used their bodies and emotional relationships as

tools for survival, managing threats and forging alliances in precarious environments. Such studies draw attention to the commodification of femininity in criminal economies, where women's sexuality, care work, and reputations become currencies in their own right. This labour is not peripheral but foundational, facilitating the everyday functioning and resilience of OCGs. Similarly, Sikkens and van San [107] explore how women in Dutch crime groups adopt masculine coded behaviours and symbols to gain legitimacy and protection, while simultaneously navigating expectations of femininity within their communities to deflect suspicion or access certain privileges. Women who defy normative roles are often subject to intensified social and judicial scrutiny, with the legal system disproportionately punishing women whose criminality violates dominant ideals of motherhood, care, and passivity [108,109]. Media portrayals frequently reinforce this moral panic, portraying female offenders as aberrant, unnatural, or monstrous. This punitive gaze not only distorts public perception but also affects judicial outcomes, reinforcing cycles of marginalisation and invisibility [25].

Economic marginalisation remains a key driver of women's involvement in organised crime. The "feminisation of poverty", a term describing the disproportionate economic disadvantage faced by women, correlates with higher female involvement in survival-based crimes [110–112]. In the global south, where social inequality is pronounced, many female prisoners report that their entry into OCGs was driven by the need to provide for their children as sole caregivers [66,113]. Moreover, globalisation and economic liberalisation have produced precarious labour markets, disproportionately impacting the socio-economic position of women. In regions like Southeast Asia and Latin America, women have increasingly turned to illicit economies as a means of securing livelihoods, especially when legal opportunities are unavailable or exploitive [108]. For example, in Argentina, Brazil, Costa Rica, and Peru, more than 60 percent of female prisoners were convicted for drug-related offences [114]. Therefore, it is critical to decolonise the field, with Eurocentric models of organised crime often marginalising local knowledge and obscure the ways in which global inequality, migration, and colonial legacies impact on criminal opportunities. A truly global and gender-sensitive analysis of organised crime must account for the varied configurations of kinship, economy, and governance that shape criminal organisations across various contexts, especially within the global south.

2. Methodology

The present study utilised court judgement transcripts from cases (including appellate cases) within Australia that involved a successful conviction or unsuccessful appeal. Court judgments, although not widely used in criminological research on organised criminal groups, are often cited as valid, reliable, and robust sources of information and data [115–121]. Transcripts of court judgements were collected using the AustLII (the Australasian Legal Information Institute) online database. For inclusion in the study, a female offender would need to be involved in an organised criminal group that consists of three or more offenders engaged in profit-driven crimes (as defined by Article 2 United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organised Crime). Cases that involved less than three offenders or groups that were engaged in offences that were not profit motivated (e.g., terrorism, child pornography) were excluded from the present study. However, while the study is primarily concerned with cases identified judicially as involving organised criminal groups, it is necessary to acknowledge that such groups intersect with a range of criminal activities (e.g., drug trafficking, money laundering, fraud). Therefore, while some of the included offences (such as vehicle rebirthing or fraud) may not always fall within the definition of organised crime, they were included when courts specifically framed the offending as the activity of an organised criminal group.

The keywords that were used to generate results in the AustLII database were as follows, ‘crime syndicate’, ‘criminal syndicate’, ‘crime network’, ‘criminal network’, ‘crime organisation’, ‘criminal organisation’, ‘crime group’, ‘criminal group’, and ‘organised crime’. Such keywords were utilised as they reflect the various descriptors of organised criminal groups used by law enforcement and judicial systems in Australia. Furthermore, cases were limited to those in which a successful conviction was finalised between 1 January 2010 and 31 December 2024. This was to ensure a contemporary understanding of the role of female offenders in organised criminal groups. The keywords were entered into the AUSTLII database using the “advanced search” feature, with the aforementioned keywords entered into the “exact phrase” option. This search strategy was utilised for each state (jurisdiction) in Australia (New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, Northern Territory, Western Australia, South Australia, Australian Capital Territory, and Tasmania) and was limited to the “all cases” database for each state.

Tables 1 and 2 below highlight the results for the above search strategy. Relevant cases were identified based on whether the convicted individual was a woman and if they participated in a profit drive crime as part of an organised criminal group. Overall, the search terms resulted in 2054 cases (including cases not relating to organised criminal groups), with 84 relevant cases identified using the aforementioned relevancy criteria. Accordingly, data analysis was conducted by undertaking a content analysis of the court judgement transcripts. Although court documents are rarely the subject of content analysis, Hall and Wright [122] developed the method of systematic content analysis, which can specifically aid in the analysis of court and other legal documents. In accordance with Hall and Wright [122], the systematic content analysis consists of three distinct parts: (1) selecting cases, (2) coding cases, and (3) analysing the case coding. Hall and Wright [122] note that the selection of cases should be conducted in a replicable manner, with a detailed search strategy and selection criteria that will allow for the replicability of the case selection process. The coding of relevant cases involved identifying key variables, including the age of the female offender, the offence for which they were convicted, their role within the organised criminal group or in the commission of the offence, criminal histories, mental health issues, drug use, significant relationships, experiences of abuse or violence, and notable vulnerabilities (including economic disadvantage and marginalisation).

Table 1. Search Term Results (Part One).

Australian States	Search Terms				
	Criminal Syndicate	Crime Syndicate	Criminal Network	Crime Network	Criminal Organisation
ACT	Total = 4 Relevant = 0	Total = 4 Relevant = 0	Total = 1 Relevant = 0	Total = 0 Relevant = 0	Total = 0 Relevant = 0
NSW	Total = 89 Relevant = 6	Total = 14 Relevant = 0	Total = 60 Relevant = 0	Total = 33 Relevant = 0	Total = 150 Relevant = 8
NT	Total = 2 Relevant = 0	Total = 0 Relevant = 0	Total = 0 Relevant = 0	Total = 0 Relevant = 0	Total = 0 Relevant = 0
QLD	Total = 2 Relevant = 0	Total = 0 Relevant = 0	Total = 0 Relevant = 0	Total = 0 Relevant = 0	Total = 73 Relevant = 2
SA	Total = 0 Relevant = 0	Total = 0 Relevant = 0	Total = 4 Relevant = 0	Total = 3 Relevant = 0	Total = 63 Relevant = 4
TAS	Total = 0 Relevant = 0	Total = 0 Relevant = 0	Total = 0 Relevant = 0	Total = 0 Relevant = 0	Total = 0 Relevant = 0

Table 1. Cont.

Australian States	Search Terms				
	Criminal Syndicate	Crime Syndicate	Criminal Network	Crime Network	Criminal Organisation
VIC	Total = 17 Relevant = 2	Total = 10 Relevant = 0	Total = 0 Relevant = 0	Total = 0 Relevant = 0	Total = 7 Relevant = 0
WA	Total = 0 Relevant = 0	Total = 0 Relevant = 0	Total = 0 Relevant = 0	Total = 0 Relevant = 0	Total = 4 Relevant = 0
Total Cases	114	24	65	36	297
Relevant Cases	8	0	0	0	14

Table 2. Search Term Results (Part Two).

Australian States	Search Terms			
	Crime Organisation	Criminal Group	Crime Group	Organised Crime
ACT	Total = 0 Relevant = 0	Total = 0 Relevant = 0	Total = 0 Relevant = 0	Total = 5 Relevant = 0
NSW	Total = 0 Relevant = 0	Total = 510 Relevant = 44	Total = 6 Relevant = 0	Total = 397 Relevant = 9
NT	Total = 0 Relevant = 0	Total = 0 Relevant = 0	Total = 0 Relevant = 0	Total = 0 Relevant = 0
QLD	Total = 0 Relevant = 0	Total = 0 Relevant = 0	Total = 0 Relevant = 0	Total = 76 Relevant = 1
SA	Total = 0 Relevant = 0	Total = 9 Relevant = 0	Total = 4 Relevant = 0	Total = 180 Relevant = 3
TAS	Total = 0 Relevant = 0	Total = 0 Relevant = 0	Total = 0 Relevant = 0	Total = 6 Relevant = 0
VIC	Total = 0 Relevant = 0	Total = 0 Relevant = 0	Total = 0 Relevant = 0	Total = 262 Relevant = 4
WA	Total = 0 Relevant = 0	Total = 0 Relevant = 0	Total = 0 Relevant = 0	Total = 63 Relevant = 1
Total Cases	0	519	10	989
Relevant Cases	0	44	0	18

Limitations

Research into organised crime remains methodologically challenging due to the secretive and dangerous nature of the field [28]. As a result, scholarly work on organised crimes relies primarily on secondary data. The present study was limited to one data source, namely court judgement transcripts from Australia. In considering this, it is likely that the information in the judgement transcripts is incomplete to some degree. This limitation stems from the methodologies employed by policing agencies in gathering evidence for a conviction. Investigators rely on data collection methods such as surveillance, archival records, and the testimony of informants or witnesses, all of which can yield partial or fragmented accounts [123]. As a result, data obtained from sentencing documents may be limited in both completeness and accuracy. The consequences of such gaps are that the personal histories and experiences of female offenders, as well as the ties and relationships within OCGs, are often only partially visible in the available data [123]. Essentially, judicial data is known to echo the performance of the criminal justice system as opposed to the crime itself [69]. Therefore, it is likely that other methodologies and data sources might

provide additional information on female offenders involved in OCGs, especially in regard to their personal histories.

Judicial documents are also susceptible to gender bias, with the stereotyping of female victims and offenders prevalent within the criminal justice sector. The stereotyping of women as either passive victims or exceptional transgressors reflects broader perceptions regarding gendered criminality [7,25,53,65]. As Smart [55] argues, legal discourses, and therefore judicial documents, are far from neutral and instead should be viewed as gendered constructions that reproduce dominant cultural assumptions about femininity and criminality. Consequently, investigative and prosecutorial practices may overlook women's involvement in OCGs, particularly where normative values cast them as peripheral or coerced participants [60,61]. When women are prosecuted, the framing within judicial documents may emphasise their deviance as 'doubly transgressive', both criminal and unfeminine, resulting in victim-blaming attitudes or disproportionality harsh sentences [124]. Judicial documents are therefore not objective account of criminality but gendered narratives that risk obscuring the complexity of women's involvement in OCGs.

The use of a content analysis within the methodology also has limitations. Firstly, sampling challenges undermine the generalisability of the findings. Convenience or purposive sampling, as utilised in the present study, allows for potential selection bias which restricts the external validity of the data [125,126]. Relatedly, the use of keywords and database searchers are inherently subjective and can either miss relevant data or include irrelevant items, thus reducing validity. Of note, the present study was limited to search terms constructed around synonyms for organised criminal groups (e.g., criminal organisation, criminal network) as the focus was on the role of female offenders in OCGs. Therefore, the inclusion of search terms relating to particular criminal activities (e.g., "drug trafficking", "money laundering", "rebirthing") could have expanded the dataset. Future research should utilise a probability sample approach, incorporating both group-based and activity-based terms to broaden the scope and gain a better understanding of the relationship between gender and organised crime.

Additionally, coding issues in content analysis make it difficult to generalise across studies, particularly in the context of organised crime and gender. Researchers examining the same variables, such as the role of female offenders in organised criminal groups, may operationalise that variable differently, resulting in inconsistent coding schemes and findings. For example, some studies note that women have become increasingly involved in organised crime, while others suggest they have always been involved [8,12,13,17]. These divergent coding categories not only produce different empirical results but also make it difficult to compare findings across studies and to build cumulative knowledge. As Lacy et al. [126] note, when dissimilar codes are applied to similar phenomena, the generalisability of results is weakened. In the case of organised crime and gender, this fragmentation can reinforce the lack of consensus over women's agency, perpetuating stereotypes in some analyses while obscuring evidence of more active participation in others.

3. Results

The following sections will present the results from the collated court judgement transcripts. The presentation of the results is divided into two sections: descriptive results of the convicted women involved in organised crime, and the role of the convicted women in organised criminal groups.

3.1. Descriptive Results of Convicted Women Involved in Organised Crime

The ages of the convicted women ranged from 22 to 75 with the average age being 38.825 years at the time of the offence. Of the 84 cases identified, 16% (13 cases) of cases involved women who had no criminal record (where noted in the court judgement transcript). In comparison 8% (7 cases) of the convicted women had a minor criminal record (including drug possession and driving offences), while 2% (2 cases) had a significant criminal record (including drug trafficking, weapon possession, and assaulting law enforcement). Furthermore, 18% (15 cases) of convicted women were confirmed to have a mental illness (including anxiety disorder, PTSD, and depression), while 14% (12 cases) had experienced violent, sexual and emotional abuse in intimate relationships. Additionally, 21% (18 cases) of convicted women had an intimate relationship with a co-offender, while 14% (12 cases) had a history of drug use and abuse (including at the time of their offence). Other notable results included, 17% (14 cases) of convicted women had experienced financial difficulties or had a debt at the time of their offence, while 6% (5 cases) were in a single mother experience.

In terms of the crimes committed by the convicted women, there was a range of offences, with 10 different classifications of crimes in the court judgement transcripts. The majority of women were convicted of one offence, three of them were convicted of two offences, while one woman was convicted of three offences. The most common crime committed was drug offences (drug trafficking and supply), money laundering, and fraud. Most women were convicted for aiding in the crime they were convicted of (71% or 60 cases), while in the remaining cases (29% or 24 cases) they were fully complicit in carrying out the offence. The crimes they were convicted for were divided into 10 different crime categories: (1) drug offences, (2) money laundering, (3) fraud, (4) precursor chemicals, (5) homicide, (6) break and enter, (7) stolen goods, (8) car rebirthing, (9) sex trafficking, and (10) possession of dedicated encrypted criminal communication device. The majority of the crimes committed were drug offences (63% or 53 cases), this was followed by money laundering (17% or 14 cases), fraud offences (12% or 10 cases), and importing and possessing precursor chemicals (2% or 2 cases). The other crime categories all had one case each (see Figure 1 below).

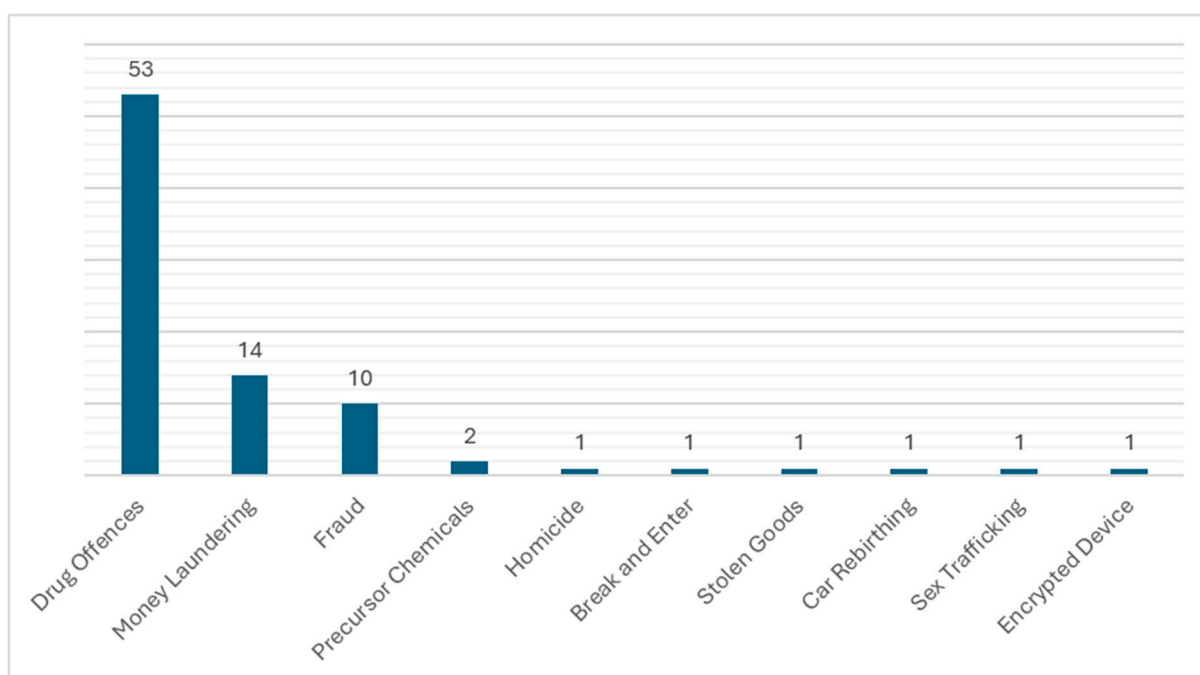


Figure 1. Offences of Convicted Women.

3.2. *The Role of Women in Organised Criminal Groups*

The following results present data on the involvement of women in organised criminal groups, specifically in relation to their convicted offences. Among the 53 cases involving drug-related offences, women occupied a range of significant roles, with five distinct categories identified. The majority of women (60% or 32 cases) were principally engaged in the supply of illicit drugs. This role typically involved distributing drugs to customers, collecting and storing substances, and delivering them to co-offenders. A smaller proportion of women (20% or 11 cases) participated in the importation of illicit drugs. Their responsibilities included organising import documentation, liaising with customs brokers, and arranging the storage of drug shipments. Additionally, some women (11% or 6 cases) were involved in advisory, or coordination roles related to drug importation. These roles encompassed managing financial transactions, negotiating with suppliers, and communicating with other offenders using encrypted criminal communication platforms (e.g., ANOM). A minority of cases (5% or 3 cases) involved women in drug cultivation activities, such as coordinating cultivation procedures, purchasing properties for this purpose, and crop minding. One case involved a woman directly implicated in the drug manufacturing process, specifically the extraction of pseudoephedrine from over-the-counter medications to produce methamphetamine.

In the 14 cases involving money laundering offences, women undertook a variety of roles within the laundering process. The most common role (50% or 7 cases) involved the physical transfer and deposit of illicit funds, including the circulation of cash through casinos and direct deposits into bank accounts. In 4 cases (28%), women facilitated the movement of illicit funds through both personal and business accounts. Two cases involved women laundering proceeds through the purchase of high-value assets, such as vehicles and real estate. In one case, a woman acted in an advisory capacity, providing strategic guidance on how illicit funds should be structured and deposited to avoid detection. In the 10 cases involving fraud-related offences, women occupied a range of roles. Notably, four women (40%) were directly responsible for obtaining fraudulent funds, primarily through the submission of dishonest loan applications and the use of deceptive practices to access government funding. In two cases, women acquired counterfeit identification documents, such as driver's licences and Medicare cards, to facilitate fraudulent financial transactions. The remaining cases reflected diverse methods of fraud. One case involved participation in a business email compromise scheme: another centred on the use of counterfeit credit cards to purchase high-value goods. In a further case, a woman was found to have recorded individuals using ATMs in order to capture personal banking information.

The remaining eight cases involved a diverse array of offences, illustrating the range of roles women can occupy within OCGs in Australia. In two cases, women were implicated in the importation of precursor chemicals essential for the manufacture of illicit drugs. One acted as a courier, while the other arranged supplies and recruited additional couriers to receive and transport parcels. In another case, a woman was charged as an accessory both before and after the fact to murder, having transported the perpetrators to the victim's residence and provided operational intelligence, including details of the victim's daily routine. In the break and enter case, the woman served multiple functions, including acting as a lookout, participating in the burglaries, and remitting proceeds from the crimes to overseas contacts. The woman charged in relation to stolen goods was responsible for distributing baby formula, obtained through theft by illicit suppliers, on behalf of an OCG. In the car rebirth case, the accused facilitated the offence by securing appropriate premises for the activity. Another woman was charged with possession of a dedicated encrypted criminal communication device; she operated a business selling Cipher-enabled devices and supplied them to criminal syndicates. Finally, in the sex trafficking case, the woman

functioned as the head of a criminal syndicate, leveraging contacts in Southeast Asia to recruit women for unlicensed brothels under false promises of favourable pay and working conditions. Collectively, these cases underscore the breadth and complexity of women's involvement in OCGs, highlighting their participation across logistical, facilitative, and leadership roles.

4. Discussion

The findings challenge longstanding assumptions about the marginality of women in OCGs [2–5,9–13,27]. Rather than occupying exclusively subordinate or auxiliary roles, the women in the sampled cases occupied positions of varying influence within OCGs. The role of women in OCGs within Australia mirrors more recent scholarship, which positions women as active, complex, and sometimes autonomous participants in organised crime [7,12,19–26]. Within the sampled cases, their participation spanned numerous criminal offences, including drug trafficking, money laundering, and fraud. Although only 84 cases involved a female offender, their roles and breadth of involvement affirm Selmini's [25] assertion that women "occupy both passive, subordinate roles and more active, powerful ones" (p. 000). The cumulative evidence in this dataset supports more recent notions that women's roles in organised crime are fluid and contingent on structural, relational, and individual variables. While many remain embedded in gendered hierarchies and perform roles shaped by coercion or dependency, others operate with significant autonomy and agency, occupying strategic and sometimes leadership positions.

The data revealed a significant diversity of offences and roles, with car rebirthing, sex trafficking, and the selling of encrypted devices as noteworthy stand outs. However, drug-related offences dominated the dataset, with women participating in all stages of the supply chain. In 73 out of the 84 cases, women occupied low-level roles, such as couriers or "mules", roles which are often associated with gendered vulnerabilities and economic marginalisation [29]. Women who occupied these roles often had financial obligations to family, such as a 45-year-old woman who had to cover her sick mother's medical bills in Vietnam [127], were single mothers experiencing financial strain [128], or women in precarious employment due to visa limitations [129]. In other notable cases, a 22-year-old drug mule, cited an obligation to support her mother financially [130], while another aged 75, participated in precursor chemical importation after her husband was placed in a nursing home and she faced medical and financial difficulties [131]. Recent data from the Women's Economic Equality Taskforce (WEET) [132] found that women in Australia are more likely to be reliant on low-paid, insecure work and tend to work less hours than men, with 57.32 per cent of underemployed Australians being women. Precarious employment environments and increased pay gaps (\$255.40 per week) [132] are likely to lead to involvement in OCGs where financial benefits are more apparent. Such cases reinforce the concept of the "feminisation of poverty", which is likely to be exacerbated by the "cost of living crisis" in Australia [133]. These patterns reinforce the insights of Fleetwood and Leban [29], who argue that the feminisation of poverty and histories of trauma frequently underpin women's entry into drug trafficking.

Other women held mid- to high-level positions (11 cases), where they engaged in operational, financial and managerial activities. For instance, one woman was responsible for arranging import documentation and storage of drug shipments, liaising with customs brokers, and overseeing the physical unpacking of imported drugs [134]. Another acted as a key organiser in a drug supply network, organising her own distribution and sales [135]. However, women in central or leadership positions still exhibited signs of gendered vulnerabilities. For example, a 41-year-old woman who led a syndicate trafficking women from Southeast Asia into unlicensed brothels was responsible for financially supporting her

disabled brother's son [136]. Within her role she coordinated recruitment, transport, and employment, and used coercive tactics masked as economic opportunities for the trafficked women. The offender's role within the syndicate encapsulates the idea of the 'alpha victim', especially with regard to her centrality in the criminal offences [66,71]. In another case, a woman who was responsible for the cultivation and distribution of cannabis reported that her motivation was to repay her mother's debt, noting that her mother's gambling addiction had caused family breakdown, loss of the family home and bankruptcy [137]. The involvement of migrant women in OCGs may be linked to economic inequality within Australia, where migrant women are 7 per cent less likely to be employed than those born in Australia [138]. This is often coupled with experiences of racism, discrimination, and familial constraints [139]. Such accounts echo the concepts of "blurred boundaries" [61], "pseudo-emancipation" [84], and "doing gender" [12], whereby women in OCGs are simultaneously empowered and constrained by gendered structures and expectations (e.g., familial obligations).

Women also played substantial roles in money laundering and fraud, using their professional knowledge and social capital to facilitate often complex financial crimes. For example, one offender used contacts and skills as an accountant to facilitate loans for properties in order to launder proceeds from drug trafficking [140]. Another woman, a physiotherapist and business co-director, created false appointments, treatment notes and invoices in order to claim government funds fraudulently [141]. These cases challenge the prevailing notion that women in organised crime are often passive participants, showing instead how some may leverage legitimate occupations for criminal purposes. These roles echo research findings that women are often deeply embedded in the essential financial and logistical arms of OCGs, especially where violence is minimal or not required [19,68,71]. As Guerreiro et al. [7] notes, "even in supposedly secondary positions, women play a relevant role, and criminal groups often depend on them to exist" (p. 57). Similarly, another offender sold high-end encrypted devices to multiple criminal groups, running a profitable and technological complex operation [142]). This intersection of legitimate and criminal enterprise reflects what Potter [32] describes as the "renovated lens" needed to understand female participation in serious crime. This lens considers the key role women play as brokers between legality and criminality, where criminal contacts and opportunities outweigh the need for violence or the use of force in particular illicit activities.

Almost half of the female offenders (39 out of 84) also had complex and often traumatic personal histories which contributed to their criminality. Many reported mental health issues, substance abuse, histories of domestic and personal violence. In one case, a woman supplied drugs on behalf of her partner who had a history of physically and verbally abusing her. This was compounded by a history of mental health and substance abuse, psychological deprivation, neglect, and parental absence [143]. Another woman, who was involved in the supply of cocaine, had experienced post-traumatic stress disorder and persistent depressive disorder, and had a documented history of substance abuse and sexual abuse. The offender was at the very bottom of the criminal hierarchy and did not share in the profits of the group [144]. These cases underscore the continued relevance of gendered subordination and violence which links women's criminality to structural and patriarchal inequalities and survival-driven decisions. These drivers of criminality are exacerbated within Australia, where intimate partner violence is prevalent. Data from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [145] notes that 23 per cent of women have experienced physical and/or sexual violence from an intimate partner since the age of 15. Similarly, 16 per cent of women experience economic abuse from a current or previous partner. This aligns with existing literature further highlighting the blurred boundaries between victimisation and criminalisation, where women's roles in OCGs are often bound

to “emotional survival” rather than calculated self-enrichment [3,25,29,61]. As such, this entanglement complicates legal and criminological analysis. When the criminal behaviour of women is intertwined with prior victimisation or partner dynamics, there is a need to approach the complexity of their behaviour through a gynocentric and intersectional lens.

Some of the sampled cases (17 out of 84) also highlighted the importance romantic or familial relationships as pathways into criminality. These relationships were frequently described as exploitative, controlling, or emotionally manipulative. In some cases, women acted out of loyalty, coercion, or emotional dependence. One offender, for instance, said she took over her imprisoned husband’s drug business because she was afraid and felt threatened [146]. In another case, a woman drove co-offenders to the scene of a murder and provided intelligence about the victim but claimed she acted “under some degree of duress” as she was in a relationship with a notorious criminal [147]. The data strongly supports Selmini’s [25] and Rossi’s [81] findings that familial and romantic relationships often act as conduits into organised crime, with loyalty playing a significant role. One woman acted as a money launderer for her husband’s drug syndicate [148]. Another stated her entry point was “helping her brother” acquire fraudulent identification for loan applications [149]. These relational dynamics support Rossi’s [81] and Ingrasci’s [74,84], arguments that women often assume criminal responsibility in order to support male relatives. Of note, Ingrasci [84] found that even women who orchestrate violent crimes or handle finances remain subordinate to male decision-making and cultural codes. The data confirms that gendered subordination remains a key feature of women’s participation in organised crime and supports the conclusion that victimisation and agency often co-exist; a woman may be both manipulated and instrumental, subordinate and strategically important.

However, a subset of cases (20 out of 84) defied the prominent narrative of gendered victimisation and marginalisation. Women with no history of trauma, addiction, or coercion, engaged in organised crime and occupied leadership roles. For example, a 46-year-old woman with a supportive family and successful business operated an OCG involved in high-level drug trafficking [135]. In another case, a woman, who was well-respected in the Vietnamese Community of South Australia, trafficked large commercial quantities of methylamphetamine and laundered the proceeds through property holdings with the assistance of friends, family, and associates [140]. Such cases suggest that financial opportunity, status, and even entrepreneurial ambition may motivate some women’s involvement in organised crime, especially if the appropriate criminal connections or relationships are present [34,121,150]. As such, these cases challenge stereotypes of the “typical” female offender as economically disadvantaged, experiencing violence and abuse, or acting under duress [2,20,106,107,151–153]. Instead, these cases suggest that some offenders in Australia operate with deliberate intent and entrepreneurial acumen. Such cases require a reframing of women’s roles in organised crime not as deviations or exceptions, but as increasingly autonomous actors who are not restricted by gendered structures of vulnerabilities.

The criminal behaviour of the women in sampled cases, and the roles they occupied, followed several identifiable patterns. First, relational offending was common, with many women introduced to organised crime through intimate partners or family members. In these cases, behaviour often involved carrying out assigned tasks (e.g., delivering parcels, storing money, forging documents). Second, opportunistic offending involved women leveraging existing employment or contacts to facilitate the criminal activities of OCGs (e.g., laundering money through business accounts, invoicing schemes, fraudulently accessing government benefits). Third, entrepreneurial models were evident, where women created or led operations with minimal oversight by male co-offenders, suggesting significant decision-making autonomy. Based on the dataset, the following patterns were identified regarding the role of female offenders involved in OCGs within Australia:

- Survival-Based Offenders: Motivated by debt, poverty, or dependent care obligations.
- Relational Offenders: Involved through intimate partners or familial ties, often under coercion.
- Professional Facilitators: Leveraged existing employment or contracts to facilitate criminal activity.
- Entrepreneurial Operators: Autonomously organised and managed criminal activity.
- Subordinate Offenders: Occupied supportive roles and performed tasks under supervision.

These patterns are supported by existing scholarship which reinforces the notion that female criminality within organised crime must be understood in relation to socio-economic factors, personal histories, and access to opportunities [2,7,12,25].

5. Conclusions

This study highlighted the complex and often contradictory roles women occupy within OCGs, challenging the binary of ‘victim versus perpetrator’. Many women engage in crime as a means of survival or as an extension of relational dynamics, with issues such as gender inequality, workforce participation, migrant discrimination, and intimate personal violence likely to lead to increased involvement within Australia. In contrast, some women demonstrate substantial agency and strategic intent, with illicit profits a motivating factor. The findings presented here support Tickner et al.’s [93] claim that “the participation of women in organised crime economies is not exceptional and does not occur only in minor labour or subordinate positions” (p. 26). Future research must continue to adopt intersectional frameworks that account for the ways in which gender interacts with race, class, and geography to shape women’s involvement in organised crime. Rather than viewing women as anomalies within male-dominated systems, criminology must embrace a gender-sensitive epistemology that recognises their centrality and complexity. Scholars advocate for qualitative methodologies such as life histories, ethnography, and in-depth interviews to capture the complexity of women’s roles [25,28]. These methods are better suited to uncovering the interplay between agency, coercion, and structural constraint that characterises women’s involvement in organised crime. As Selmini [25] provocatively asks: “Are these new roles evidence of real power. . .or are the traditional gender roles replicated in new, more opaque forms?” (pg. 000). As such, research should seek to understand organised crime through a gynocentric lens which utilises intersectionality to understand how gender, power and crime intersect within OCGs, including non-criminal or peripheral forms of involvement. Further research will allow for the development of a typology of female offenders involved in OCGs, utilising intersectionality to highlight potential differences between the roles and experiences of male and female offenders.

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