

Women, brokerage and transnational organized crime. Empirical results from the Dutch Organized Crime Monitor

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Abstract This paper analyzes the role of women in various types of transnational organized crime and tests the ‘gendered markets’ hypothesis by Zhang et al. (Criminology 45(3):699–733 2007) for a wide cross-section of 150 cases from the Dutch Organized Crime Monitor. The main information sources for the Dutch Organized Crime Monitor are closed Dutch police investigations into criminal groups, often spanning a period of several years. Following four data sweeps, a wide cross-section of 150 cases was collected about various forms of organized crime (period 1994–2011): ‘traditional’ drug trafficking cases (cocaine, heroin, and cannabis), but also other—less frequently prioritized—phenomena such as synthetic drugs (production and export), human smuggling, human trafficking, and fraud and money laundering. The paper discusses several important theoretical perspectives from the organized crime literature: the gendered markets hypothesis; the social embeddedness of (transnational) organized crime; and the idea of brokerage. Furthermore, empirical data are presented on how often women play a (prominent) role in different types of criminal activities and which roles they play. These findings are related to the ‘gendered markets’ hypothesis and alternative explanations. Further qualitative analysis is presented on the transnational aspects which can be discerned in the studied cases: transnational marriage and transnational relationships; language and mediation; and migration and legal status. Finally, the main conclusions are discussed as well as their theoretical and empirical relevance.

Keywords Women · Crime · Organized crime · Brokerage · Social networks · Theory

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Introduction

Zhang et al. (2007) introduced the hypothesis of ‘gendered markets’ to explain the unusually prominent role of (Chinese) women in human smuggling as a form of organized crime. According to these authors, this higher prevalence of women in human smuggling, compared to traditional drug cases, is due to: the limited role of violence and turf as organizing features of human smuggling; the importance of interpersonal networks in defining and facilitating smuggling operations; gender ideologies about work and care giving; and the impact of safety as an overriding concern for clients. In this article, we have put this hypothesis to the test for a wide cross-section of 150 cases from the Dutch Organized Crime Monitor. The main information sources for the Dutch Organized Crime Monitor are closed Dutch police investigations into criminal groups, often spanning a period of several years. Following four data sweeps, we collected a wide cross-section of 150 cases about various forms of organized crime (period 1994–2011): ‘traditional’ drug trafficking cases (cocaine, heroin, and cannabis), but also other phenomena such as synthetic drugs (production and export), human smuggling, human trafficking, and fraud and money laundering. Since empirical research on organized crime is scarce, and particularly research on women in transnational organized crime, the amount of empirical material used in this article is unique.

The next section ([Theory](#)) discusses several important theoretical perspectives from the literature on organized crime: the gendered markets hypothesis; the social embeddedness of (transnational) organized crime; and the idea of brokerage. [Current research](#) section briefly discusses current research and data from the Dutch Organized Crime Monitor. [Gendered markets?](#) and [Women and transnational organized crime](#) section contain the main empirical results and describe the extent to which women play a (prominent) role in different types of criminal activities and which roles they play. These findings will be related to the ‘gendered markets’ hypothesis and alternative explanations. [Women and transnational organized crime](#) section focuses more specifically on the transnational aspects which can be discerned in these cases: transnational marriage and transnational relationships; language and mediation; and migration and legal status. The final section discusses the main conclusions and their theoretical and empirical relevance.

Theory

Landesco (1935) was one of the first authors to pay attention to the role of women in organized crime. Over the years, several examples have been documented of women who played a rather active role in the world of organized crime (e.g. Block 1980, 1981; Calder 1995; Potter and Gaines 1995; Albanese 1998; Kleemans and Van de Bunt 1999; Fiandaca 2007; Brennan et al. 2012). Much of this literature focuses on the role of women in traditional Mafias, but this paper will focus, in particular, on the role of women in transnational organized crime.

According to the traditional view, crime—and especially organized crime—is a predominantly male phenomenon. Steffensmeier (1983), for instance, states that where the stakes are high and the risks are great, organized crime is highly sexually segregated. Several authors have discussed why women are under-represented in official crime statistics, for crime in general and for organized crime in particular.

Other articles in this special issue go into these discussions in more detail, such as the papers by Arsovska and Allum, and Hübschle. However, what is to be expected regarding transnational organized crime? It is common knowledge that in ordinary crime, women are fairly under-represented and men are highly over-represented. Why would this be different for transnational organized crime?

Gendered markets

In the above-mentioned seminal paper, Zhang et al. (2007) challenged the traditional view that women are under-represented in organized crime, by focusing specifically upon the role of (Chinese) women in international human smuggling activities. Since this role was revealed to be greater than expected, they went on to contend that organizational context and market demands shape the extent and nature of women's participation in criminal enterprise. In effect, their line of reasoning is based upon the idea of blocked opportunities: if women wished to choose for organized crime, they would have better options in human smuggling markets than in other markets such as local drug markets. In human smuggling, Zhang et al. argue, violence and turf are much less important and interpersonal networks more salient in defining and facilitating smuggling operations, while gender ideologies about work and care giving, and the impact of safety as an overriding concern for clients, put women in a relatively better position in these markets than in other markets. After all, human smugglers have to take care of clients and cater for them instead of defending their territory. However, Zhang et al. (2007) did not elaborate upon what this general idea would mean for other markets such as human trafficking for sexual exploitation or fraud and money laundering.

The social embeddedness of transnational organized crime

Arguably, anyone can steal or commit a violent act, but things are more complex in organized crime and particularly in cases of cross-border crime or 'transit crime' (Kleemans 2007). Transnational organized crime poses different requirements than traditional high-volume crime (Kleemans and De Poot 2008). The first distinct feature is the greater importance of social relations in organized crime. It is simply impossible to get started without access to suppliers, clients, co-offenders, and profitable criminal opportunities. Trust is also important, as the financial stakes are high and the rules and mechanisms that make transactions in the legal world so much easier are absent: entering into contracts, paying via the official banking system, and—in case of disagreement—the availability of mediation or the judiciary (Reuter 1983). For this reason, existing social ties are used or new illegal business relationships have to be built up. Not everyone has suitable ties providing access to profitable illegal opportunities; moreover, building up such relationships takes time and energy.

The second distinct feature of organized crime is the transnational character of many of these criminal activities. Many types of organized crime are based on international smuggling activities. However, as social networks are typically constrained by laws of geographical and social distance (e.g. Feld 1981), many people lack international contacts that may connect them to these illegal opportunities. Consequently, not all potential offenders have access to transnational contacts.

A third common feature is that, compared to high volume crime, the activities are logistically considerably more complex and call for more co-offenders and specific expertise (e.g. Cornish and Clarke 2002). Since more co-offenders are required for the successful commission of these crimes, seeking and finding suitable co-offenders is important (see e.g. Tremblay 1993). Reliance on co-offenders from within a given social circle is not always sufficient, as they may not possess the necessary capabilities. Contacts with the legal world are also salient for transport, money transactions, and shielding from the authorities. Many people lack these contacts and expertise, and some acquire them only later on in life, e.g. through their professional activities and contacts.

From this perspective of the social embeddedness of organized crime, one may argue that involvement in transnational organized crime is not principally about structurally blocked access (or better opportunities for all women in some markets than in others) but rather, a question of (individual) capacity and individual access, which some have and others do not.

Brokerage

It is frequently observed that family, friends, and acquaintances work together and provide each other with introductions to third parties (Kleemans and Van de Bunt 1999). General ideas about the structure of social relations can also be applied to organized crime research. Social relations do not happen at random but often obey the laws of social and geographical distance (Feld 1981). Commonly, the closer people live; the more daily activities they have in common; and the less social distance exists between them, the more probable it is that ties will be forged between them. This produces clustering of people based on factors such as geographical distance, ethnicity, education, age, etc. The same kind of clustering exists within criminal networks. People who have grown up together or who live in the same neighborhood may later become companions in crime, while people sharing a similar ethnic background may also become members of the same criminal group.

Different networks, however, might be poorly connected as a result of geographical and/or social barriers between different countries, between different ethnic groups, and between the underworld and the licit world. These barriers produce ‘structural holes’ in networks that are difficult to bridge (Burt 1992; Kleemans 2007; Morselli 2009). For example, the main drug consumer markets are the United States and Europe, but there are few connections between southern American cocaine producers and European or U.S. drug consumer markets. The illegal nature of criminal activities presupposes a high degree of mutual trust. Therefore, those offenders who are able to bridge these structural holes have all kinds of strategic opportunities for making a profit. Case studies on transnational organized crime show that offenders in such strategic positions often operate at an international or inter-ethnic level or somewhere between the underworld and the licit world: they provide ‘bridges’ between people in different countries, between people from different ethnic backgrounds, and between criminal networks and the licit world (Kleemans 2007). These offenders are the ones who make the necessary connections between networks that would otherwise remain separate. Due to the importance of trust in such activities, these connections are often forged through family ties or other strong social bonds. An example of how this works is a case

involving trafficking cocaine from southern America via the Caribbean to the Netherlands (Kleemans and Van de Bunt 1999). The most vital link between the various countries was a man from the Netherlands Antilles who was a ‘broker’ between Colombian suppliers and European buyers. His sister was married to a Colombian who occupied a fairly high position in a cocaine organization, which was mainly based upon family ties. The Antillean lived in the Netherlands for a while, resulting in connections with Antilleans in the Netherlands who bought the cocaine and distributed it. Another old acquaintance was a native Dutchman who shipped—with the assistance of friends—the cocaine to the Netherlands. Hence, ‘structural’ holes at a macro-level were bridged by social relations at a micro-level.

From this perspective of ‘brokerage’, one may question which roles women play in transnational organized crime. Since close social relationships are necessary for transnational contacts or for connections between the underworld and legal society, what does this mean for the role of women? Are existing relationships between men and women able to account for this brokerage, in a static or more dynamic way?

Current research

The idea behind the Dutch Organized Crime Monitor is to collect solid empirical data on a wide cross-section of organized crime cases. The main sources for the Dutch Organized Crime Monitor are closed Dutch police files of criminal groups, often spanning a period of several years (for more information, see Kleemans 2007). From 1996 to 2011, 150 large-scale investigations were systematically analyzed. Each case study starts with structured interviews with police officers and/or public prosecutors. After these interviews, we analyze and summarize the police files (to which we have direct access). When describing and analyzing these files, use is made of an extensive checklist.¹ Unobtrusive police methods, such as transcripts of wiretaps and data obtained from police observations, and interrogations of victims and offenders, often provide a detailed picture of the social world of organized crime. Furthermore, it is important to note the absence of plea-bargaining in the Dutch criminal justice system and the extensive use of wiretapping, which provides researchers with a lot of ‘unobtrusive’ evidence that can be checked by researchers themselves.

A recurring discussion in academic literature is whether organized crime should be defined in terms of characteristics of groups or of criminal activities (for an overview, see Fijnaut and Paoli 2004). In the Dutch Organized Crime Monitor, organized crime is mainly distinguished from terrorism, corporate crime, group crime, and other types of crime by the characteristics of the groups involved. Following the Fijnaut research group (Fijnaut et al. 1998), groups are considered as organized crime groups when they are focused primarily on obtaining illegal profits; systematically commit crimes

¹ This checklist elaborates upon the following main questions: What is the composition of the group and how do offenders cooperate? What kinds of illegal activities do they engage in and how do they operate? How do they interact with the opportunities and risks presented by their environment? What are the proceeds of the relevant criminal activities and how do they spend these proceeds? Which methods of criminal investigation were deployed against the group and what were the results? Which members of the group were brought to trial and what outcomes did these trials produce?

with serious damage for society; and are reasonably capable of shielding their criminal activities from the authorities. Shielding illegal activities from the authorities is made possible by using various strategies such as: corruption, violence, intimidation, storefronts, communication in codes, counter surveillance, media manipulation, the use of experts such as Notaries Public, lawyers and accountants.

Following four data sweeps, we collected a wide cross-section of 150 cases about various forms of organized crime (during the period 1994–2011). The strength of this data set is combining breadth with in-depth research, yet it should not be misinterpreted as forming a representative sample. Since only intrusive policing techniques can shed light on a hidden phenomenon such as organized crime, any ‘complete’ or ‘random’ sample is inconceivable. Furthermore, all samples are in some way ‘selective’ and influenced by police priorities (as well as failures of criminal groups to escape police attention and shield their activities effectively). Therefore, the Dutch Organized Crime Monitor employs ‘strategic selection of cases’ from a total population of all closed criminal investigations of national and regional investigation teams (including also the ‘fiscal police’ FIOD-ECD). This ‘strategically selective sample’ pays attention not only to ‘traditional’ drug trafficking cases (cocaine, heroin, and cannabis) (37 cases), but also to other—less frequently prioritized—phenomena such as synthetic drugs (production and export) (15 cases), mixed cases (including traditional drugs and synthetic drugs) (21 cases), human smuggling (16 cases), human trafficking (18 cases), fraud and money laundering (32 cases) and other criminal activities (11 cases).² This way, we collected a wide cross-section of cases regarding empirical phenomena, covered by the broad umbrella term ‘organized crime’.

To find out which roles women play in transnational organized crime, we used data from the Dutch Organized Crime Monitor. In 102 cases, women were involved as suspects. Overall, we gained data on 247 women, their roles, and the context of the criminal groups and the criminal activities in which they were involved. This means that 11 % of all suspects ($N=2295$) were female. Many of the criminal activities concerned various forms of ‘transit crime’: international smuggling activities, such as drug trafficking, smuggling illegal immigrants, human trafficking for sexual exploitation, arms trafficking, trafficking in stolen vehicles, and other transnational illegal activities, such as money laundering, fraud, and evasion of taxes (e.g. cigarette smuggling, oil fraud, and Value Added Tax fraud). In these cases, the Netherlands can be either a country of destination, a transit country, or particularly in the case of synthetic drugs, a production country.

Gendered markets?

We use our dataset in order to provide qualitative answers to qualitative questions. Notably, plain quantitative statements are only conceivable for ‘random samples’ from known populations. However, many populations in criminology are unknown

² Classification would be simple, if criminal investigations would relate to one criminal organization pertaining one specific criminal activity. However, criminal investigations often involve various suspects pertaining to various criminal activities, sometimes in various types of cooperation. Therefore, this classification is based upon the main criminal activities that are part of the case study.

and highly dependent upon priorities of the criminal justice system to target specific types of criminal activities and specific types of people. Nevertheless, it is clear that many researchers go on to ask quantitative questions about such populations, also regarding the question of the prevalence of men and women in certain types of crime. However, one may still question whether such results reflect mainly differences in the original (unknown) populations or differences in the selections of criminal justice systems.

We think that quantitative statements about are dataset should be interpreted carefully, as we have strategically selected several types of criminal activities, based on a larger sample of police investigations. We did not select cases for reasons of the involvement of women and we tried to include a wide range of criminal activities. In this way, we considered it interesting to see if women are involved or not in several types of activities and if they are structurally involved in certain types of activities, as Zhang et al. (2007) suggested. This is how this data set should be used: to refute the null hypothesis that women are *not* involved in particular activities.

If we consider the number of female suspects in our case studies, we can draw three conclusions. First, in 68 % of all cases, women are involved as suspects (102 out of 150 cases). This means that in only a minority of all cases (48) were women absent as suspects. Second, what do the results of our case studies tell us regarding the assumed absence of women in drug markets and their role in human smuggling, which is supposed to require more ‘female’ qualifications? As Table 1 shows, women are involved in different kinds of criminal activities: they are not only involved in human smuggling, but they are also involved in traditional drugs trafficking. Furthermore, they are involved in human trafficking for sexual exploitation (which is not only a crime of men against women) and fraud and money laundering (presumably also open to women as offenders or as accomplices). Third, the number of women involved is fairly small (compared to men). In total, 247 female suspects are involved, which is only a very small percentage (11 %) of all suspects. Although we do not want to put too much emphasis on these numbers, one may say that women do play a role, but that scientists who claim that women play a prominent role in organized crime probably exaggerate the role of women.

Table 1 Number of female suspects and percentage of female suspects involved in several types of criminal activities

Type of criminal activity	Number of female suspects	Percentage (of all suspects)
Traditional drugs trafficking (heroin, cocaine, cannabis)	67	12 %
Synthetic drugs (production and export)	30	13 %
Both synthetic and traditional drugs	44	8 %
Human smuggling	18	8 %
Human trafficking for sexual exploitation	40	21 %
Fraud and money laundering	32	7 %
Other types of criminal activities	16	14 %
Total number of female suspects	247	11 %

Table 1 shows that women play a role in different types of cases and that there are no criminal activities where female suspects are entirely absent. They play a role in different types of drug trafficking (141 suspects). Regarding the argument that characteristics of the drugs market block opportunities for women (e.g. by the importance of violence and turf), this is clearly untrue for at least 141 female suspects. Some cases also show prominent roles for women.

Moreover, the gendered markets hypothesis seems to ignore the possibility that gender ideologies may differ between various cultural populations. In matrifocal communities, such as may be found in the Caribbean, girls are brought up with the idea that women have to be able to provide for themselves; they have to be economically independent (e.g. Safa 2005). This may account for the leading role that is played by a woman in the following case:

A criminal group smuggles cocaine from a Caribbean island to the Netherlands. A woman, A, is in charge and also her daughter (B) has a stable position in this family. A buys the drugs and coordinates the drug trafficking, using family members and acquaintances as couriers. A was born in the Dominican Republic and has Dutch nationality. She uses men and women as couriers, for money transfers and other odd jobs (case 140).

Women also play prominent roles in other drugs cases. They not only participate in traditional drugs smuggling, but also in the production of synthetic drugs (e.g. case 37) and the export of these drugs:

X is the female partner of J and they are both involved in XTC-smuggling from the Netherlands to Panama and the United States. In the past, X was involved in an extensive drug smuggling network for smuggling cannabis. She also played a major role in this network (case 89).

As several female suspects are involved in various drugs cases, the statement that, for instance, the dominance of violence and turf would block opportunities for women should be modified by these findings. It is equally untrue that women refrain from using violence, as case 122 shows:

B is A's girl friend and both are in charge of a criminal group involved in cannabis cultivation and trafficking. B gives orders to group members and is in charge of several bank accounts in the Netherlands and abroad. She gives orders to X to assault Y (case 122).

Women are also involved in other types of criminal activities: in human smuggling (18 suspects), in human trafficking for sexual exploitation (40 suspects), in fraud and money laundering (32 suspects), and in other types of criminal activities, such as arms trafficking and trafficking in stolen vehicles (16 suspects).

Prominent roles are found for instance in Chinese human smuggling cases. The next case illustrates that, similar to findings by Zhang et al. (2007), women may indeed have a significant position in the human smuggling market. However, it also illustrates that in human smuggling operations, even if they are led by a woman, caring about customers may not always be the leading principle, as is assumed by Zhang et al. (2007). Furthermore, it illustrates that in some cases violence in fact is an important factor, again, even if the organization is led by a woman.

A is one of the main suspects who is in charge of an organization smuggling large numbers of illegal Chinese immigrants to the United Kingdom. Two fellow male suspects play a coordinating role. Some of the smuggled Chinese immigrants are secreted in refrigerated containers with a temperature of -18° Celsius. One transportation arrangement fails dramatically and 58 Chinese immigrants suffocate in a lorry while trying to reach the United Kingdom.

A was able to attain and defend her main position on the route of illegal Chinese immigrants to the United Kingdom by threatening and using brutal violence. She blocked attempts by others to start their own business or leave the smuggling organization. For the latter reason, a former friend of A was seriously assaulted by A's accomplices. He was hit with a hammer on his back and his hands and was threatened with a gun in his mouth. Furthermore, because of fear of repercussions, suspects and witnesses were highly reluctant to give statements to the police and when they did, they refused to sign them (case 82).

Summing up, in a large majority of all analyzed cases, women play a role and sometimes a prominent one. In all cases, eight women played a leading role. Furthermore, there seem to be no particular criminal activities from which women are absent. In addition, in human trafficking cases for sexual exploitation, it is true that some women play a prominent role (see e.g. Siegel and De Blank 2010). Nevertheless, the 'bigger picture' is that the prevalence of men is much higher, as is true for other criminal activities (see, e.g. the articles by Arsovska and Allum as well as Hübschle in this special issue). Women are not absent and women play also other roles than victim roles, but still the picture of 'men trafficking women' prevails. Thus, our case studies suggest that the 'gendered markets' hypothesis should be modified and elaborated for particular criminal activities and particular roles, as all markets seem to be in some way accessible for women. Therefore, a more fruitful way to assess the gender factor in transnational organized crime is to explore the different roles women play in transnational organized crime.

Women and transnational organized crime

Analyzing the cases of the Dutch Organized Crime Monitor, the role of women in transnational organized crime seems to be explained primarily by the social embeddedness of organized crime (section [Theory](#)). Since women are part of the social environment, they are also able to play a role in transnational organized crime. As brokerage plays a key role in transnational organized crime, we will highlight several aspects of the roles of female suspects in our cases: transnational marriage and transnational relationships; language and mediation; and migration and legal status.

Transnational marriage and transnational relationships

Sometimes transnational marriage and transnational relationships can be a salient factor in criminal groups. In several cases, these relationships provide important links between networks in different countries and may be described in terms of 'brokerage' between disconnected networks. In some cases, these relationships are the core of the

link between the Netherlands and source countries for drugs and prostitutes (human trafficking). This is illustrated by the next case:

A, a Surinamese man, is in charge of a cocaine trafficking group and B is his girl friend. She was born in the Dutch Antilles and has Dutch nationality. She stays intermittently in the Netherlands, Curacao, Aruba, Venezuela, and the Dominican Republic and organizes cocaine for the group. She describes her role as a go-between between A and his group. She is involved in preparing transport, giving orders to group members, and arranging hotel accommodation for couriers in Aruba and Curacao (case 58).

As drug trafficking is a transnational activity, drug groups need anchor points in source countries and countries of destination, not only for ‘brokerage’ between sellers of cocaine and wholesale buyers on European markets, but also for logistical purposes. Transnational marriage and transnational relationships may forge such a link. Furthermore, migration patterns and colonial history may play a role as well (e.g. Fijnaut et al. 1998). Surinam and the former Dutch Antilles link southern American cocaine markets to the Netherlands, as many native Dutch, Surinamese, and Antilleans have relationships in both countries. Many people migrated or fled—after a brutal *coup d’état* by the Surinamese army—from Surinam to the Netherlands and many Antilleans have also migrated to the Netherlands. Such historical links between countries are also reflected in the life histories of people and in their relationships.

In human trafficking cases, we find a different pattern. Central is again the link between the Netherlands and source countries of prostitutes, particularly in Eastern Europe, but the main function of the women in these cases concerns the recruitment (and control) of new prostitutes:

One of the main suspects is A, a Dutchman, who has a relationship with J, who was born in Ukraine. J is a prostitute, who first worked for B and was transferred to A. She cohabits with A and they have a child together. She plays a role in the group as interpreter, mediator and recruiter of girls abroad, particularly in the Ukraine, but also in the Czech Republic, Romania, and former Yugoslavia. She recruits minors and older girls to work in the Netherlands or Germany as a “dancer” or “waitress” (Case 10).

Dutchman A is in charge of a brothel and B, another Dutchman, is a municipal official and organizes the checks under the Aliens act. B forges documents for prostitutes and ensures that they do not undergo checks under the Aliens Act. A has a relationship with C, an Eastern European prostitute from A’s brothel. C works as a prostitute, but is also the contact for recruitment of girls from the Czech Republic, and she receives these girls when they start working in the brothel. She is a procurer of two girls and she also works as an interpreter for A (one of the analyzed cases).

In several other cases of human trafficking, a key aspect is both recruitment of girls and controlling them. Women, in general, and prostitutes, in particular, are in a good position to recruit girls and control them, specifically if they originate from the same countries and/or work also as prostitutes. Being able to talk to them and to take care

of them, they are also able to control them and/or exploit them, with or without a male companion. This also shows that “care giving”, a central element in the traditional role of women, may go hand in hand with control and manipulation.

Language and mediation

When focusing on the role of women in transnational organized crime, it is important to note that sometimes the social aspect is very important. For one, people have to speak the same language. For another, they have to build trust and mediate or curb conflict. The two examples from human trafficking cases already showed that women sometimes play a role as interpreters, since they speak the same language as other prostitutes. Furthermore, as cocaine originates from southern America, it is important to speak Spanish and this can be a bottleneck for several offenders (e.g. case 70, where H is used as interpreter). An important example is case 137, which shows that it is very difficult for Turkish offenders to traffic heroin and cocaine to Ireland, as they do not speak English:

A is one of the main suspects of a group of Turkish offenders which is involved in trafficking heroin and cocaine. However, A speaks no English, which is a difficulty when doing business with Irish offenders. D is his Dutch girl friend and bears his child. She was born in the Netherlands and has Dutch nationality. D and two other women are very important for the contacts between the Turkish traffickers and the Irish buyers. On behalf of the group the women contact the Irish buyers, negotiate with them, and discuss with the Turkish offenders the terms and conditions. Contacts between the Irish and the Turkish offenders are always mediated by these three women. They go to Dublin, make telephone calls and translate text messages. Gradually, the women get more and more responsibilities (case 137).

In addition, other cases show that speaking the language and building trust can be important bottlenecks. Sometimes women are able to provide a solution, as they speak the language and are able to mediate. In some cases women even organize ‘weekends’ for the partners of male suspects and mediate between men (case 30). These cases show that there is also a social aspect to transnational organized crime and that women are a part of that. Moreover, since women play an important role in social life, they sometimes are of similar importance in an investigative strategy. In one of the analyzed cases, an undercover operation succeeds, as the wife of the main suspect gets on very well with a female police undercover agent. As the women get along so well, the two couples spend a lot of time together and the undercover agents are able to forge a good connection with the main suspect.

Migration and legal status

Migration is a very important factor in forging connections, familial, social, and economic, between different countries (Schiller et al. 1992). These connections may be used for legal trade, but also for illegal activities. The case below shows how migration may forge a link that is used for criminal activities.

A Colombian criminal group imports cocaine and marihuana and consists of A, his wife E, his brothers B and C, and their sister D. E came to the Netherlands in 1983 as a prostitute and gained Dutch nationality by a fake marriage with a Dutchman. In 1990, she married A. E stays in the Netherlands and is an important anchor point in Europe because of her nationality and connections. She receives the cocaine and marihuana, stashes it, and takes care of selling it (case 8).

Several female suspects in our cases migrated to the Netherlands from countries in the Caribbean area, Eastern European countries or Africa. Some came to the Netherlands to work in prostitution and later became human traffickers themselves:

This case involves several female African suspects who came to Europe as prostitutes and who are now involved in human trafficking. E recruited women and abused women if they did not follow orders or if they did not earn enough money. E exploited several girls (case 75).

B and C are two female Romanian suspects and are the girl friends of Dutchmen A and D. These two Romanian girls were part of a human trafficking group and had contacts in Romania to recruit girls. B and C were also involved in streetwalking and at the same time checked on the girls (case 116).

One important aspect of migration has to be mentioned separately. A person of foreign nationality may become a Dutch citizen after having legally resided in the Netherlands for a certain period of time (depending on the situation). Therefore, migration, political asylum or marriage may produce Dutch citizenship. There are several examples in which females are important bridgeheads by means of possessing Dutch citizenship. With reference to case 8 mentioned earlier in the text, the female suspect came to the Netherlands as a prostitute and acquired Dutch citizenship by fraudulent marriage. Another female suspect (case 83) also acquired Dutch nationality by fraudulent marriage. Having Dutch nationality and legal status is very important in transnational criminal activities, since it is very important to be able to use licit logistical requirements for transporting illicit goods or to smuggle illegal immigrants. Only people with legal status are able to have a company, to rent houses, to transport goods through legal companies, etc.

From the cases we analyzed specific roles of female suspects can be discerned and are often connected to the fact that some women have a legal status, a proper job, or raise no suspicion: fetching illegal immigrants, catering to them, and smuggling children on their own passport (e.g. case 1); owning companies (e.g. case 30); transporting cocaine and recruiting couriers (case 91); transporting drugs and money (case 97); using bank accounts for money laundering (case 99); owning a brothel (case 109); and fetching couriers (case 126).

Some of these activities are also tightly linked to connections with the licit world which are forged by these women. Examples include the abuse of legal jobs to get access to immigration services (speeding up procedures to acquire Dutch citizenship) and to police information (checking police information on a particular person before her husband kidnaps this person).

One may explain these specific roles by the fact that women sometimes have positions that give access to the licit world which some male suspects do not have. It is also possible that women in some cases do not attract as much attention as men,

e.g. acting as a courier, fetching couriers or having bank accounts and owning companies. Of course, straw men might be either men or women, but one might argue that the perfect straw man is a (related) woman with a clean rap sheet.

Conclusion

We used our data for answering quantitative as well as qualitative questions. If we consider the sheer number of female suspects in our case studies, three conclusions may be drawn. First, in 68 % of all cases, women are involved as suspects (102 out of 150 cases). This means that in only a minority of cases (48) were women absent as suspects. Second, our data show more similarities than differences in the presence of women in different criminal markets, despite the assumed absence of women in e.g. drug markets. Our data show that women are involved in different kinds of criminal activities: they are not only involved in human smuggling, but they are also involved in traditional drugs trafficking. Furthermore, they are involved in human trafficking for sexual exploitation (not only a crime of men against women) and fraud and money laundering (which is clearly also open to women as offenders or as accomplices). Third, the number of women involved is fairly small (compared to men). In total, 247 female suspects are involved, which is only a very small percentage (11 %) of all suspects. Although we do not want to put too much emphasis on these numbers, one may say that women do play a role, but that scientists who claim that women play a prominent role in organized crime clearly exaggerate the role of women.

Our qualitative analysis shows that perhaps the hypothesis of Zhang et al. (2007) about ‘gendered markets’ relies too heavily on ideas of blocked access. They contend that organizational context and market demands, shape the extent and nature of women’s participation in criminal enterprise. According to these authors, women have better options in human smuggling markets than in other markets such as local drug markets. However, from the perspective of the social embeddedness of organized crime and ideas about ‘brokerage’, it could be argued that involvement in transnational organized crime is less about structurally blocked access (or better opportunities for all women in some markets than in others) but more a question of (individual) capacity and individual access, which some have and others do not.

In the qualitative part of the paper, we highlighted several aspects of the roles of female suspects in our cases: transnational marriage and transnational relationships; language and mediation; and migration and legal status. In several cases, transnational relationships provide important links between networks in different countries and may be described in terms of ‘brokerage’ between disconnected networks. In some cases these relationships are the core of the link between the Netherlands and source countries for drugs (drug trafficking) and prostitutes (human trafficking). Furthermore, it is noted that sometimes the social aspect is very important, communication is language dependant, as people have to speak the same language, and they have to build trust to mediate or curb conflicts. In several cases, women play important roles if they speak the language and can provide mediation. Finally, migration and legal status are reasons leading to important female roles in international criminal activities. Migration may produce Dutch legal citizenship, as a result of political asylum or marriage, and some specific roles of women are connected to

the fact that these women have a legal status, employment, or perform tasks which raise no suspicion.

These roles of women may be interpreted in terms of ‘brokerage’ between disconnected networks: between different countries, between different ethnic groups, or between the licit and illicit world. Individual links of women with men (or family members) sometimes provide important links that can be discerned in our cases.

An important part of the brokerage literature is based on the idea of individual actors, who invest strategically in relationships (e.g. Burt 1992). Our cases, however, show that many strategic links have a background that goes beyond individuals and their strategic actions. Some links are ‘ascribed’, by birth, or attained by marriage or other ‘life events’ such as migration. Although the links often facilitate international criminal activities, it is hard to interpret these links as the result of strategic action, as the links often precede criminal activities. Furthermore, it could be more fruitful to think in terms of ‘coupled individuals’, by marriage or by family relationships, who play a part in a wider context.

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