

# Women as actors of transnational organized crime in Africa

November 2021

ANALYTICAL REPORT



This project is funded  
by the European Union

*This analytical report was compiled in the framework of the European Union (EU) funded Project ENACT (Enhancing Africa's response to transnational organized crime) and was produced with funding from the EU. The contents of this report are the responsibility of the author(s) and can no way be taken to reflect the views or position of the European Union or the ENACT partnership. Authors contribute to ENACT publications in their personal capacity.*

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ENACT is implemented by the Institute for Security Studies and INTERPOL, in association with the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime.



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## Executive Summary

In the last two decades the percentage of imprisoned women offenders is growing globally, at a faster rate than imprisoned male offenders.<sup>1</sup> Such global increase raises the question as to whether the same can be observed on the African continent.

Information suggests that transnational organized crime (TOC) affects African women and girls differently than African men and boys. It is crucial to learn how and if men and women behave differently in TOC in Africa in order to uncover the main drivers of these differences and adapt policing methodology accordingly.

While gendered data continues to be insufficiently reported upon by law enforcement authorities in Africa, the assessment suggests that African law enforcement authorities are possibly under-investigating and under-estimating the involvement of African women in TOC. African law enforcement authorities likely continue to perceive them as victims or accomplices only. They are possibly rarely seen as the criminals themselves and less so as being the organizers, leaders, traffickers or recruiters. This gap in police investigations is indeed known to be exploited to the benefit of organized crime as women are more likely to go under the radar<sup>2</sup>.

The assessment draws attention to the common features of African female offenders based on available data to share insights and encourage police forces to reconsider their approach.

## Key findings

- ❖ Available data suggests that African women offenders continue to represent on average slightly under 10 per cent of all suspected or convicted offenders of TOC committed in Africa or by African nationals.
- ❖ The participation gap in criminal activities, meaning the difference between criminal male and female imprisonment due to criminal activities, remains on average the same in Africa whereas it has diminished almost everywhere else in the world according to available data<sup>3</sup>.
- ❖ Available data shows that reported female criminals are on average between 34 and 36 years old at the time they have committed or were convicted for their illicit activities.
- ❖ African women are more likely to take part in TOC when they are facing poverty and unemployment as well as when they are the sole providers for their family or have to compensate for the absence of revenue by their male counterpart.
- ❖ African women are driven by business opportunities or their social context when entering into criminal activities, much like their male counterparts.
- ❖ The length of convictions are relatively similar for African men and women in the TOC fields studied. It is likely that women have become increasingly more involved in high responsibility or active roles and no longer hold only subordinate roles, although available data has to be interpreted with precaution.
- ❖ Organized Crime Groups (OCGs) may rely on African women for various tasks such as communicating, handling money, recruiting, selling products or transporting.
- ❖ Gender-related data are very rarely collected and produced by African member countries to assess the gender dimensions of TOC. The lack of data relevant to gender can lead to misguided law enforcement measures.

## Introduction

The African criminal landscape is characterized, like any other criminal environment, by its adaptability and its flexibility to new opportunities, technologies, trends, overcoming almost immediately any new obstacles, for example to determine possible new markets or market interests but also to conduct their activities.

Women in Africa are economically very active, yet, they face important barriers to achieve their full potential as a result of cultural practices or discriminatory national laws and regulations<sup>4</sup>. Many local, regional and continental initiatives supporting and encouraging gender equality to achieve Africa's development ambitions have seen the light in recent years. As a result, significant progress has been made across the continent in achieving gender equality and closing gender gaps.

Based on the above assumptions, one would wonder whether recent efforts to offer equal opportunities to women in Africa are also mirrored in their activities and role in TOC. Although overall data on gender equality across the continent seems to be available, notably on economic opportunities, social and political representation as well as empowerment, very little official data seems to be available on women's involvement in criminal activities. Existing data on the involvement of women remains basic and proceeds on the assumption of gender-neutrality or the implied male composition of OCGs. There is a lacuna in the literature on the role of African women in TOC with a notable exception for their role in human trafficking networks.

By extension, understanding women's roles as perpetrators, their behaviour, their motivations and stories in all forms of TOC could challenge ideas and assumptions about perpetrators and provide valuable insights to law enforcement agencies in Africa. To counter current and emerging crime threats effectively, law enforcement agencies must be capable of anticipating criminal groups' activities. Too often, the gender perspective is left out of the predictions when it is very possible that women play an increasing role on the transnational crime scene. This report aims at demonstrating that law enforcement agencies in Africa would benefit from adopting a more systemic gender approach in order to fight organized crime groups effectively.

The analysis will look at existing research and data to assess the level of responsibility, different roles and evolving participation of women in organized crime in Africa.

## 1. STRUCTURE OF THE REPORT

### 1.1. Scope and objectives

The aim of this threat assessment is to raise awareness among African countries on the suspected role and involvement of women in TOC in Africa, in order to potentially reassign resources, reassess targets or operational methods. The findings can inform regional and national agencies, institutional practices and support the development of policies and strategies. The assessment details specific roles and specific areas of TOC to identify and disrupt criminal networks. The assessment draws upon an analysis of available data and presents the current nature, scope, dynamics, and activities of women in TOC.

The assessment will mainly focus on the time period between January 2017 to January 2021, however some of the data integrated, notably when extracted from INTERPOL databases, are older.

**This analysis should be seen as a starting point for deeper insight and discussion on this topic.**

The analysis attempts to identify profiles of African women offenders, new trends or changes of behaviours in recent years. It then tries to assess the different roles African women are playing in the structure of OCGs.

### 1.2. Methodology

This assessment follows an all-source intelligence analysis methodology. It is the result of integrating multiple data sources, including INTERPOL databases, countries' national law enforcement, INTERPOL Gender Experts and open sources. African law enforcement input was sought via a questionnaire sent to all African countries, requesting information on the role of women in TOC in their respective countries, as well as the impact of these crimes and their countries' response to combat them. A limited number of the countries surveyed provided feedback to the questionnaire, which constitutes a limitation for this analytical report.

African regions are defined by INTERPOL on the basis of countries' participation in regional chiefs of police organizations. Some countries participate in more than one regional chiefs of police organization. In such cases, they are counted in each of the regional organizations in which they participate. Some of them may therefore be counted on more than one occasion. North African countries are member of the INTERPOL Middle East and

North Africa (MENA) region. For the purpose of this report, which only covers the African continent, they were regrouped in a category named North Africa. This category includes the following countries: Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia. The other INTERPOL African regions and their member countries are grouped as follows:

CAPCCO: Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Democratic Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Republic of Congo, Sao Tome and Principe.

EAPCCO: Burundi, Comoros, Djibouti, Democratic Republic of Congo, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Seychelles, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda.

SARPCCO: Angola, Botswana, Democratic Republic of Congo, Eswatini, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa, Tanzania, Zambia, Zimbabwe.

WAPCCO: Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Ivory Coast, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Togo and Guinea.

Open sources used in the framework of this report include news articles and reports from various private entities, international organizations and think tanks. Whenever identified, official statistics and data were used and given preference over other sources.

Information from the aforementioned sources was aggregated together in order to identify consistencies across all data, patterns and trends, and any identifiable convergences. A regional approach was retained when drafting this report. Therefore, when national examples are quoted, it is done for illustrative purposes, in order to put forward regional dynamics.

The concept of gender is applied throughout this document to convey a binary understanding of men and women because this is where research can support the findings. The data collected for this assessment are mostly quantitative rather than qualitative. It does not, by any means, intend to dilute the many other genders represented by the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex persons. Also, the terms “woman” and “female” or “men” and “male” are used interchangeably as an editorial choice to make the text more readable.

In addition, when referring to African women taking part in TOC, this report looks at all INTERPOL data holding which includes data for African women convicted or suspected of participation in TOC activities, unless specified otherwise.



## 2. COMMON FEATURES AND PUSH FACTORS OF AFRICAN WOMEN AS CRIMINAL ACTORS

Traditionally and globally, men are considered to be more inclined to take part in criminal activities.<sup>5</sup> Available data corroborates this traditional conception in Africa. Men represent an overwhelming percentage of TOC perpetrators on the African continent (Figures 1 & 2) according to all INTERPOL data holding.

NB: In this report, when analyzing and referring to data extracted from the INTERPOL databases, the ENACT-INTERPOL team looked at crime related specifically to the following TOC areas: Organized Crime/Transnational Crime; Computer and information technology crimes; High Tech Crime, Maritime piracy/Robbery on the high seas; Drugs related crimes; People smuggling, trafficking and illegal immigration; Sexual exploitation/Prostitution; Crimes against Children; Banking/Fraud; Bribery/Corruption; Environmental Crime; Counterfeiting/Forgery; Intellectual Property Crime; Pharmaceutical crime.

The data was extracted for all African member countries.

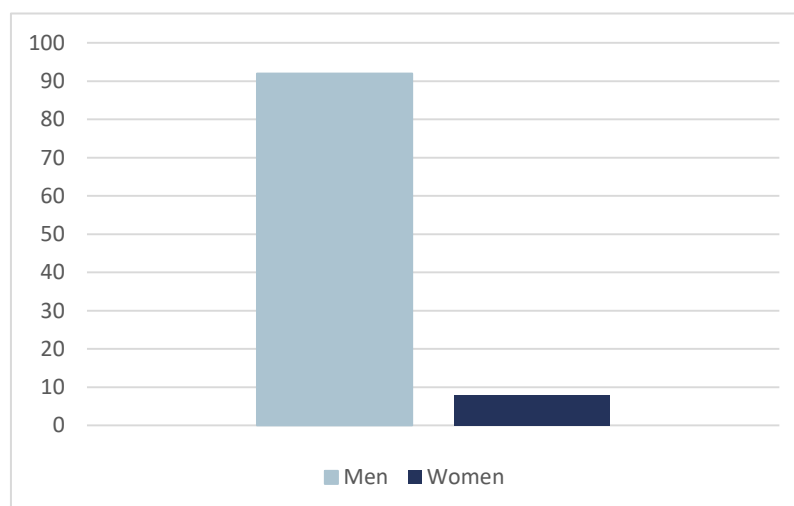
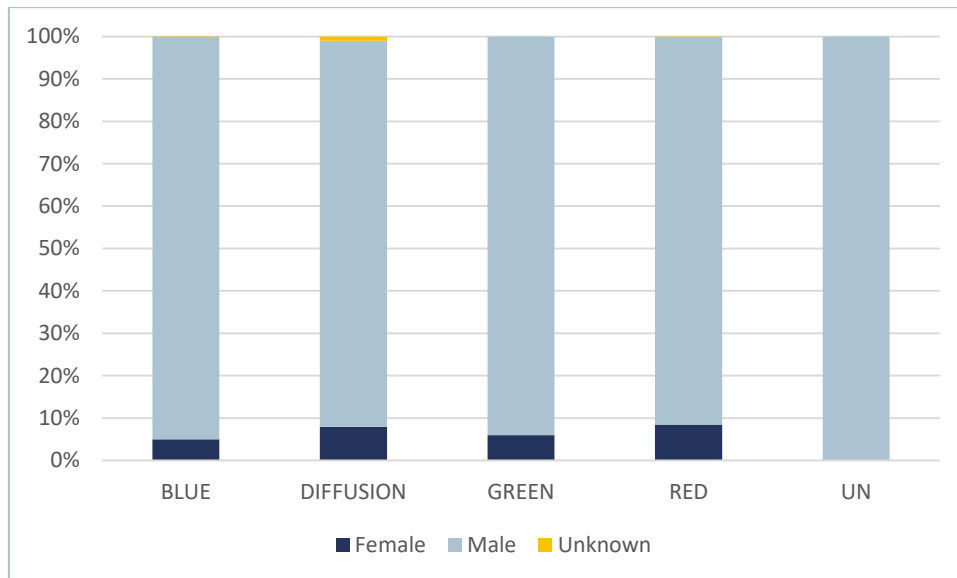


FIGURE 1 – PERCENTAGE OF THE TOTAL INTERPOL DATA ENTRIES BY GENDER



**FIGURE 2 - TYPE OF NOTICES<sup>6</sup> BY GENDER**

This section examines the common features of women as criminal actors based on the data collected from African law enforcement and from INTERPOL databases. Women enter into different criminal markets and have different roles as explored later on in this assessment. However, they tend to present similar characteristics in terms of age, social background or even the push factors leading them to participate in criminal activities.

### 2.1. African female offenders' age

Available data show that criminal women are on average 36 years old at the time they have committed or were convicted for their illicit activities. The below table 1 indicates that age may vary slightly depending on the region from which they are coming. A correlation can be found between the gender gap index and the women's age per region. Referring to the African gender index as established by the African Development Bank and United Nations Economic Commission for Africa<sup>7</sup>, regions with a higher gender gap rate, meaning with more gender parity, can possibly expect to see women entering into criminal activities at a younger age. This finding can likely be interpreted in light of the prospects created for women. Countries where gender stereotypes have eased in recent years have created equal prospects for women in the legitimate economy as much as in the underground one.

Regions	Average of women's age at the time of the offence
CAPCCO	37
EAPCCO	38
EAPCCO/CAPCCO	37
North Africa	33
SARPCCO	35
SARPCCO/EAPCCO	36
WAPCCO	37
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>36</b>

TABLE 1 - WOMEN'S AGE PER REGION AT THE TIME OF THE OFFENCE ACCORDING TO INTERPOL DATA

The average age of African female criminals remains fairly constant across the different TOC markets (table 2). Women are notably younger when linked to cybercrime activities most certainly because younger generations are IT literate while the older generation had little access to informatics and web-based knowledge. A further age difference is to be noted in financial crimes and illicit goods markets where women are older. Typically these crimes require a certain amount of notoriety and authority or already established resources and finances. Some of them are sometimes referred to as “white-collars” crimes. Younger women would rarely have the assets required to enter into such criminal activities.

Criminal markets	Youngest Age	Oldest Age	Average
Cybercrime	27	30	28
Crime against Children	23	63	34
Intellectual Property	21	42	34
Maritime Crime	23	60	34
Illicit Drugs	18	75	35
Environmental Crime	20	66	35
THB and People Smuggling	21	63	36
Illicit Goods	19	65	41
Financial crime	19	84	42
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>34</b>

TABLE 2 - WOMEN'S AGE PER TYPE OF CRIMINAL MARKETS AT THE TIME OF THE OFFENCE ACCORDING TO INTERPOL DATA

NB1: The difference in the grand total age averages in the two above tables are due to the fact that some countries pertain to more than one region as explained in the methodology section.

NB2: Due to limited resources in judicial systems, convictions may take place several years after arrests, therefore, women might be younger at the time of committing the offense.

## 2.2. Push factors

In line with the below graphic (figure 3), this section explores some of the push factors for women entering into criminal activities as stated by African law enforcement authorities when surveyed for this assessment. The assessment focuses on the reasons leading African women to participate in TOC in light of their social and economic status. Although some general tendencies are drawn upon in this assessment, one should be mindful of the wide variety of profiles, reasons, social context, roles, etc. that women can represent.

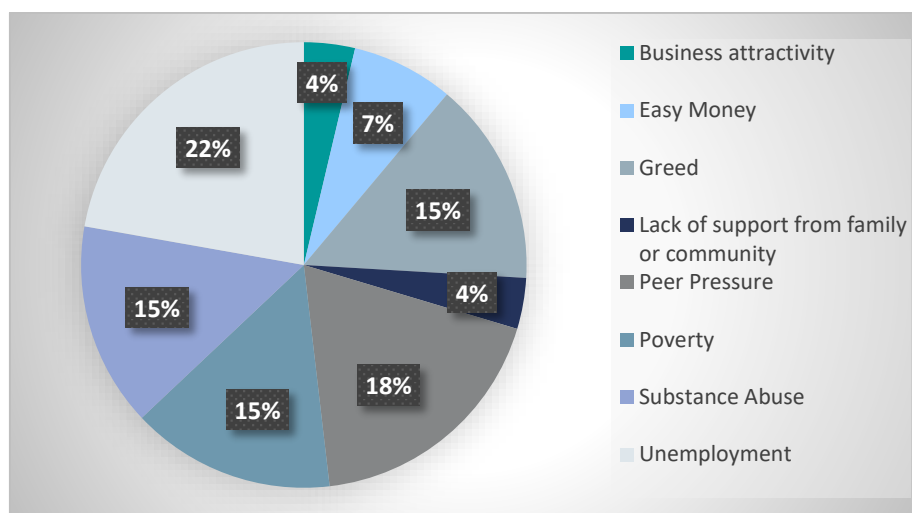
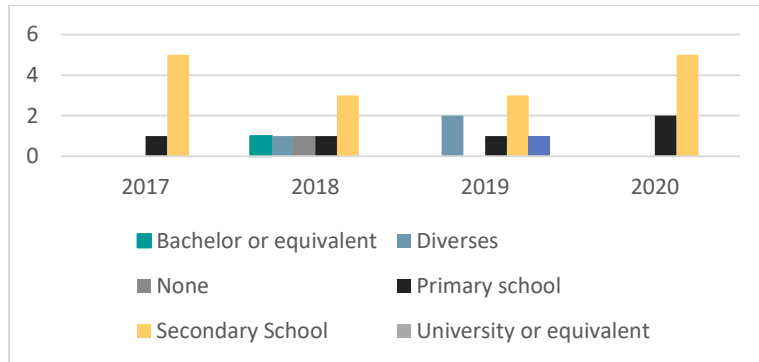


FIGURE 3 - PUSH FACTORS ACCORDING TO AFRICAN LAW ENFORCEMENT AGENCIES

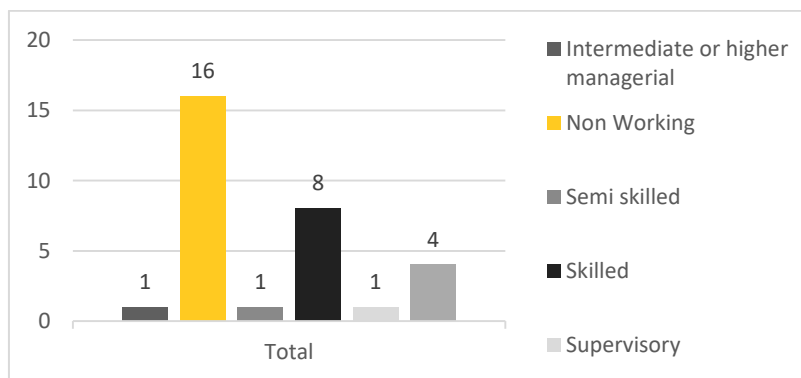
### 2.2.1. Lack of education and unemployment

Through study of the responses provided by African law enforcement, it can be established that women entering into criminal activities have often not been able to access education beyond secondary school (Figure 4).



**FIGURE 4 - EDUCATION LEVEL OF ARRESTED WOMEN**

The African Gender Gap Index<sup>8</sup> rates access to basic education at 96.2 per cent, implying that women and men have almost the same level of primary education across the African continent. At secondary school, the gender gap increases to 86.5 per cent and again slightly, to 85.8 per cent, at tertiary graduation. Although these figures show that African women continue to be disadvantaged in education across the continent, they also imply that criminal men and women, on the whole, have the same level of education. According to the responses collected from the African law enforcement, the vast majority of women convicted were unemployed/ “non-working” (figure 5). Poverty, unemployment and the lack of support from the family or community are clearly defined as the main reasons why women will become criminal actors (see graphic above – figure 3).



**FIGURE 5 – WORKING BACKGROUND OF ARRESTED WOMEN**

Previous studies show that individuals with low socioeconomic status are more likely to become involved in crime. A similar pattern of findings has been obtained in relation to studies of unemployment or lower education level.<sup>9</sup>

It can reasonably be considered that although African women may have been participating in TOC largely due to their relationship as wives, mothers or romantic partners, it is no longer predominantly the case.

### 2.2.2. Peer pressures and social context

According to the data collected from African law enforcement (Figure 3), although peer pressure is mentioned as one of the reasons for entering into criminal activities, it is important to note that the subordination, *familial* or *romantic* link<sup>10</sup>, to their male counterpart was only mentioned once in the returned questionnaires. When consulting law enforcement, the response field was deliberately left open not to influence responses and law enforcement had to write in free text. Consequently, it can reasonably be considered that although African women may have been participating in TOC largely due to their relationship as wives, mothers or romantic partners, it is no longer predominantly the case. Such relationships may facilitate involvement in TOC but is probably no longer the main reason.

In addition, the peer pressure factor is predominant as illustrated in *Figure 3*; this factor is to be considered equally for male and female criminals. Many studies have already explored that peer pressure and social context are reoccurring phenomena in criminal or deviant behaviour<sup>11</sup>. Major features of the peer pressure process are identified in delinquent groups' dynamics and behaviours as well as sanctions for non-conformity. Peer pressure exists for conformity to a specific social context and in particular criminal context regardless of gender.

### 2.2.3. Family responsibilities

A global study conducted in drug trafficking<sup>12</sup>, exploring how women become involved and focusing on the lived experiences of women as drug mules, clearly highlighted that women worldwide felt compelled by their caretaker responsibilities rather than being compelled by their social environment. While being interviewed, they expressed the financial difficulties of making a life as the family provider: mothers, daughters, girlfriends or wives. Due to the

lack of alternative options, women will turn to illicit and illegal opportunities.

Similarly, according to data collected among African law enforcement, the majority of African women convicted for criminal activities were single and a significant number of them had children (Figure 6 & 7). Although the later information seems to be only occasionally collected by law enforcement, from the available data, it is very probable that the majority of women arrested are the main and sole providers for their family. Alternatively, these women may have had to compensate the absence of sufficient revenue of their male counterpart.

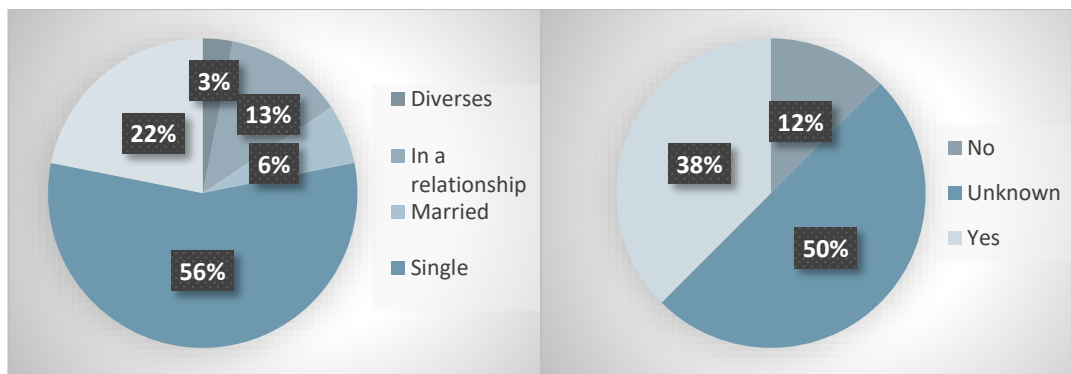


FIGURE 6 - MARITAL STATUS OF ARRESTED AFRICAN WOMEN

FIGURE 7 - CHILDREN STATUS OF ARRESTED AFRICAN WOMEN

### 3. AFRICAN WOMEN'S INVOLVEMENT IN TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME

Available information suggests that African women are no longer passive actors in TOC, yet the question remains as to the extent of their role and involvement in criminal activities. These questions remain partly answered because of the limited access to reliable data focusing on women in the field of organized crime in Africa.

This section explores women's involvement in the different types of illicit activities in order to establish which illicit activities they are more likely to turn to.

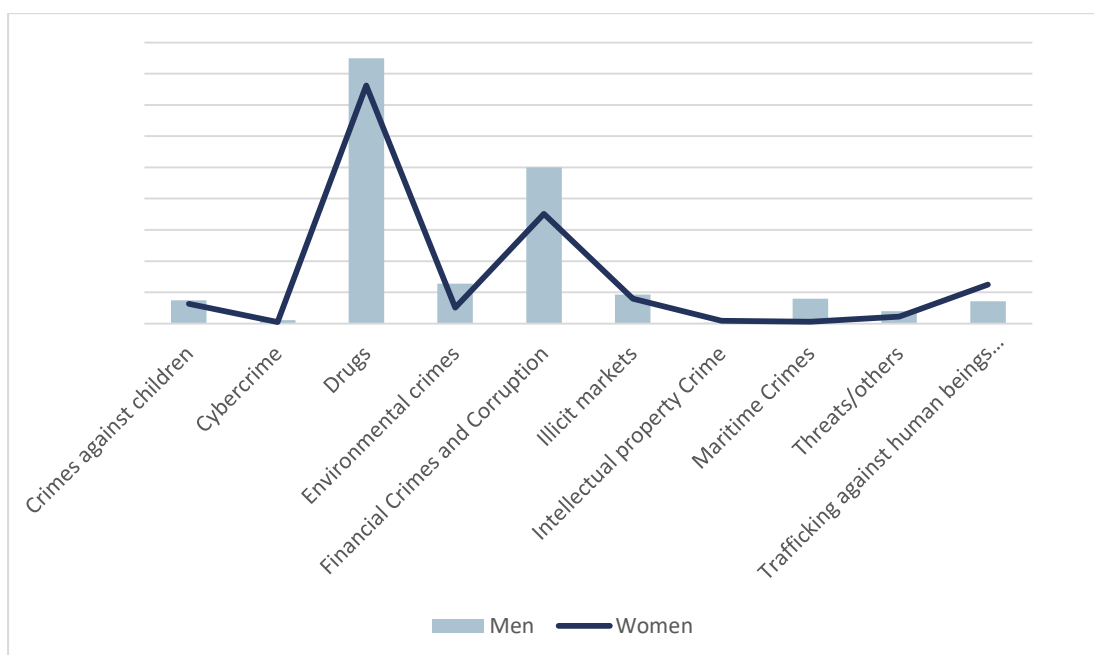
It is possible that African women are not driven by considerations such as avoiding violent environments when entering into criminal activities but rather, like their male counterpart, by the business opportunities or their social context.

### 3.1. African women's involvement by type of transnational organized crime

Studies have attempted to explain the correlation between violence and women's participation in some specific fields of TOC. It is suggested that on one hand women are more attracted to less violent criminal activities and on the other hand that TOC is becoming less violent and as such becoming more accessible to women.<sup>13</sup> For example, women are believed to be more involved in human trafficking and people smuggling compared to other forms of TOC as it is often considered that the place of violence is limited in all features of the trade<sup>14</sup>.

The below graphic (figure 8) is the result of data extracted from INTERPOL databases. Figures for African men and women were compared proportionally in order to bring forward any difference between the types of activities in which one or the other sex would be more likely to participate. As clearly highlighted below, proportionally African women and men enter into the same type of activities.





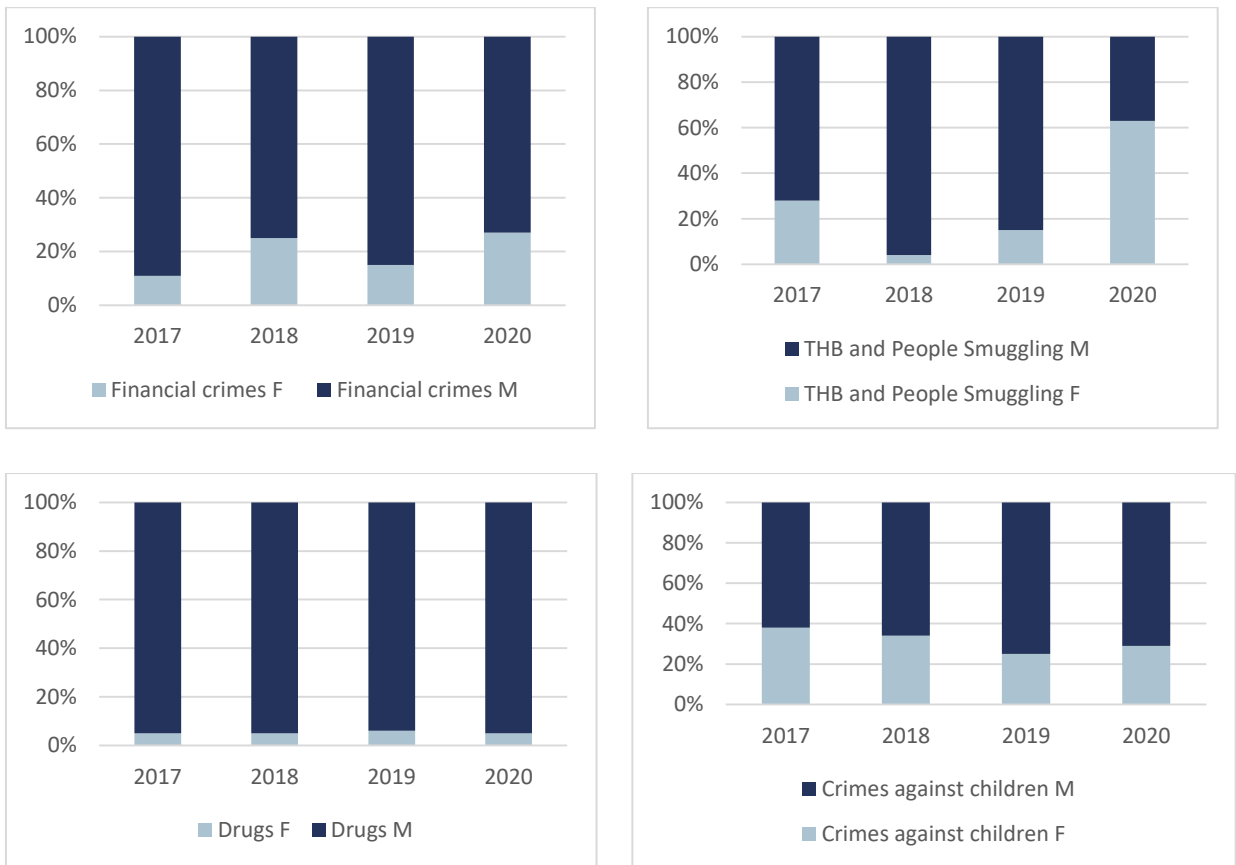
**FIGURE 8 – COMPARATIVE PARTICIPATION OF AFRICAN MEN AND WOMEN PER TYPE OF ACTIVITIES**

It is possible that African women are not driven by considerations such as avoiding violent environments when entering into criminal activities but rather, like their male counterpart, by the business opportunities or their social context. It can be further noticed from the above graphic that African women involved in organized crime will mainly turn to four major illicit activities in order of presence: Drugs production and trafficking; Trafficking in Human Beings, People Smuggling and Crimes against Children; Financial Crimes and Corruption; Illicit markets. African women’s specific roles in three of these illicit fields will be detailed later in this assessment (section 5).

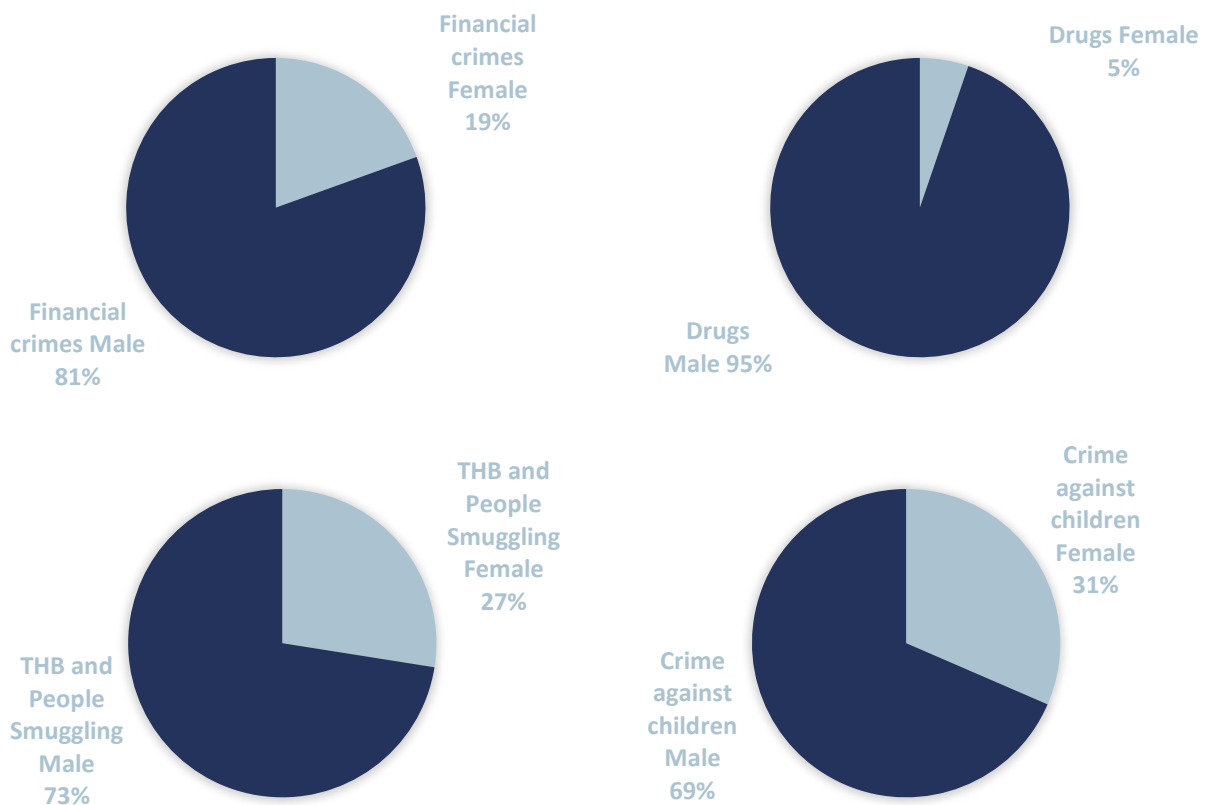
### **3.2. African women’s increasing involvement in transnational organized crime**

The data collected from African law enforcement covering the period from 2017 to 2020, show that, in some areas of TOC, the gap between the number of arrests for African men and women is becoming smaller than the historical participation gap usually observed (slightly lower than 10 percent on average) and arrests of African women are even higher

in human trafficking and people smuggling in 2020 as illustrated in the graphics below (figure 9 & 10).

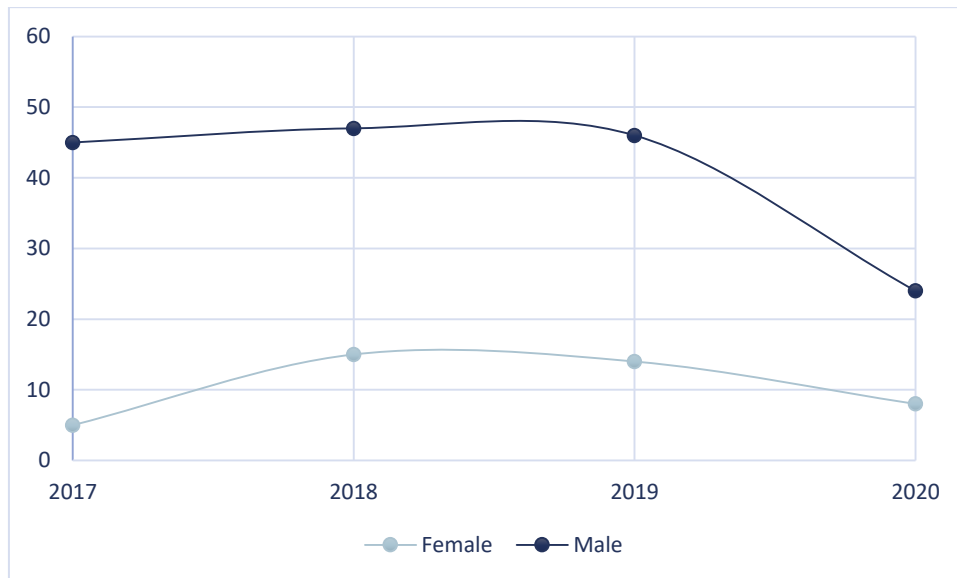


**FIGURE 9 - COMPARED PERCENTAGE OF ARRESTS PER TYPE OF CRIMES BETWEEN MALE (M) AND FEMALE (F) PER YEAR BASED ON INFORMATION PROVIDED BY AFRICAN LAW ENFORCEMENT AGENCIES**



**FIGURE 10- COMPARED PERCENTAGE OF ARRESTS PER TYPE OF CRIME FOR THE PERIOD 2017-2020 AS PER THE INFORMATION PROVIDED BY AFRICAN LAW ENFORCEMENT AGENCIES**

The data received from African law enforcement indicates a clear increase in the presence of African women in the area of financial crimes in the SARPCCO region as illustrated in the graphic below (Figure 11). As previously mentioned, financial crimes are often committed by persons with a good understanding of technologies, while being employed and benefiting from a certain level of authority<sup>15</sup>. According to the Africa Gender Index Report<sup>16</sup>, the SARPCCO region shows a smaller gender gap, offering more job opportunities or senior and representational positions to African women than other regions on the continent. The increased presence of African women in financial crimes is possibly linked to their capacity to access the employment market. By projection, other African regions and countries seeing the gender gap closing with regards to job markets accessibility can reasonably expect to see a similar increase of African women’s presence in financial crimes activities.



**FIGURE 11 – COMPARISON OF ARRESTS FOR FINANCIAL CRIMES FOR THE SARPCCO REGION**

These graphics should be interpreted with precaution as only a few countries returned extractable data when surveyed and not all criminal activities were covered by the returned questionnaires. However, it confirms a tendency observed worldwide<sup>17</sup> and noted by African law enforcement agencies over the past couple of decades that the number of African women offenders is becoming substantial and growing.

The above breakdown and the global tendency is not yet verifiable from the data extracted from INTERPOL databases for the same period. INTERPOL data holdings analyzed continue to show that the number of African male offenders is much higher than the number of African female offenders across all types of illicit activities. It also demonstrated that the gaps between African female and male offenders remained stable. African women continue to represent approximately 10 per cent of Africa’s overall reported criminals.

The latter is further corroborated by open sources information. A report on female imprisonment around the world estimates that the female prison population has risen in all continents since 2000, except on the African continent, where “the rise has been somewhat less than the increase in the general population of the continent”. The report

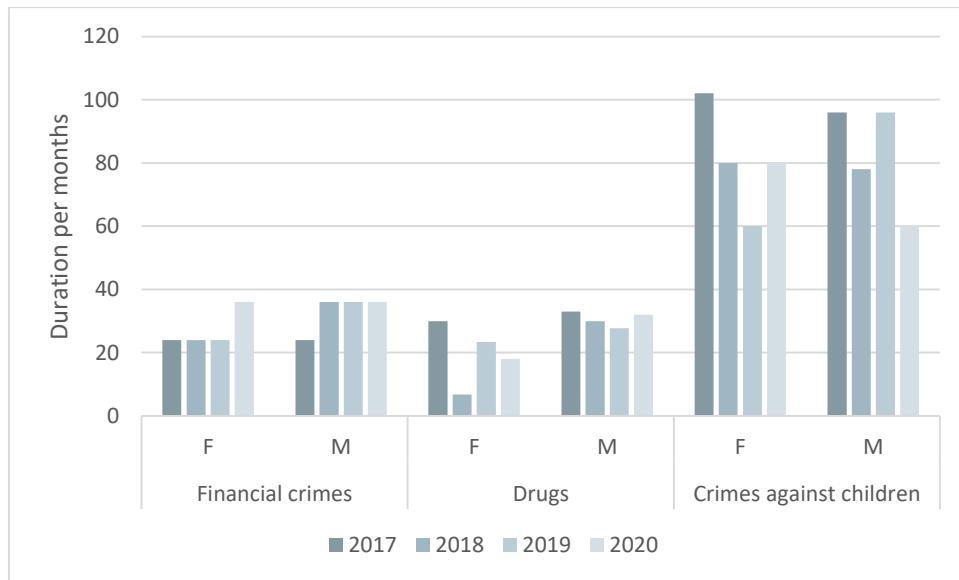
pursues explaining that in “African countries the proportion of women and girls in the total prison population, at 3.4 per cent is much lower than elsewhere [6.9 per cent]”.<sup>18</sup>

#### **4. AFRICAN WOMEN’S ROLES IN SPECIFIC TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME FIELDS**

Recent data indicates that women in TOC have held more active roles worldwide than what was implied by historical data<sup>19</sup>. Compared data collected from the African law enforcement agencies (figure 12) with regards to the length of convictions between African women and men in the different types of TOC shows only slight differences. The length of convictions are relatively similar for African men and women in the TOC fields studied. As previously warned, this graphic is to be interpreted prudently as the data collected from African law enforcement may not be representative of overall continental trends, being sometimes incomplete or only rarely provided.

The length of convictions are relatively similar for African men and women in the TOC fields studied. [...].

African women are sentenced to almost comparable jail time as their male counterparts. It is likely that women have become increasingly more involved in high responsibility or active roles and no longer only hold subordinate roles.

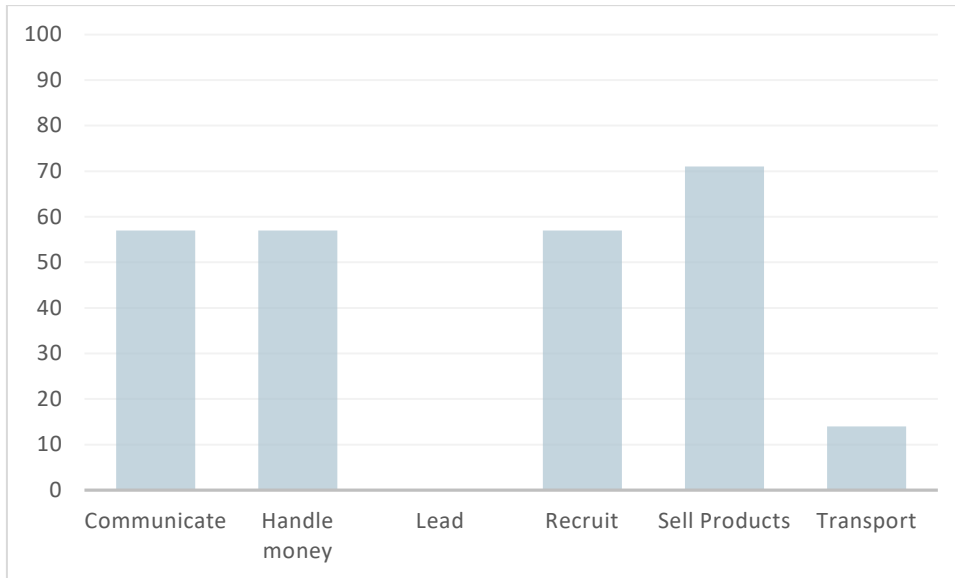


**FIGURE 12 - COMPARISON OF CONVICTIONS DURATION FOR MALE (M) AND FEMALE (F) OFFENDERS**

However, it can reasonably be expected that leadership roles or persons playing a more predominant role in TOC would be subject to longer prison sentences imposed by national criminal justice systems. Therefore, should women have only supportive or subordinate roles compared to their male counterparts, the length of their sentence should be significantly lower. Even more so, when it is generally believed that the judicial systems are *“more lenient with women than with men, thus giving women an advantage in the crime market”*<sup>20</sup>. African women are sentenced to almost comparable jail time as their male counterparts. It is likely that women have become increasingly more involved in high responsibility or active roles and no longer only hold subordinate roles.

Available information on the role of women in TOC is fairly recent and has only been explored since the end of the twentieth century, regarding the role of women within the mafia and by extension their role in TOC. Globally and across specific crime markets, the role of women differs in terms of status, level of responsibility and whether they feature at all<sup>21</sup>. Research on the role of women in Africa in TOC is particularly difficult to find with the exception of their role in human trafficking.

According to the data collected from African law enforcement, OCGs on the African continent rely on women for varied types of tasks (Figure 13). Although they seem excluded from leadership roles as such, they hold important responsibilities in the OCGs structures.



**FIGURE 13 - ROLE OF AFRICAN WOMEN ACROSS ALL TOC IN AFRICA BASED ON DATA COLLECTED FROM AFRICAN LAW ENFORCEMENT**

The following sections will further explore the role of African women in specific TOC areas based on the activities they are more likely to turn to as illustrated under section 3: trafficking in human beings, people smuggling and crimes against children, drug trafficking, as well as financial crimes and corruption.

#### **4.1. Trafficking in Human Beings, People Smuggling and Crimes Against Children**

African women’s involvement in trafficking in human beings and people smuggling as well as in crimes against children (often related to the first two types of crime) has long been known by law enforcement authorities. They are recruiters, supporters, partners-in-crime, “madams” and bosses.<sup>22</sup>



**FIGURE 14 - AFRICAN WOMEN'S MAIN ROLES IN THB AND PEOPLE SMUGGLING<sup>23</sup>**

### CASE STUDY N° 1

The role of Nigerian women involved as traffickers is well known and documented. Nigerian women act as “madams” and sponsor young Nigerian victims, paying their travel fees or voodoo rituals, and then ask that the women work for the “madams” to pay off their debts. Beliefs in voodoo is very strong in some parts of Nigeria, and the women are often forced to make an oath by voodoo priests, in which they swear obedience to their traffickers.

In 2019, a French court sentenced 24 members of a Lyon-based sex trafficking ring to prison terms of up to seven years for forcing Nigerian women into prostitution. It included one of Europe's most wanted women, Jessica Edosomwan, accused of acting as a France-based “madam” to women recruited mainly in Nigeria's southern Edo State. The offenders faced up to 10 years' imprisonment on charges including human trafficking, pimping, money laundering and helping people live illegally in France. The victims were mainly women and girls lured to Europe with false promises of jobs as hairdressers or seamstresses, only to find themselves selling sex to repay their smugglers.

*Source: The Local, 30 November 2019, <https://www.thelocal.fr/20191130/nigerian-sex-traffickers-jailed-in-france/>, (accessed 3 November 2021).*



## 4.2. Drugs Trafficking

Like any other TOC activity, it is generally considered that drug trafficking organizations are predominantly operated by men and that the role played by women in drug trafficking is relatively insignificant compared with that of their male counterparts.<sup>24</sup> The identification of women's role in drug trafficking has only recently become of interest and the data available is rarely disaggregated by gender.<sup>25</sup> It is relatively difficult to assess precisely what the involvement of women is in drug cultivation, production and trafficking worldwide and even more so for the African continent. Several case studies in Africa suggest that African women are involved in a varied range of roles along the illegal drug supply chain<sup>26</sup>.

<b>Cooks and growers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Women play managerial and supporting roles in the growing industry</li><li>• Women work on the plantations</li><li>• Women are involved in drug production either as a "cooker" or as a supporter</li></ul>
<b>Drug mules</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Women smuggle illicit drugs across national borders for transnational drug networks</li><li>• Women more easily evade detection by law enforcement</li><li>• Easily replaceable</li></ul>
<b>Drugs traffickers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Women are often professionals in the global transportation business and they cooperate with OCGs.</li><li>• Women act as the "middlemen" between the growers/cookers and the dealers</li></ul>
<b>Dealers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Women addicts often resort to dealing drugs, particularly when they can no longer support their own addiction</li><li>• Women are usually low level dealers</li></ul>
<b>Queenpins</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Women are involved in the operational and financial management of local or transnational organized crime networks</li></ul>

FIGURE 15 - AFRICAN WOMEN'S MAIN ROLES IN DRUG TRAFFICKING <sup>27</sup>

## CASE STUDY N° 2



IMAGE 1 - SHERYL CWELE

In 2011, Sheryl CWELE (f), South African national, was sentenced to 12 years in jail for drug trafficking. The appeal court raised the sentence up to 20 years of prison in 2012. She was found to be the recruiter of women mules to smuggle drugs into the country. She was also found guilty of facilitating the drug distribution. Her role as queenpin in drug trafficking was revealed following the arrest of a female drug mule she had recruited in Sao Paulo, Brazil. It is unusual for high ranking OCG individuals to recruit mules themselves.

Source: Mail & Guardian, “Sheryl Cwele sentence increased to 20 years”, 1 October 2012, <https://mg.co.za/article/2012-10-01-sheryl-cwele-sentence-increased>, (accessed 22 October 2021).

#### 4.3. Financial crimes and corruption

The African Union, in a report published in 2019, recognized that “*Illicit financial flows (IFFs) and corruption have long been at the centre of discussions on development in Africa, particularly due to the existence of a wide consensus on their negative impacts on development financing in Africa*”<sup>28</sup>. However, the extent of the issue is hard to quantify and obtaining reliable data is particularly challenging in general, let alone obtaining reliable data on the role of women in criminal activities.

Traditionally and globally, women are believed to be less inclined to take part in IFFs and corruption due to them being more averse to taking risks than men but also as these crimes are believed to be mainly committed by people holding position of power either in the private or public sector.<sup>29</sup> There is no evidence that women behave differently once they are in the same power position<sup>30</sup>. African women as a group, tend to have relatively lesser “power” than men, as more senior and representation jobs are held by men.<sup>31</sup>

Unlike the TOC previously explored in this assessment, IFFs are not clearly and universally defined. They can include activities that are “illegitimate, while not strictly illegal, as well as activities that go against established rules and norms”<sup>32</sup>. Similarly, actors of financial crimes are numerous and varied as it can be anyone who has been involved in the cross-border transaction of money illegally earned, transferred or spent.

In the course of this analysis, no data was found on the particular role of African women in IFFs and corruption, or on the role of women in financial crimes in general<sup>33</sup>. However, several case studies indicate that African women do play a part in this TOC area with examples of corruption, tax evasion and other illicit acts.

### CASE STUDY N° 3



**IMAGE 2 - MUNACHIM ONYIA**

The INTERPOL National Central Bureau Abuja and the Nigeria Police Force have declared a businesswoman named Munachim ONYIA (f) as wanted in November 2021 over her involvement in a N5.3 billion (11,362,186 EUR) investment fraud, as reported by the Peoples Gazette. Before going at large, Munachim ONYIA had been running MECO Enterprises, a sole proprietorship she registered in September 2018, according to companies' registration files. She also ran IBC Africa, an investment firm, and the same-naming Muna Investment, a Ponzi scheme through which she allegedly swindled unsuspecting investors.

An arrest warrant was issued for Munachim ONYIA by the Lagos Division of the Federal High Court for obtaining money under false pretence and pretending to be a staff of the Central Bank of Nigeria.

*Source: Punch, "Interpol declares businesswoman wanted over alleged N5.3bn fraud", 13 November 2021, <https://punchng.com/interpol-declares-businesswoman-wanted-over-alleged-n5-3bn-fraud-report/2021>, (accessed 15 November 2021).*

## Conclusions

This assessment provides an overview of women as actors of TOC in Africa. It uses the available data to assess African women's activities and roles in TOC.

The assessment finds common features of African female criminals: they have on average the same age across the continent and across all types of TOC. They are also driven by similar motives: lack of education, financial hardship, peer pressure, social context and family responsibilities. These push factors cannot be considered independently as the sole determining factor.

African women are likely compelled by business opportunities when entering into criminal activities and are proportionally turning to the same types of TOC than African men, regardless of whether they are considered to be violent environments or not. Available data show that African women offenders continue to represent on average only 10 per cent of all suspected or convicted offenders of TOC committed in Africa or by African nationals. Although an increasing tendency of female criminals' presence in Africa might be observed, it needs to be confirmed with additional data. A worldwide recent tendency showing that women are increasingly actors of TOC, is not verifiable for women in Africa.

However, African women may have acquired more predominant roles as illustrated by the length of jail sentences pronounced against African women. African women are sentenced to almost comparable jail times as their male counterparts despite the fact that judicial systems are likely more lenient with women than with men. The assessment describes the roles in which African female criminals are known to be involved for specific TOC with the exception of financial crimes and corruption for which there is a clear lack of exploitable data.

In order to assess the involvement of African women in TOC more precisely, law enforcement in particular in Africa needs to collect more data on gender linked to criminal behavior; it is believed that African women criminals are underreported. This enhanced data foundation will help in tackling and preventing TOC.

- <sup>1</sup>R. Walmsley, *World Female Imprisonment List (4th edition)*, Institute for Criminal Policy Research, London, [http://www.prisonstudies.org/sites/default/files/resources/downloads/world\\_female\\_prison\\_4th\\_edn\\_v4\\_web.pdf](http://www.prisonstudies.org/sites/default/files/resources/downloads/world_female_prison_4th_edn_v4_web.pdf), (accessed 14 October 2021); UNODC, *Women and Imprisonment*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 2014, [https://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/women\\_and\\_imprisonment\\_-\\_2nd\\_edition.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/women_and_imprisonment_-_2nd_edition.pdf), (accessed 01 February 2022)
- <sup>2</sup> UNODC, E4J University Module Series: Organized Crime, Module 15: Gender and Organized Crime, <https://www.unodc.org/e4j/en/organized-crime/module-15/key-issues/gender-and-organized-crime.html>, (accessed 10 November 2021).
- <sup>3</sup> R. Walmsley, *World Female Imprisonment List (4th edition)*, Institute for Criminal Policy Research, London, [http://www.prisonstudies.org/sites/default/files/resources/downloads/world\\_female\\_prison\\_4th\\_edn\\_v4\\_web.pdf](http://www.prisonstudies.org/sites/default/files/resources/downloads/world_female_prison_4th_edn_v4_web.pdf), (accessed 14 October 2021); UNODC, *Women and Imprisonment*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 2014, [https://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/women\\_and\\_imprisonment\\_-\\_2nd\\_edition.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/women_and_imprisonment_-_2nd_edition.pdf), (accessed 01 February 2022).
- <sup>4</sup> African Development Bank and United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, *Africa Gender Index Report 2019, 2020*, <https://www.afdb.org/en/documents/africa-gender-index-report-2019-analytical-report>, (accessed 18 August 2021).
- <sup>5</sup> B. Heilman & G. Barker, *Masculine Norms and Violence: Making the Connections*, Washington, DC, Promundo-US., 2018, <https://promundoglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Masculine-Norms-and-Violence-Making-the-Connection-20180424.pdf>, p.20 (accessed 11 October 2021).
- <sup>6</sup> Red Notice: To seek the location and arrest of wanted persons wanted for prosecution or to serve a sentence. Blue Notice: To collect additional information about a person's identity, location or activities in relation to a crime. Green Notice: To provide warning about a person's criminal activities, where the person is considered to be a possible threat to public safety. INTERPOL–United Nations Security Council Special Notice: Issued for groups and individuals who are the targets of UN Security Council Sanctions Committees.
- <sup>7</sup> *Africa Gender Index Report 2019*, op. cit., <https://www.afdb.org/en/documents/africa-gender-index-report-2019-analytical-report>, (accessed 18 August 2021).
- <sup>8</sup> *Africa Gender Index Report 2019*, op. cit., <https://www.afdb.org/en/documents/africa-gender-index-report-2019-analytical-report>, p.16, (accessed 25 August 2021).
- <sup>9</sup> T.P. Thornberry & M. Farnworth, 'Social correlates of criminal involvement: further evidence on the relationship between social status and criminal behaviour', 1982, cited in D. Weatherburn, 'What causes crime?', *Crime and Justice Bulletin* n°54, February 2001, <https://www.bocsar.nsw.gov.au/Publications/CJB/cjb54.pdf>, (accessed 20 August 2021).
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- <sup>16</sup> *Africa Gender Index Report 2019*, op. cit., p.28 & p.50, <https://www.afdb.org/en/documents/africa-gender-index-report-2019-analytical-report>, (accessed 18 August 2021).
- <sup>17</sup> R. Walmsley, *World Female Imprisonment List (4th edition)*, Institute for Criminal Policy Research, London, [http://www.prisonstudies.org/sites/default/files/resources/downloads/world\\_female\\_prison\\_4th\\_edn\\_v4\\_web.pdf](http://www.prisonstudies.org/sites/default/files/resources/downloads/world_female_prison_4th_edn_v4_web.pdf), (accessed 14 October 2021).
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