Gender-based Violence and Organized Crime: Evidence and Policy Recommendations for Latin America

CAF Policy Brief[*]

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1 Introduction

Gender-based violence (GBV) is a severe human rights violation and the most pervasive form of violence in Latin America and the Caribbean.[1] Yet it is often hidden. This invisibility perpetuates inter-generational cycles of violence and deprives marginalized communities – those most likely to be victimized – of institutional support. Our research suggests that the presence of organized crime exacerbates GBV. This policy bried addresses the following questions: **What is the impact of organized crime on gender-based violence in Latin America? What public policies can address gender-based violence in territories where criminal groups are present?**

Across Latin America and the Caribbean, GBV is widespread yet undercounted. Much of it occurs in private settings, is perpetrated by intimate partners or acquaintances, and never reaches official statistics (United Nations Women 2024; Palermo et al. 2014). The

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1. We follow the United Nations in defining gender-based violence (GBV) as any harmful act perpetrated against a person's will that is rooted in socially ascribed gender differences and unequal power relations, including physical, sexual, psychological, and economic harm as well as threats, coercion, and deprivation of liberty, whether in public or private life. Although GBV can affect people of all genders, it is well-documented that women and girls are disproportionately impacted (U. Women 2009). We focus on GBV perpetrated by men against women and girls.

burden is not evenly shared: women facing intersecting forms of marginalization—Afro-descendant and Indigenous women, adolescents, migrants, and those living in territories governed by criminal groups—are at heightened risk. Brazil illustrates the scale and profile of the problem. In 2022, authorities recorded 1,410 femicides (roughly one every six hours) with the vast majority committed by current or former partners and most occurring inside the home. Black and brown women were overrepresented among victims (62%). Reports of rape have continued to rise: in 2023, 83,988 cases were registered, implying an incident about every six minutes (FBSP 2023).[2] Within Brazil, risk is spatially uneven. Rio de Janeiro stands out: survey evidence indicates that four in ten *carioca* women reported some form of GBV in 2022, well above the national average of one in three (FBSP 2023). This exposure sits alongside intense criminal and police violence that may shape both the prevalence of GBV and survivors' ability to reach state authorities for protection (Arias 2006; Maré 2023).

This report addresses an empirical puzzle that has real implications for women's safety amid criminal governance. Scholars have documented that certain territorial organized criminal groups (OCGs) claim to provide order in the communities they govern, which can include the prohibition of sexual violence (Arias 2006, 2017; Arias and Rodrigues 2006; Barnes 2022; Lessing 2021). In these areas, organized criminal groups have written codes of conduct which ostensibly prohibit GBV (Lessing and Willis 2019), and have been observed punishing perpetrators of GBV in the public square (Arias 2006, 2017). One potential takeaway from this vein of the literature is that organized criminal groups protect women, and women are safer living amid criminal governance than in its absence.

In contrast, an alternative interpretation is that these codes of conduct are merely a way for OCGs to enforce social control. These accounts demonstrate that GBV is brutally punished for some perpetrators, but OCGs turn a blind eye when their friends, allies, or fellow criminals perpetrate the same acts (Arias 2006). These studies have documented OCGs condoning GBV and even perpetrating it in Brazil (Dias 2009; Manso and Dias 2018) and Mexico (Fregoso and Bejarano 2010; López Ricoy et al. 2022), profiting from the gendered exploitation of women and girls in Mexico (Izcara Palacios 2023), and even using horrific acts of sexual violence as part of gang initiation rituals in Central America (Wolf 2016).

These conflicting pieces of evidence suggest that the incidence of GBV might be distributed differently in communities where OCGs are present than in communities where they are not, and that more evidence is required to understand the relationship between criminal governance and GBV. Even further, reducing the incidence of GBV in these com-

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2. See also *The Guardian*, "Violence against women in Brazil reaches highest levels on record," July 18, 2024.

munities might require different tools to measure and address it than in communities where OCGs are absent. Existing studies fail to systematically document how women navigate life under criminal rule or how GBV is adjudicated inside and outside state institutions. Similarly, while underreporting of GBV to the police is widely acknowledged, its extent in OCG-controlled areas remain poorly understood and measured.

This report addresses these knowledge gaps in four ways. First, we provide a conceptual framework for understanding how criminal groups engage with the population–including women–in the territories they control. This conceptual section clarifies key definitions used throughout the document.

Second, we present the results of a systematic review of interdisciplinary literature on gender and organized crime across Latin America, reviewing common themes related to gender in the burgeoning organized crime literature. Much of the literature on women and organized crime comes from Mexico, Brazil, the US, and Italy. Across regional contexts, studies overwhelmingly focus on drug trafficking and human trafficking organizations. We present the frequencies of several hand-coded topics related to gender, finding that most studies focus on women being victimized by organized criminal groups.[3] We summarize major themes in the literature on women's victimization by criminal groups, highlighting the causes and consequences of GBV amid organized crime.

Third, we complement the systematic review with an illustrative case study focusing on women's victimization in the presence of organized crime, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.[4] This study draws from three high-frequency sources of data to document the association between criminal governance and GBV, and explain how criminal governance influences reporting of GBV. We leverage (1) event-level data about GBV reported to the police, (2) anonymous tips to a non-profit hotline (*Disque Denúncia*) about GBV, and (3) panel data about criminal governance within the city of Rio de Janeiro to conduct these analyses.

Finally, we conclude this document with a discussion of avenues for future research and policy recommendations for a range of actors. Our findings indicate that organized crime shapes both the incidence and the visibility of GBV. Most scholarship from our systematic review foregrounds women's victimization by criminal organizations and seldom substantiates claims of "protection," and our evidence from the case study is consistent: GBV clusters in micro-areas where criminal groups exercise authority, although its reported incidence is
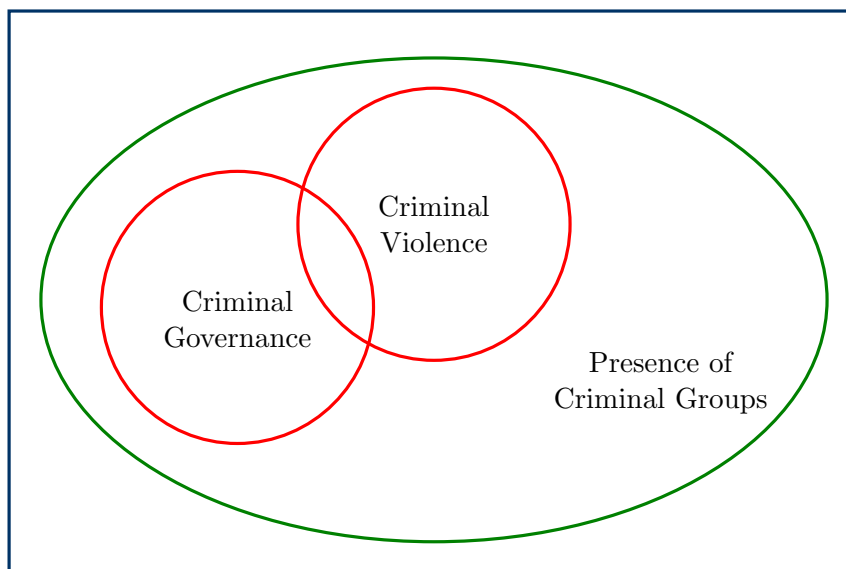
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3. While we also count the incidence of other emerging topics in the literature, such as women's participation of organized crime, this brief primarily focuses on explaining variation in GBV victimization by OCGs. See TITLE - Cecilia Farfán-Méndez in this policy brief series for a longer exploration of women's participation in OCGs.

4. This case study draws from our co-authored working paper, "Under the Radar: Estimating Underreporting of Gender-Based Violence to the Police." (Montini and Trudeau 2025)

influenced by the type of criminal group that is present. Our evidence suggests that policies aimed at preventing and facilitating reporting of GBV need to be different in communities where organized crime is strong. This report combines the findings from our systematic review and case study to make both immediate and longer-term policy recommendations that account for the presence of organized crime.

2 Conceptual Framework

Figure 1: Important Concepts Related to Organized Crime

Note: Authors' elaboration, adapted from a helpful suggestion from Ana Arjona.

Scholars of organized crime have documented that their presence and behavior is varied and depends on many factors, which has downstream effects on how criminal groups interact with their members and the population around them. In this section, we briefly provide some definitions of these core concepts before explaining the relationship between organized crime and GBV.

First, the focus of this brief is on criminal organizations, defined as "hierarchically organized groups of criminals with the ability to use violence, or the threat of it, for acquiring or defending the control of illegal markets in order to extract economic benefits from them" (Reuter 2008). These groups are involved in a range of illicit economies, from the illicit drug trade to human trafficking rings to the sale of "protection," a common product of mafia groups. Given that different types of criminal organizations will have different types of resources and human capital, we expect them to also use violence differentially, includ-

ing violence against women. This concept, as well as other related ones, are stylistically represented in Figure 1.

Second, an important scope condition for this study is our focus on territory-based criminal organizations. Much of the contemporary political science literature about organized crime emphasizes their relationship with territory because, in order to conduct their illicit business, criminal groups need to develop certain relationships with corrupt state officials, suppliers, buyers, and the population, all of whom support or contest their criminal business to varying degrees (Arias 2006; Barnes 2017; Trejo and Ley 2020).[5] Given our interest in a criminal group's relations with the population, when we use the term *criminal presence*, we focus on criminal groups that are physically present and conducting their operations in a specific territory.

A third related but distinct concept is *criminal governance.* We employ Lessing's definition of criminal governance, that is "the imposition of rules or restrictions on behavior by a criminal organization," over both members (*internal governance*) and non-members (*criminal-civilian governance*) (Lessing 2021). Though, as demonstrated in Lessing's review article, criminal groups govern many facets of illicit and civic life, we are particularly interested in their *criminal-civilian governance*, specifically that which relates to gender, which includes any potential rule-making about gender or GBV, and their treatment of women in the communities they govern. Though criminal groups must have some ostensible presence in the territories they govern, not *all* criminal groups who are present in an area govern the population, as shown graphically in Figure 1.

A fourth related concept is *criminal violence.* Though criminal groups have access to violence at scale, and often use it, violence is costly for their illicit businesses, and research has shown that strategic criminal groups only use violence selectively (Trejo and Ley 2020). Criminal groups use violence against the state, against their rivals, and against the population, when trying to subdue them (Barnes 2025; Lessing 2017; Magaloni et al. 2020). As shown in Figure 1, however, criminal presence does not imply that criminal groups are using violence, and there is a broad range of criminal governance behaviors that are nonviolent. In this brief, we are particularly interested in criminal violence against women they govern and against civilian perpetrators of GBV as a punishment tool.

Given that there is so much variation in how organized criminal groups manifest and behave, we expect there to be significant variation in the distribution of GBV amid these different settings. We examine such variation in organized crime and GBV in the extant literature in the following section.

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5. We exclude criminal groups who only specialize in industries that do not require physical presence, such as certain types of cybercrime organizations.

3 Systematic Review: GBV and Organized Crime

To assess the state of knowledge on GBV and organized crime, we conducted a systematic review of the interdisciplinary literature. This review elucidates persistent gaps in the literature on organized crime —particularly around how violence against women and women's interactions with criminal organizations are characterized. Our research methods and key findings are summarized below.

Research Methods

1. **Study universe:** Our study universe consists of peer-reviewed journal articles and scholarly book chapters published between 2000 to 2025 that engage substantively with organized crime and gender in Latin America and beyond. The unit of analysis is the individual publication (article, chapter, or book chapter).

2. **Search Strategy:** We systematically searched the Web of Science database using a combination of Boolean operators to focus on identifying interdisciplinary literature on gender and organized crime.[a] This search yielded an initial sample of 610 articles. We did not restrict by discipline in order to capture relevant contributions across fields such as political science, sociology, criminology, anthropology, public health, and law.

3. **Screening:** We screened studies in two stages. First, we reviewed titles and abstracts to remove clearly irrelevant records. Second, we assessed full texts as needed to determine whether studies met our substantive criteria (e.g., whether organized crime/criminal governance was a core analytic focus rather than a passing reference). After screening, the final analytic corpus included 224 studies.

4. **Inclusion and Exclusion:** We included studies that: (1) adopted a positivist social science orientation (empirical description, empirically grounded theorization, or systematic evidence), and (2) engaged substantively with organized crime or criminal governance (beyond generic discussion of violence or victimization). We excluded normative legal essays and work focused primarily on arts or literature. We also excluded studies of violence against women politicians/elites when the targeting was not linked to criminal organizations, and public health studies where gender and victimization appeared only in passing as control covariates alongside many other predictors.

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5. **Coding rules:** We hand-coded nine variables for each study. We coded categorical variables capturing (1) country of focus and (2) the criminal group's primary illicit market. We also coded binary indicators for whether the study analyzed: (3) criminal governance; (4) women as victims of criminal organizations; (5) sexual violence or sexual exploitation by criminal organizations; (6) female minors or girls interacting with criminal organizations; (7) women as participants in criminal organizations; (8) women being protected by criminal organizations; and (9) women's resistance to criminal organizations. Binary variables were coded as 1 only when the theme was part of the study's core contribution (not a passing mention), and studies could receive multiple 1s across categories. A detailed codebook is provided in Table 5 in the Appendix.

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a. The search terms included: (women OR gender OR female) and ("criminal governance" OR "organized crime" OR mafia OR cartel OR "street gang" OR "drug gang").

Our systematic review sheds light on several important trends and knowledge gaps. First, as shown in Table 1, much of our understanding about GBV and organized crime comes from the countries that dominate the literature on organized crime, in general: Mexico, Brazil, the US, and Italy.[6] There are several cross-national studies (24), and a smaller but perceptible amount that are cross-national studies within Latin America (9).

Table 1: Literature about women and organized crime, by country (top 10)

Country	N
Mexico	45
Global (Cross-national)	24
Brazil	20
USA	17
Italy	15
Colombia	13
UK	11
Latin America (cross-regional)	9
China	6
Spain	6

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6. This table only shows the top ten countries in our review. Please refer to **??** in Appendix for the complete list by country.

Second, Table 2 shows the distribution of articles by criminal industry.[7] An overwhelming share of the articles focus on drug trafficking organizations. Next, given our focus on gender, we found many articles that focused on human trafficking, and to a lesser extent, sex trafficking and criminal prostitution rings. While we do not have comparable data for a meta-analysis of criminal governance, in general, we suspect that topics related to human and sex trafficking received outsized attention when considered through a gendered lens. Several articles (20) examined women and organized crime across several types of criminal organizations, and street gangs (18), mafia groups (11), extortion rackets (7), and migrant smugglers (4) also received considerable attention in the literature.

Table 2: Literature about women and organized crime, by criminal industry

Criminal Industry	N
Drug Trafficking	108
Human Trafficking	37
Survey article (many types)	20
Street Gang	18
Mafia	11
Extortion	7
Sex Trafficking	5
Migrant Smuggling	4
Prostitution Ring	3

There are several important takeaways when examining the distribution of hand-coded topics in the literature about women and organized crime, shown in Table 3. First, studies about GBV and organized crime are often in the broader context of a criminal group's governing behavior and tools vis-a-vis the community they control. This is consistent with a growth in studies about criminal governance across disciplines (Arias 2017; Arjona 2016; Lessing 2021; Magaloni et al. 2020; Uribe et al. 2025). Forty-six percent of the studies we considered emphasize criminal governance when explaining the relationship between women and organized crime, e.g., gendered preferences for punishment of crimes by vigilante groups (Dow et al. 2024).

Second, we consider several victimization-related topics, and find that eighty percent of our studies depict women as victims of organized criminal groups. Certain studies identify specific types of victimization that we cataloged for more detailed analysis: 46% of studies

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7. This table again excludes industries where only one or two articles were written. A complete list is shown in the Appendix.

Table 3: Key topics in the literature about women and organized crime

Topic	N	Percent (%)
Criminal governance	103	46
Women as victims of criminal organizations	178	80
Women sexually exploited by criminal organizations	102	46
Female minors or girls and criminal organizations	94	42
Women as members of criminal organizations	108	48
Women protected by criminal organizations	20	9
Women resisting criminal organizations	48	21
Total	224	100%

documented women being sexually exploited by criminal groups (e.g., Izcara Palacios 2023; Selmini 2020), and 42% clarified that the victims themselves were girls (e.g., Ducharme et al. 2025; Devries et al. 2019). Nearly all of the studies on gender-related criminal industries (human trafficking, sex trafficking, and prostitution rings) depicted women as victims, and most of the articles focused on minors fell under this category as well.

Because of the overwhelming focus on victimization in the literature, we closely read these 178 articles to provide greater context about the variation in women's victimization by OCGs. Many of these studies (89%) focused on explaining the reasons why women are victimized by OCGs, ranging from explanations related to poverty and marginality (e.g., López et al. 2024) to their involvement with the criminal group's business, either incidentally or as an affiliate or employee (Fleetwood 2014). A sizable share of the studies on victimization also examined the indirect *consequences* of victimization, other than the immediate effects of violence or insecurity. Many studies (75%) linked victimization by OCGs to outcomes related to displacement or migration (Palacios and Pedro 2022), poor health outcomes (Svallfors 2024), and psychological trauma (Banu et al. 2021). Only a minority of the articles (26%) focus on the efficacy of legal instruments related to victimization, either in a domestic setting (e.g., the tradeoffs of legalizing the escort sector in Australia and the Netherlands, described in Jeffreys (2010)) or an international setting (e.g., compliance with UN human trafficking treaties in Portugal, described in Matos et al. (2018)).

Given that a majority of the literature on OCGs and women's victimization focuses on the *causes* and direct or indirect *consequences* of victimization, many of these articles contain evidence that is both hard to obtain and sensitive in nature. Given this, most of these studies

(75%) were qualitative, often leveraging interviews (36%), case studies (25%) ethnographic fieldwork (25%), or some combination. Fewer studies used quantitative mixed methods, but the dominant tools employed included quantitative statistical analysis (16%) and surveys (8%). As a result, even though the literature documents patterns of women's victimization amid organized crime, the methods employed limit our abilities to draw causal conclusions in favor of elucidating the processes of victimization in detail. These tradeoffs should be considered when forming public policies.

Third, there is an expansive literature that emphasizes female membership in organized crime. There are a few common themes that emerge from this literature, which is discussed in greater detail in TITLE by Cecilia Farfán-Méndez. A minority of articles in our review document the role of women's leadership roles in organized crime, focusing on traditional mafia organizations and as *madams*, leaders of sex trafficking or prostitution rings (e.g., Allum and Marchi 2018). More common are studies of incarcerated women that focus on risk factors for joining criminal groups (e.g., De Campos and De Oliveira 2023; Sumter et al. 2024) or women's treatment in prison (Ribeiro and Martino 2022). Of the drug trafficking articles, many that focused on women members depicted them as drug mules (see, for instance Campbell 2008), and described specific risks related to smuggling drugs across borders.

One of the key (and perhaps surprising) findings of our meta-analysis is that very few studies mention women being protected by criminal organizations (9%) (Carey 2014; Smith 2021; Moore and Stuart 2022; Dow et al. 2024; Niño Vega 2018)[8]. One interpretation of these findings is that women being protected by criminal groups is understudied. Another interpretation, and the one we favor based off of this evidence, is that researchers should be circumspect when claiming that criminal governance protects women, especially when considering the external validity of these claims. These findings corroborate Arias' (2006) concerns – also drawing from Brazil – that women are only "protected" by criminal groups when it is convenient.[9]

Finally, we measured the prevalence of literature documenting women and women's organizations resisting organized crime. Only twenty-one percent of the articles we reviewed focused on resistance. Those that did focused on three major themes: escaping and resisting violent atmospheres (López et al. 2024), including unwilling membership in organized criminal groups (Cayli 2016), activism on behalf of victims of organized crime, especially the disappeared (*desaparecidos*) (Salazar Serna and Castro Pérez 2020), and collective resistance

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8. There are other studies conducted in Brazil, for instance that draw from qualitative interviews with criminal group members who claim that criminal organizations punish perpetrators of sexual violence and prohibit domestic violence in the communities they govern. They weren't included in this review because the search terms are not included in the title and/or abstract (e.g. Barnes 2025; Lessing and Willis 2019)

9. This is consistent with the idea of *selective governance* in Arjona (2016)

organizations, from women's collectives to neighborhood arts groups (Fahlberg et al. 2023; Hincapié 2017).

In sum, the literature establishes that women's experiences with organized crime are overwhelmingly documented as victimization, far less as protection, and only selectively as resistance or agency. That evidence is concentrated in a handful of countries and industries. Work that focuses on the governance aspects of organized crime has grown, but even these studies do not collectively link criminal governance or criminal governance subtypes to GBV incidence. As a result, we know that OCGs harm women in a range of ways, but we know much less about the mechanisms that exacerbate or mitigate the risk of victimization, and almost nothing about how these patterns vary at the territorial scale where criminal rule is exercised. The case study that follows takes up these gaps in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, to address these limitations in a case where there is variation in criminal presence, violence levels, and governance types, and where we have access to high-frequency data.

4 Case Study: GBV and Organized Crime in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Building on the limitations identified in our systematic review, the municipality of Rio de Janeiro provides an especially salient setting to examine how organized crime intersects with GBV. There is impressive variation in criminal governance in Rio de Janeiro: in the municipality alone, there are strong criminal monopolies, shared governance between the state and criminal groups, criminal groups that are present but weakly govern, if at all, and areas with high violence and incessant criminal warfare (with each other and with the law enforcement arms of the state) (Arias 2006, 2017; Barnes 2025; Lessing 2017; Magaloni et al. 2020). There is a range of impressive sub-municipal sources of data that scholars use to estimate these "micro-level armed regimes" (Arias 2017), including police reports and non-profit estimates of violence, that we leverage to study how this variation in the type of criminal group[10] correlates with GBV. We follow a long line of scholarship that leverages these same granular sources of data to analyze Rio de Janeiro criminal governance at the neighborhood-level (Barnes 2022; Magaloni et al. 2020; Monteiro and Rocha 2016; Trudeau 2022). We briefly summarize the context in Rio de Janeiro in the box below, introduce the data in Section 4.1, and present descriptive findings about the relationship between organized crime and gender-based violence in Section 4.2.

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10. e.g., criminal groups that are structured as drug trafficking organizations or as vigilante extortion rackets (Lessing 2021).

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Context: Crime and Violence in Rio de Janeiro

Criminal Governance

Rio is governed by micro-territory: *favelas*, *comunidades*, and other informal settlements sit adjacent to the formal "asphalt," producing block-by-block variation in who governs and how. While the state more reliably governs formal neighborhoods, governance in most favelas ranges from collaborative to contested between state forces and non-state armed actors (Arias 2017; Perlman 2010).

Two principal sets of criminal actors shape everyday governance. First are drug trafficking factions (e.g., CV, ADA, and TCP) which operate through decentralized franchise-like structures (Leeds 1996; Lessing 2008). Second are the *milícias*, paramilitary organizations with ties to current and former security personnel, which increasingly govern through extortion and have documented linkages to political and police actors (Cano 2013; Misse 2009; Paes Manso 2020; Pantaleão and Montini 2025).

Gender-Based Violence

Violence in Rio is not limited to armed conflict. Brazil—and Rio de Janeiro in particular—also exhibits very high levels of gender-based violence (GBV). In 2022, survey evidence indicates that about 40% of *carioca* women reported experiencing some form of GBV, above the national average (FBSP 2023).

Lethal violence against women remains acute: Brazil recorded 1,410 femicides in 2022, most committed by intimate partners or ex-partners, and primarily occurring inside the home (FBSP 2023). Sexual violence is likewise widespread and increasing, with 83,988 rape reports in 2023—equivalent to one rape every six minutes nationwide—disproportionately affecting children and adolescents (FBSP 2023). Together, these patterns underscore that gendered insecurity is a central feature of everyday life in Rio, shaping women's vulnerability, mobility, and access to protection.

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4.1 Data and Measurement

We consider three main sources of data to estimate the correlation between the type of criminal group and GBV: (1) police-reported GBV, aggregated at the police precinct-month level, (2) civilian complaints about GBV to an anonymous non-profit tipline, also aggregated

at the police precinct-month level, and (3) monthly panel data on criminal presence at the favela-level, drawn from the original database in Trudeau (2024). The study focuses on a panel from 2008 to 2023 in the city of Rio de Janeiro.

The first source consists of police reports obtained from the Institute of Public Safety of Rio de Janeiro, (ISP, *Instituto de Segurança Pública*). These records include all registered crime reports from each of police precincts (CISP). We obtained records at the level of the individual incident, and aggregated to the CISP-month level. Each observation contains metadata on the exact day and hour of the report, the police precinct of registration, the type and subtype of crime, if the crime is prohibited by a certain piece of legislation, and victim-level covariates such as age, gender, race, and relationship to the perpetrator. The ISP records are highly detailed, and there are more than 70 specific crimes and 400 sub-crimes that are recorded in their database, with a total of around 6 million reports in our study period.[11]

For our analyses, we focus on two crime outcomes that fall under the broad umbrella of gender-based violence (GBV). Within this category, we distinguish between two crimes. The first is rape, which is defined by ISP as both attempted and completed rapes, as well as sexual violence against minors. The second crime is violence against women (VAW), where we focus on physical aggression[12]. To construct the VAW variable, we sum three distinct ISP crime records: (1) physical injury (*lesão corporal*) that is protected by *Lei Maria da Penha*,[13] (2) physical injury that is sub-classified as domestic violence, and (3) femicide. These three records are a parsimonious set of crimes that could be considered VAW, reflecting the basic crimes mentioned in the *Lei Maria da Penha*. Though there is substantial overlap in the ISP records between categories (1) and (2) and categories (1) and (3), it is not perfect, so we use these three filters to include all relevant acts of VAW.

The second source contains the universe of *Disque Denúncia* (DD) call logs for the same period. *Disque Denúncia* is a civil society organization, independent from the police and other public agencies. It runs a 24-hour hotline that classifies anonymous tips and forwards life-threatening emergencies to law enforcement while safeguarding callers' identities.

We processed approximately three million *Disque Denúncia* records (i.e., all calls between 2008 and 2023 in Rio de Janeiro), which we geocoded to enable spatial analyses at both the police precinct level and at more granular latitude–longitude coordinates. For the main

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11. For example, *theft* is a crime category and *theft of a cell phone* is a sub-crime category.

12. We claim it is important to separate these two forms of violence because of the different pathways of reporting that each of then entail, with health institutions serving as the key gateway for women who decide to seek help after experiencing violence.

13. The *Maria da Penha* Law (Law 11.340/2006) is an omnibus law at the national level aimed at reducing domestic violence and GBV. It increases the severity of penalties, the coverage for crimes that can be prosecuted, and provides additional legal and support resources for survivors.

analyses presented here, we focus on those calls within the municipality of Rio de Janeiro and aggregate DD calls to the precinct-month level to match the structure of the police report data. Each DD record includes a complaint type and subtype, as assigned by the call center worker, and may involve multiple categories (e.g., drug trafficking, threat, extortion, noise, violence against women, rape, illegal possession of weapons, police abuse, etc.). Records also contain short text summaries and keywords that provide additional qualitative detail. In line with the police data, we focus on two types of GBV: rape and VAW, both of which are main categories in DD's classification system (which is distinct from the police's). DD does not use the police's classification system because people often call about non-crime nuisances, problems with service provision, or to complain about the state and public servants (including the police).

The third source contains information about criminal group presence at the *favela*-level within the city of Rio de Janeiro, drawn from the original data described in detail in Trudeau (2024) and summarized here. This dataset draws from the original *Disque Denúncia* reports and uses text processing methods to filter the text summaries of the complaints for the three drug trafficking factions (ADA, CV, TCP) and for *milícia* groups in Rio de Janeiro. Then, using a combination of machine processing and hand-coding tools, Trudeau (2024) aggregated text summaries for each favela to identify which criminal faction(s) were present in a favela, or if it was in a state or conflict (turf war) for each month-year observation.

One limitation of this analysis is that the violence data is reported at the police-precinct level, while the criminal group presence data is reported at the *favela*-level. Often, there are multiple *favelas* inside the territorial boundary of one precinct. In order for the unit of analysis for the criminal presence data to be comparable to the violence data, we assign a police-precinct-month observation a value of "1" for *milícia* presence if *any* of the favelas within that precinct are governed by *milícia* groups during a particular month. We do the same for a binary drug trafficking variable, assigning an observation a value of "1" if *any* of the drug trafficking factions are present in *any* of the *favelas* for a certain month, and the same for a criminal conflict variable. All of these indicators are non-mutually exclusive, as it is possible for a police precinct to encompass one favela in each category. Given this data limitation, these findings should be interpreted as correlational evidence of the relationship between GBV and criminal presence of a certain type within the broader precinct.

The proportion of police-precinct-months that have at least one favela governed by drug factions, *milícias*, or in conflict are shown in Table 4, presented alongside "no criminal presence" where none were present as a reference category.

Table 4: Proportion of police-precinct-months with criminal presence, by type, in the municipality of Rio de Janeiro

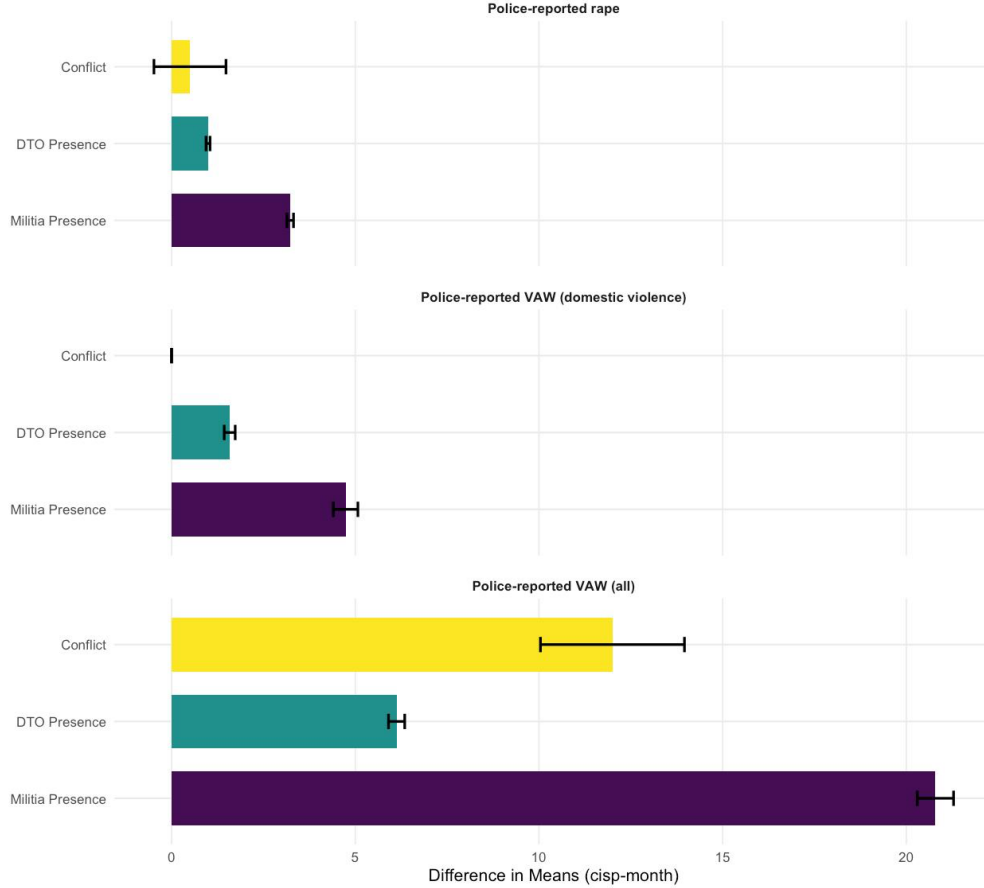| None	Drug Trafficking	Milícia	Conflict
8.9%	70.6%	85.4%	20%

4.2 Findings

We begin by comparing reported GBV to the police within the city of Rio de Janeiro across different criminal group types. We calculate the difference in mean GBV reports to the police across precincts where different criminal group types were present, shown in Figure 2 with 95% confidence intervals. Each bar in Panel A shows the difference in mean levels of reported rape to the police for police precincts *with* a particular type of criminal presence vis-a-vis precincts without that type. On average, there are three more reported rapes per police precinct (CISP) per month in precincts with a *milícia* presence than precincts with no *milícias*. The gap is smaller between precincts with drug trafficking gangs and with active conflict, with only 1 and 0.5 more reported rapes than in precincts without, respectively. These difference-in-means for Panel A tell us that reported rape is most highly correlated with precincts where *milícia* groups are present, and least correlated with precincts with active conflict.

Panels B and C of Figure 2 show the difference-in-means for the subset of VAW crimes that are specifically classified as domestic violence, and all VAW crimes, respectively. Both of these types of crimes follow similar trends as reported rape, showing that precincts with *milícia* presence are most highly associated with domestic violence, specifically, and violence against women, in general. We find no evidence of women reporting domestic violence in precinct-months with an active turf war, and 2 more incidents of domestic violence occur in precincts with a drug trafficking faction present than in precincts without. Panel C shows that the scale of violence against women is much larger when including violence against women events classified under the *Lei Maria da Penha* legal instrument and femicides. On average, 21, 12, and 6 more events of violence against women are reported per month in precincts with *milícia* presence, with an active turf war, and with drug trafficker presence, respectively.

Do these findings prove that women are at higher risk of GBV when *milícia* presence is higher, and at lower risk when trafficking presence is higher or in active conflict zones? Not necessarily. Other studies from the city of Rio de Janeiro suggest that criminal group

Figure 2: Difference in Means of GBV Reporting in different criminally controlled areas
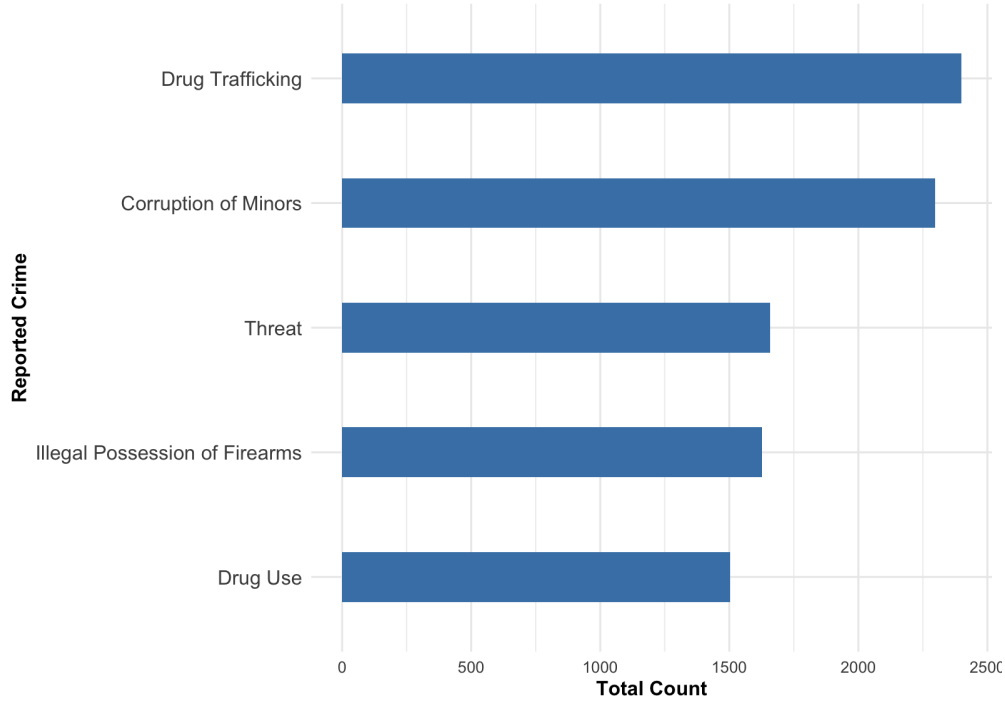
Police-reported rape

Police-reported VAW (domestic violence)

Police-reported VAW (all)

Difference in Means (cisp-month)

Bars show differences in mean outcomes (with 95% CIs) across police-precinct–months (CISPs) classified as *Militia presence*, *DTO presence*, *Conflict* (contested).

type differentially affects reporting to the police for many types of crimes, including GBV. Certain drug trafficking factions that publicly claim to prohibit GBV and enforce the rules within their communities do so to consolidate social control and ensure that the police do not interfere with their clandestine business (Arias 2006; Barnes 2022). If so, women living under drug trafficking regimes may be discouraged from calling the police or calling outside authorities, and encouraged to report GBV to the local traffickers to "handle" internally. This may be especially true when conflict is active and when drug traffickers are especially sensitive to police presence.

To paint a more complete picture of the relationship between criminal group type and GBV, we then focus on the *Disque Denúncia* data. We analyze within-call data to estimate the co-occurrence of GBV with other crime categories in DD. Treating each individual call as the unit of analysis, this allows us to consider GBV alongside other crimes that are commonly associated with organized criminal groups. In each DD report, the call center

Figure 3: Crimes Co-Occurring with GBV

Top 5 Co-Occurring Crime Reports (DD)

Note: When crimes are reported to *Disque Denuncia*, the call center workers may classify a report in multiple categories. These are the top 5 crimes that co-occur with reports of GBV.

worker can classify a call by "primary topic" and "secondary topic." We filter complaints when either type of GBV (rape or VAW) is the primary or secondary topic, and compare other primary or secondary topics that GBV is commonly paired with. This analysis frees us from some of the territorial constraints in the above exercise, and clearly demonstrates what other criminal behaviors are co-occurring alongside GBV. We pool complaints related to rape and VAW to show which other crimes occur with GBV, in general.

In Figure 3, we plot the most common crimes co-occurring with GBV. Notably, drug trafficking is the top category, meaning that it is the most likely crime that callers report in the same complaint when they are denouncing rape or violence against women. We interpret this as a strong signal that drug trafficking gangs are also perpetrators of GBV. The second most frequent crime category that co-occurs with GBV is corruption of minors, which mirrors the results from the systematic review, suggesting that a substantial share of the victims of GBV in Rio de Janeiro are minors. Threats and illegal possession of firearms are both likely behaviors for either drug trafficking factions or *milícia* groups, and drug use is likely to be more strongly associated with neighborhoods governed by drug gangs than *milícias*, though there is recent evidence of widespread drug usage and sale in *milícia*-dominated communities as well (Ventura et al. 2024).

These patterns suggest that GBV is not independent of broader criminal dynamics: women often experience or witness violence in the same spaces where criminal groups exert territorial control. Both police reports and *Disque Denúncia* are imperfect sources to measure GBV, but together, they paint a sharper image. When analyzed together, Figures 2 and 3 suggest that the level of GBV victimization are similarly high across criminally governed areas, but they might be reported differently, or, in some cases, not reported at all.

5   Avenues for Further Research

Combining the findings from our systematic review of the literature on organized crime and GBV and the evidence presented in our case study, we identify several potential avenues for future research. First, it is clear that the measurement of GBV needs to be sensitive to the varied criminal presence and governance structures on the ground. This report demonstrates that measures of GBV – notoriously difficult to measure even in the absence of criminal organizations – are sensitive to local criminal governance structures. Our case study shows that GBV in Rio de Janeiro is reported through police records and independent hotlines, and other studies show that many criminal groups may adjudicate cases informally. More broadly, a multi-systems approach that links police, nonprofit, health, and judiciary data could help to estimate the true incidence of GBV, even allowing for bias from any one source. We provide an example of how to do this using the Rio de Janeiro data in a related working paper (Montini and Trudeau 2025). We expect similar dynamics to be present across Latin America where criminal governance is so prevalent (Uribe et al. 2025).

Second, one undertheorized phenomenon is the victimization of women who are part of criminal organizations. Our systematic review revealed that many women in criminal organizations were also victimized by criminal organizations. Therefore, research on women in organized crime should move beyond the familiar "mules" or "madams" framework to map their ranks, potential roles, and constraints across different types of criminal organizations. Such findings could help inform not only scholarly work, but also policy interventions focused on prevention and exit programs. Relatedly, criminal groups' regulation of gender deserves systematic documentation. Two domains seem particularly relevant: internal rules for members (e.g., sanctions for intimate partner violence or sexual assault) and external rules imposed on residents. This can help to clarify if certain criminal organizations are truly protecting women, as some suggest, or if doing so is merely the means to an end.

Third, the results from our systematic review demonstrate that most of our cumulative knowledge on the subject matter comes from careful qualitative research. Both qualitative and quantitative scholars should work together to establish clearer ethical guidelines and

protocols for research and data protection that match the risks of conducting research in areas where organized crime is present.

Finally, the state is not a monolithic entity. Existing work on policing demonstrates that coordination across different state agencies can lead to widely varying outcomes at the sub-municipal level (Flom 2022; Flom and Post 2016; González 2020). If criminal governance makes implementing state policies more challenging, for a range of actors, more research should be conducted to understand how the presence of organized crime obstructs inter-agency cooperation with respect to GBV reporting and prevention.

6 Policy recommendations

6.1 Quick wins

- **Expanded access to third-party channels:** In areas where criminal groups are present, there may be risks that women face when reporting GBV victimization to the state. For example, criminal groups may prohibit residents to contact the police in territories they control and even when women do attempt to call the police, law enforcement may not be willing–or have the capacity–to enter criminally governed areas. As such, increased funding for, publicity of, and the creation of independent channels[14] could immediately provide survivors with an alternative, and potentially safer outlet to report GBV. While third-party channels have the disadvantage of not being able to deliver resources to survivors as directly as the state, the data from these channels can inform policymakers about general trends and care gaps.

- **Information campaigns about the various pathways to seek care as a GBV survivor:** Often, the consequences of reporting GBV can be life-threatening or put the survivor in further danger. A quick win for policymakers seeing GBV on the rise in areas where organized crime is high would be information campaigns explaining the benefits and potential outcomes of reporting to different channels to expediate help and access to care. Though this will vary by context, there are many Latin American countries with a multitude of reporting channels for GBV survivors. Survivors can report to the police, the courts, social or family services, hospitals, or independent agencies, to name a few common options. This could be an important quick win if the outcomes of reporting channels vary. For example, in Brazil, if a woman is seeking a restraining order (which requires a police report) but goes to the court first, she is

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14. E.g., *Disque Denúncia* in the Rio de Janeiro case study.

wasting precious time by not getting the police report first. Demystifying the process of accessing resources could protect more women, quicker.

6.2   Medium and long-term reforms

- **Increased funding for women to access reporting channels in criminally governed areas:** Women need to "bypass the enemy" when reporting GBV. At times, the enemy are COs. At others, it seems to be the state. One potential remedy is to strategically locate and provide sustained funding for community-based front-doors in criminally governed areas.

- **Law enforcement accountability reforms:** Strengthen internal affairs and external oversight to address collusion and retaliation risks across police precincts. This requires rotation policies for police leadership in high-risk areas and anonymous reporting for police misconduct. Across Latin America, it is well-documented that police violence is widespread, particularly in urban peripheries where organized crime is concentrated. As a result, high levels of police violence and police-criminal conflict can erode civilian trust (Cruz 2009), which could reduce women's confidence that the police will effectively process a GBV claim. Greater levels of law enforcement accountability could have the unintended consequence of increasing GBV reporting to the police (while not necessarily reflecting an increase in GBV *incidence*).

- **Capacity building and trauma-informed practice:** Train police, health workers, prosecutors, and judges on GBV dynamics under criminal governance (risk assessment, confidentiality, retaliation mitigation), with periodic audits.

- **Leniency agreements and legal protection for women victims who are members of criminal organizations:** This study documents that there is substantial overlap between women's victimization by organized crime and women's membership or close affiliation with criminal groups. More detailed legal provisions, including leniency agreements and potential amnesties, should be developed so that these women can have a safe pathway to exit the life of crime if they choose.

- **Better communication and referral protocols between GBV reporting channels:** Establish standardized, referral pathways with response-time targets, standardized protocol for confidentiality, privacy, and care for survivors and witnesses, and, shared checklists to minimize survivors being bounced between institutions. This requires agencies to coordinate the sequence, flow, and hierarchy of processing GBV complaints between agencies.

- **Improve data quality for GBV reporting:** Build a secure, privacy-protecting data backbone that links police reports, health service encounters, court protective orders, and third-party channels. To overcome measurement bias from any one source, policymakers should standardize and harmonize data to create a unified database that accurately tracks GBV hotspots and audits gaps in service delivery. Integration across sources can be an important step for bounding the true, unobserved level of GBV. That being said, integration has limits. Rules should be established for which actors can see *other* entries or personal information within the database, to ensure survivor privacy and confidentiality.

- **Hospital-to-protection pipeline:** In violent areas where access to law enforcement may be scarce, healthcare institutions may be a safer alternative for victims of GBV. One potential recommendation is to allow health providers to trigger protective measures (with survivor consent) without requiring an in-person police visit first (e.g., remote police report filing from hospitals for all GBV cases[15]), immediate scheduling for forensic exams, and automatic notification to specialized GBV units.

- **Legal pathways for third-party reports to trigger protection:** Where feasible, reform statutes so vetted third-party channels (e.g., women's shelters) can initiate time-limited protective measures with the survivor's consent or at least pre-register cases, reducing the cost and risk of the first contact with the state.

- **Sustained funding for third-party channels:** Provide multi-year support to health and social service centers (e.g., women's shelters, community health centers) and trusted NGOs to act as low-barrier entry points, with paid community navigators who accompany survivors across institutions. Maintain hotline capacity with contingency staffing.[16]

7   Conclusion

This report shows that organized crime reshapes both the incidence and the visibility of GBV. The systematic review finds that scholarship documents a broad range of women's victimization and rarely substantiates claims of "protection." The Rio case demonstrates

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15. For example, in our case study, sexual assault victims need to visit a police precinct in person to file a police report.

16. We address the consequences of under-staffing of DD during night-time hours for GBV reporting in Montini and Trudeau (2025).

that GBV is positively correlated with organized criminal presence, but its incidence and reporting varies depending on the criminal group type.

Both theoretical exercises paint a stark picture. We suspect that, across the Americas, where criminal groups are present, women might live in a state of uncertainty and fear, similar to those shown in studies from the systematic review. We urge policymakers that focus on GBV to consider it alongside their city, region, or country's broader public security crisis. Persistent armed conflict and high police lethality generate trauma, erode community safety nets, and limit the reach of essential prevention and protection programs. Efforts to reduce GBV require not only investments in survivor-centered health, psychosocial, and shelter services but also integrated strategies to curb armed violence, strengthen local safety infrastructure, and ensure coordination between health, social assistance, and security institutions. Without safer territorial conditions, even well-designed GBV interventions struggle to reach the women most at risk.

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Appendix A. Systematic Review Codebook

Table 5: Codebook: variables, definitions, and coding guidance

Variable	Definition & coding guidance	Type / Values
country	Country primarily analyzed. If multi-country, code "Cross-national". If work covers many with no clear focus, code "Global".	Categorical
group_market	Primary criminal industry of the focal group: *drug trafficking*, *extortion*, *natural resource* (e.g., illegal mining, logging), or *survey* (used when the study spans multiple industries or is a review/synthesis). Choose best fit; if multiple are truly co-equal, list both separated by semicolon.	Categorical (single; allow multi if needed)
crimgov	Codes 1 if the study analyzes criminal *governance* (rule-making, dispute resolution, social control, service provision, or territorial regulation by OCGs). Otherwise 0.	Binary (0/1)
women_criminals	Codes 1 if women are analyzed as *participants* in OCGs (members, accomplices, workers, leaders). Code 0 if women only appear as victims or bystanders.	Binary (0/1)
women_victims	Codes 1 if women/girls are analyzed as *victims* of OCGs or OCG-linked violence (e.g., IPV connected to criminal governance, kidnappings, threats, coercion). Passing mentions do not qualify.	Binary (0/1)
women_protected	Codes 1 if the study presents evidence that OCGs *protect* women (e.g., prohibiting GBV, punishing perpetrators). Otherwise 0.	Binary (0/1)
women_sex	Codes 1 if the study documents *sexual violence or sexual exploitation* perpetrated by OCGs (including trafficking for sexual exploitation). Otherwise 0.	Binary (0/1)
women_resist	Codes 1 if women or women's groups *resist* OCGs (collective action, advocacy, exit/defection strategies, or community mobilization). Otherwise 0.	Binary (0/1)

Appendix B. Full Results from Systematic Review

Table 6: Distribution of articles, by country and region

Country/Region	N	Percent (%)
Africa	3	1.28%
Algeria	1	0.43%
Australia	2	0.85%
Belgium	1	0.43%
Brazil	20	8.55%
Bulgaria	1	0.43%
Cambodia	2	0.85%
Canada	4	1.71%
Central America	1	0.43%
Chile	2	0.85%
China	6	2.56%
Colombia	13	5.56%
Cyprus	1	0.43%
East Asia	1	0.43%
Ecuador	2	0.85%
El Salvador	1	0.43%
Ethiopia	1	0.43%
Europe	2	0.85%
Finland	1	0.43%
France	1	0.43%
Germany	1	0.43%
Global	24	10.26%
Guatemala	2	0.85%

Continued on next page.

Table 6 continued.

Country/Region	N	Percent (%)
Hong Kong	1	0.43%
Hungary	1	0.43%
India	3	1.28%
Iraq	1	0.43%
Italy	15	6.41%
Jamaica	1	0.43%
Japan	2	0.85%
Kenya	1	0.43%
Latin America	9	3.85%
Malaysia	3	1.28%
Mexico	45	19.23%
Mumbai	1	0.43%
Netherlands	3	1.28%
Nigeria	1	0.43%
North Korea	1	0.43%
Peru	3	1.28%
Portugal	2	0.85%
Russia	1	0.43%
Somalia	1	0.43%
South Africa	2	0.85%
South America	1	0.43%
South Korea	1	0.43%
Spain	6	2.56%
Switzerland	1	0.43%

Table 6 continued.

Country/Region	N	Percent (%)
Taiwan	1	0.43%
Thailand	1	0.43%
Tobago	1	0.43%
Trinidad	2	0.85%
Turkey	1	0.43%
UK	11	4.70%
USA	17	7.26%
Western Balkan	1	0.43%
Total	**224**	**100.00%**

Table 7: Distribution of articles, by criminal industry

Criminal Industry	N	Percent (%)
Drug Trafficking	108	48.21%
Extortion	7	3.13%
Fraud	1	0.45%
Human Trafficking	37	16.52%
Mafia	11	4.91%
Migrant Smuggling	4	1.79%
Motorcycle Gangs	1	0.45%
Organ Trafficking	1	0.45%
Piracy	1	0.45%
Prostitution	3	1.34%
Robbery	2	0.89%
Sex Trafficking	5	2.23%
Sports Betting	1	0.45%
Street Gang	18	8.04%
Survey	20	8.93%
Theft	1	0.45%
Militias, Paramilitaries, or Vigilantes	3	1.34%
Grand Total	**224**	**100.00%**