Women in Organized Crime in Germany

Eva Maria Kallinger

German legislation has adopted the following definition of organized crime:

The perpetration of crimes that have as their purpose the search for profit or power and that, singularly or as a group, are particularly significant and are carried out by more than two people who collaborate for an indeterminate period.

In addition, the law specifies several resources used by criminal groups to achieve their objectives:

1. Use of professional or commercial structures;
2. Recourse to force or other means of intimidation.
3. Exercise of influence over the areas of politics, mass media, public administration, the justice system, or the economy;

This specification is necessary to appropriately contextualize the organized crime phenomenon in Germany. Whereas in Italy we are faced with criminal associations powerfully rooted in the social and cultural fabric, in Germany we see the presence of variously organized criminal gangs. Traditional Italian mafias—Cosa Nostra, ‘Ndrangheta, Camorra, and Sacra Corona Unita—widely use the resources described in the foregoing list, whereas criminal groups active in Germany seem weakly rooted in the culture and exercise just as weak an influence over institutions. According to the 1999 Lagebericht Organisierte Kriminalität Bundesrepublik Deutschland—the report on organized crime prepared by the federal police (Bundeskriminalamt)—out of 816 investigations and trials against organized crime conducted in 1999, only 88 cases showed attempts to influence politics, mass media, public administration, the justice system, or the economy through extortion, threats, or establishing relationships of dependence or corruption.

We must begin from this situation to explain why women have not played a significant role in the criminal groups active in Germany. Whereas in Sicily, Campania, Calabria, and Puglia women take on growing roles within the group when the male criminal business is in difficulty, this does not happen in Germany. Here, recalling the work of Principato and Dino on the role of women in the mafia, there is no need for women’s role to change from “vestal virgin” to regent of a family empire because real clan structures do not exist in Germany. In some
ways, the “liberation” of women in organized crime follows traditional economic business models (which are also undergoing a process of change); when a business is family run, it is easier for a woman to take the reins when there is no brother able to do it or when the brother or brothers opt for other professions.

The definition of organized crime adopted in Germany is similar to that of enterprise crime, criminal enterprises that lack the longevity of Italian mafia clans and aim to maximize profits through the use of business and commercial structures. Instead, Germany has become a particularly attractive country for mafia groups from other countries (e.g. Latin America, Vietnam, Russia, and China) including Italy.

“Legal structures make the ideal basis for organized crime,” said the president of the Landeskriminalamt (LKA) in Bavaria in 1996. In addition to legal investment structures that are ideal for money laundering there are criminal structures created for profit. These cartels may be made up only of German citizens or foreign citizens. According to data supplied by the Bundeskriminalamt in 1999, 77% of criminal groups are composed of foreign nationals. Immigrants who encounter growing difficulties in entering the legal labor market become a pool for recruiting criminal workers. In other cases, there are real “businesses,” like the Turkish mafia that engages in international drug trafficking through contacts with production areas. Most of the members are male, however, and conditions do not exist for the ascent of women to any significant roles.

Some studies of organized crime in Germany have emphasized the fact that women almost always perform marginal roles. There are women who follow orders given by men in criminal groups, who are employed in drug trafficking, and who manage brothels or keep girls forced into prostitution under control. According to the results of interviews by investigators and researchers, the role of women in criminal groups is, above all, that of victim. According to Letizia Paoli of the Max Planck Institut für Kriminologie in Freiburg,

I have never seen any cases in my studies where I found a woman directing one of these criminal enterprises. Women who find themselves in important roles seem, to me anyway, to be the sisters, daughters, or wives of someone.

In an interview with Gaspare Mutolo some years ago, a state witness recounted that any boy who was not the son of a mafia boss had to show he possessed a special ferocity to stand out in the environment, earning himself a reputation as an unscrupulous killer. Women do not possess the potential for such marked physical violence and, for this reason, frequently perform other types of roles. Furthermore, women are considered unreliable because they are more easily influenced by a man, a lover, a husband, or even a son. When positions of power inside family-based criminal groups (as in groups composed of Turks, Kosovars, or Italians) become vacant, it is extremely difficult for a women to enter them, even if only for a limited time.

According to 1999 report from the Bundeskriminalamt, the highest percentage of women investigated in Germany is for crimes connected to shoplifting (39.6%). The percentage of women investigated for fraud is 26.4%, and the percentages