



# Performance matters more than masculinity: Violence, gender dynamics and mafia women

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## ABSTRACT

Narrating the stories of Italian mafia women and classifying their performance, this study shows that mafiosi masculinity creates a violent social atmosphere for women. The performance practised by women may give rise to a higher social status or credibility for the women or may make them vulnerable against violence and risks posed by mafia activity. Women's performances against violent mafia activity can bring definitive failure to the solid structure of the mafia family. Yet, conversely, the performance of women under the influence of mafiosi masculinity can also render the mafia more resilient against threat.

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## 1. Introduction

The role of women in the mafia<sup>1</sup> has been the subject of investigation since their mostly passive but supportive role was evidenced with the emergence of the first mafia group in Italy during the mid-19th century (Catanzaro, 1992; Gambetta, 1993; Maiorino, 1997; Hess, 1998; Seindal, 1998; Dickie, 2007; Romano, 2007; Lupo, 2009). Research on women in the mafia has been intensified more recently, starting with the 1980s when the increasing number of women identified as belonging to the criminal networks of mafia groups awakened the interests of

the public (Fiume, 1989). Their stories were narrated in the conventional media during this period (La Repubblica, 1985, 1988; Corriere della Sera, 1997) and the sum of these narrations created a puzzling social and cultural atmosphere because of the profound roles that these women played. The traditional expectations of a woman in the private and public life of a patriarchal society was in tension with their crimes, engaging public curiosity. The role of women in this context is significant because they ensure stability, and in some cases flexibility, for mafia activities. Accordingly, women's active participation in mafia business has gradually increased in line with the logistic, strategic and existential needs of mafia syndicates (Cascio & Puglisi, 1986; Pino, 1988; Fiume, 1989; Puglisi, 1990, 2005; Madeo, 1992; Rizza, 1993; Principato & Dino, 1997; Pizzini-Gambetta, 1999; Fiandaca (Ed.), 2007; Ingrasci, 2007; dalla Chiesa, 2007). There are both commonalities and distinctions among the profiles of women who were born, or married, into mafia families.<sup>2</sup>

Studies have addressed the role of women in different mafia groups and the women of Cosa Nostra (Dino, 2000), 'Ndrangheta (Capponi, 2009; Ingrasci, 2010), Camorra (Gribaudo, 2010) and Sacra Corona Unita (Massari & Motta, 2007) have been widely explored. These explorations have unveiled the diverse dynamics of women's roles in different mafia groups. However, many puzzles remain as there is no

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<sup>1</sup> The mafia refers to the Sicilian Cosa Nostra historically, but here it is used as a term to refer to Italian organized crime groups. There are four main mafia groups in the country. These prominent mafia syndicates are Cosa Nostra from Sicily, Camorra from Campania, 'Ndrangheta from Calabria and Sacra Corona Unita from Apulia. These four mafia-type organizations have profound differences both functionally and historically. Camorra and 'Ndrangheta operated mostly as a gang structure in cities in the 19th century while Cosa Nostra formed in the later part of the nineteenth century with more rural influence. However, all three organizations have evolved and renewed themselves as the country embarked on the deeper political transformations and social changes of the twentieth century. Different from these three historical organized crime groups, the Sacra Corona Unita is a younger organized crime establishment, founded in the 1970s with distinctive hierarchical structures. Camorra and the Sacra Corona Unita have looser structures than Cosa Nostra and 'Ndrangheta. The reader should pay attention to these important differences among various organized crime groups in Italy. After giving this information, it deems important to explain why I used the mafia as a common term in this article. The principal reason is that the identity of women has been shaped by certain parallel dynamics regardless of the diversification among the organized crime groups with which they are affiliated. These parallel dynamics include a life of violence, secrecy, patriarchy, and obedience to certain rules and obligations to the family. The categorization of mafia woman profiles engaged the shift in the role of women in these organizations.

<sup>2</sup> A Mafia family signifies a clan, *cosca* in Sicilian, in which the members of the group closely link to each other and every single member is part of that *cosca* or mafia family. However, having a blood-tie among the members of the clan is not an obligation to join to the mafia family. Furthermore, a kinship tie may not be the most necessary quality for cooperation since the application of violence may be a more determinative force than kinship among the members of Camorra (Campana & Varese, 2013).

systematic analysis of the role of performance and masculinity and the involvement of these women in criminal activities or the reasons they might resist their own mafia families. Uncovering the stories of mafia women, this study will examine the profiles of different mafia women, offering new perspectives in understanding the influence of performance and masculinity on the gender dynamics of the mafia.

Presenting and narrating the sometimes conflicting stories of different women, this study aims to shed light on the role of masculinity in criminal organizations, particularly in the Italian mafia groups. This article then seeks to clarify how different mafia women acted, or performed, to manage mafia business and control family relations. It will also discuss those women who defied the mafia either through collaborating with the state or standing against the mafia publicly. I raise three main arguments in this paper to contribute to our theoretical knowledge of gender and criminal activity. First, there are more similarities between the performances of men and women because pragmatism and rationality determine the decisions of mafia groups more than conformity and consistency. Second, the inclusion of women in the mafia stems from this pragmatism; particularly when male members are imprisoned or have to flee. The increasing number of mafia women is primarily based on structural change at organizational level rather than the capacity of women to act in a similar way to their male counterparts. This second argument leads logically to the final assertion that the roles of women develop through a performance-focused approach rather than on their feminine or masculine identities. This study proposes three different performance types in order to identify the roles of mafia women; functional, theatrical and cultural while accepting that both men and women perform these roles. After exploring performance through a narrative of thirty-five mafia women, this study mainly concludes that it is the performance of mafiosi masculinity that plays a determinative role in the future of the mafia.

As it is clear in mafia-type organizations, masculinity, or rather the performance of this, is one of the constitutive powers of their domination and the accumulation of power. A pragmatic rationale is an important asset for mafia groups when acting as an 'extension of state' (Catanzaro, 1992, p. 77). Gambetta (1993) expressed this pragmatic dimension through a rational-choice theory and Varese (1994) showed that this pragmatism is not limited to the Sicilian mafia, but it encompasses Russian organized crime groups. The benefits and costs of an initiative, whether a violent massacre or a symbolic threat, are the determinants of the success of illicit enterprises for organized crime groups. As a result, this pragmatic vision is encoded as a regulative force in the decisions of mafia groups to wield their power. The same pragmatic vision has also shaped gender dynamics and the role of masculinity. My arguments do not aim either to naturalize masculinity or to reject the nature of the use of power exercised by men over women. My principal aim is to show that masculinity is not the sole determinant of the success of organized crime groups but that pragmatism and performance influence both the gender dynamics and efficiency of the mafia.

## 2. Rethinking mafia women through masculinity, performance and a criminalized life

Lewis (2007, p. 6) points out that masculinity, as a cultural pattern, '...has as much to do with seeking the approval of men, as it is to do with obtaining the approval of women'. That approval, however, displays a hegemonic character through constituting acts and fosters the articulation of power within the orbit of dominant masculinities. Such a power articulation is more vital in closed and violent social environments such as the mafia. As a result, these articulations function 'not only as constituting the identity of the actor, but as constituting that identity as a compelling illusion, an object of belief' (Butler, 1988, p. 520). The constituting act and its illusions in a masculine ideology limit the awareness of performance. In this context, the performance and its narration gain more importance because 'we will know one another better by entering one another's performances and learning their

grammars and vocabularies' (Schechner & Appel, 1990, p. 1). Turner (1987, p. 13) expresses the relationship between performance and role by stating that 'self is presented through the performance of roles, through performance that breaks roles, and through declaring to a given public that one has undergone a transformation of state and status, been saved or damned, elevated or released.'

Moving from the performance paradigm of Turner, it is crucial to question the relationship of masculinity, crime and identity among women involved in organized crime. Lowell (2013, p. 23) shared many of the views of Victor Turner regarding performance, however, he underlined the rational dimension of human behavior, which distinguishes our performative 'plays' from the ritualistic performance practiced by animals. In this respect, we need to question how rational and pragmatic behaviors regulate social interactions and the resultant performances of mafia men and women. Our response to this question may incorporate gender identity and its intersection with the criminal world, which has authority and pragmatism as its driving forces. Butler (1988, p. 520) states that 'what is called gender identity is a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo. In its very character as performative resides the possibility of contesting its reified status' (Butler, 1988, p. 520). It is clear that criminal groups have their own social sanctions and taboos which influence both their organization and gender dynamics. However, the performance of each woman needs to be explored in a more nuanced way through micro-sociological lenses. Brickell highlighted the reflexively constructed social performance as Butler (1988) had, but called for a more complex analysis of the relationship between performance and subversive masculinity (Brickell, 2005, p. 39) using Goffman's (1959) symbolic resources. Delving into the stories of mafia women and analyzing their roles in each criminal context can help us to grasp the importance of performance and masculinity as separate. As Goffman (1959, p. 19) stated: 'The word person, in its first meaning, is a mask...everyone is always and everywhere, more or less consciously, playing a role...It is in these roles that we know each other; it is in these roles that we know ourselves'. Yet every performance has its own social, cultural and even psychological dynamic and for this reason 'performance magnitudes...are also about extensions across various cultural and personal boundaries' (Schechner, 1988, p. 324).

Naffine (1987) noted in her ground-breaking work that the exclusion of women as victims, and the lack of positive construction of female identity, are the essential factors that marginalize women while concurrently making them into a powerless class. The diverse case-studies here point to women being as violent as male mafiosi members and in doing so sustaining mafiosi masculinity in the absence of men. On the other hand, the profiles of women who reject mafiosi masculinity evidence the possibility of resistance. The gender dichotomy loses its significance because all (regardless of gender) are able to play similar roles; whether they perform mafiosi masculinity or reject it. Previous studies on the relationship of women with crime also highlighted the similarities of criminal behavior between men and women. For instance, comparing the liberation of women with the increases of female offending, Adler (1975) found that women, similar to men, were inclined to commit crime when the circumstances provided the appropriate social atmosphere. Similarly, Simon (1975) claimed that the involvement of women in white-collar crime increased with the participation of women in labor force in the 1960s and the 1970s.

The similarities in the motives of both men and women in their commitment to crime, or in resisting their own families, are much greater than their differences. This is another reason that the nature of performance has more influence than notions of masculinity in determining the mafia's future. Nevertheless, the role of masculinity in violent social environments cannot be denied and crime has a solid and durable capacity to produce violence. This masculinity-crime nexus has long been explored through the internalization of masculine forms during adolescence (Sutherland & Cressey, 1924). The pull of crime in some contexts, as Turner indicates, is determined by the 'Social dramas

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