



DOI: <https://doi.org/10.38035/jgsp.v3i4>
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Women as Couriers of Narcotics: A Reflection of Transnational Organized Crime in Indonesia (A Criminological and Gendered Perspective)

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Abstract: This article examines the growing phenomenon of women being recruited and acting as couriers in transnational narcotics trafficking networks in Indonesia. The study argues that women's participation in this role is not an isolated criminal phenomenon, but rather a reflection or a "shadow" of Transnational Organized Crime (TOC) operations. The analysis highlights how drug syndicates exploit gender stereotypes that perceive women as less suspicious in the eyes of law enforcement, thereby increasing the chances of successful smuggling. The motives for women becoming couriers vary widely, including economic pressure, poverty, deception, and being victims of human trafficking. The article's central conclusion is that female couriers are often merely the "expendable pawns" or the tip of the spear in a much larger and more complex pyramid of criminal enterprise. The rising number of women couriers demonstrates the adaptability and sophistication of TOC syndicates in leveraging social vulnerabilities. Consequently, effective countermeasures require not only a strict law enforcement approach but also policies that address the root causes, such as economic empowerment, social protection, and enhanced international intelligence cooperation to dismantle the mastermind networks operating behind the scenes.

Keyword: Transnational Organized Crime, Women as the "Visible Actors" in Transnational Narcotics Supply Chains, Women's Vulnerabilities to Connect Them to The Criminal Network.

INTRODUCTION

The UNODC World Drug Report 2025 recorded that approximately 300 million people worldwide abuse drugs. This figure has increased by 20% over the past decade, with over 35 million people being drug addicts (the third booklet of the World Drugs Report, 2025). The UNODC also reported a global phenomenon where, as of December 2025, more than 950 new types of substances (including synthetic narcotics) had been identified, representing a 24% increase. During 2024, the Indonesian National Narcotics Board (BNN) uncovered 27 drug networks, and in May 2025, seized 2 tons of methamphetamine in the

Riau Islands. To date, the BNN Laboratory Center has successfully detected 83 New Psychoactive Substances (NPS), 73 of which are already included in the Indonesian Minister of Health Regulation No. 22 of 2020.

Narcotics crimes are a form of Extraordinary Crime and constitute transnational/international organized crime. They pose a serious threat as they can damage the very foundations of a nation's life. The "War on Drugs" towards a "Shining Indonesia" ("Indonesia Bersinar") begins by mobilizing villages across Indonesia. Villages in suburban buffer zones, coastal areas, and those directly bordering neighboring countries are highly vulnerable routes for illicit drug trafficking. Therefore, to realize "Shining Villages" ("Desa Bersinar"), it is essential to encourage all stakeholders to synergize and collaborate. Given that Indonesia is an archipelagic nation with a land area of 1,922,570 km² and a population of approximately 275 million people, it is highly vulnerable to narcotics circulation. The value of narcotics circulation in ASEAN reaches IDR 110 trillion, with 43% of it circulating in Indonesia, claiming the lives of 15,000 addicts per year.

Based on a 2023 study by BNN in cooperation with the University of Indonesia's Center for Health Research regarding the National Survey on the Development of Drug Abuse in Indonesia, the prevalence rate of drug abuse among the productive-age population, specifically among students, was surveyed across 13 provincial capitals in 2018 and all 34 provinces in 2019. The rate reached 3.2%, equivalent to 2.29 million people. Compared to 2017, BNN recorded a drug abuse prevalence rate of 1.77% (approx. 3.3 million people) in the 15-64 age group, and 1.80% (3,419,188 people) in 2019. The 2023 national survey showed a prevalence rate of 1.73%, or about 3.33 million people. Meanwhile, the one-year usage prevalence rate among workers is 2.1%, equivalent to over 1.5 million people. Alarmingly, around 312,000 Indonesian adolescents aged 15-25 have been exposed to narcotics. Other victims of abuse include Civil Servants (ASN), members of the Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI) and Indonesian National Police (Polri), regional heads, legislative members, households, and low-income communities. The financial losses for the country are immense, reaching IDR 63.1 trillion per year.

Illicit drug trafficking has permeated all areas, not only in cities (entertainment venues, residential areas, communities, mining, plantations) but also in Islamic boarding schools (pesantren). Mapping this out significantly shows how widespread drug circulation has become. Traffickers use various modus operandi to create access for users; for example, in mining and plantation areas, they sell in small quantities or "retail" (ecer), where a single straw or hit costs only IDR 20,000 to IDR 50,000. This is a distinct phenomenon in the pattern of drug trafficking. The pretext is that drug consumption boosts stamina, both at home and in the workplace, for mining and plantation workers. The majority of drugs, over 80%, originate from abroad and enter primarily via sea/water routes. Women and Narcotics Dominate Correctional Facilities Released highly revealing data (Ministry of Law and Human Rights, 2022):

1. Total population of convicts and child offenders: 277,114 people.
2. Number of female convicts: 17,260 people.
3. Of that number, approximately 70% of female convicts (around 12,082 people) were serving sentences for NARCOTICS cases.

Moreover, the National Narcotics Board (BNN), in its various reports, including in 2023, stated that women are often targeted and victimized by international narcotics syndicates to become couriers.

As an archipelagic nation, Indonesia faces infiltration by transnational crime networks through various borders—including Aceh, the Riau Islands, North Kalimantan, North Sulawesi, Bali, NTT, Maluku, and Papua—using sea, land, and air routes. These networks are

supplied by international hubs known as the Golden Triangle (Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Thailand), the Golden Crescent (Middle East), and the Golden Peacock (Latin America).

A common modus operandi in drug trafficking is the exploitation of women as drug couriers. The drug business is becoming increasingly uncontrollable as producers and dealers utilize women as couriers. In almost all countries, the primary cause of women's involvement in the global drug chain is poverty. Poverty not only marginalizes women in various aspects of life as a gender issue but also drags them into criminality.

METHOD

This research employs a qualitative method with a library research approach. All analyses were conducted by reviewing various relevant secondary data sources, such as UNODC reports, official BNN data, laws and regulations, criminology books, scientific journals, and credible online news. This approach was chosen because the research does not involve field data collection but rather focuses on an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of women as drug couriers in the context of transnational organized crime. Through critical exploration and analysis of this literature, this study seeks to identify patterns, vulnerability factors, syndicate modus operandi, and structural linkages that influence women's involvement in international drug networks.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Modus Operandi in Drug Trafficking Utilizing Women as Couriers

The modus operandi in drug trafficking involves the exploitation of women as drug couriers. The drug business is becoming increasingly uncontrollable as producers and dealers utilize women as couriers. In almost all countries, the primary cause of women's involvement in the global drug supply chain is poverty. Poverty not only marginalizes women in various aspects of life as a gender issue but also drags them into criminality. Other causative factors from a criminological perspective are based on external factors, personal factors, social environment, education, and economic pressure. The urgent need to make a living, coupled with promises of lucrative financial rewards, further strengthens their decision. From an experiential standpoint, female drug couriers often face high risks such as arrest, social stigma, and vulnerability to exploitation by drug networks.

Transnational Organized Crime as the Operating Framework

The statement "does not view the phenomenon of female couriers as an isolated local crime, but as a manifestation or 'shadow' of networked narcotics syndicates operating across national borders" positions the entire issue within the framework of Transnational Organized Crime (TOC).

1. Rejecting the "Lone Wolf" Narrative

The traditional, simplistic view might see a female drug courier as an individual making a solitary, criminal decision. The article argues that the courier's role cannot be understood by looking at her in isolation. Her actions are not the root of the problem; they are a symptom of a much larger and more powerful system.

2. The "Shadow" Metaphor

A shadow is not the object itself, but a visible effect caused by it.

- a) The Object (The Real Problem): Sophisticated, wealthy, and elusive transnational drug syndicates.
- b) The Shadow (The Visible Symptom): The female courier arrested at the airport.
- c) The courier is the visible, tangible, and often expendable part of the operation that law enforcement intercepts. Meanwhile, the syndicate leaders—the "object" casting the shadow—often remain hidden, secure, and free to recruit replacements.

3. Key Characteristics of this Transnational Framework

- a) Cross-Border Operations: These syndicates are not confined to one country. They manage a global supply chain—sourcing drugs, transporting them through transit countries, and delivering them to consumer markets like Indonesia. The female courier is the final link in this international logistics chain.
- b) Strategic Exploitation: Syndicates do not recruit randomly. They deliberately and strategically exploit specific vulnerabilities to create this "shadow":
- c) Economic Vulnerability: Targeting impoverished women or those in desperate financial situations.
- d) Gender Stereotypes: Exploiting the (often incorrect) perception that women are less suspicious, naiver, or less likely to be thoroughly searched by authorities.
- e) Deception and Coercion: Luring women with false promises of employment or entrapping them through debt bondage.

4. Structural Insulation:

The use of female couriers is a business model designed to protect the core of the organization. If the courier is caught, the syndicate loses a small investment but its leadership, logistics coordinators, and financiers remain intact. The courier, often lacking high-level information, becomes a dead end for investigators.

In principle, this issue shifts the blame and the focus. The primary "perpetrator" is not the individual woman carrying the drugs, but the powerful, faceless Transnational Criminal Organization that manipulates her circumstances. Therefore, an effective solution must target the syndicate itself through international police cooperation, financial tracking, and intelligence sharing, rather than solely punishing the low-level couriers who represent merely the "shadow" of the real crime.

Women as the "Visible Actors" in Transnational Narcotics Supply Chains

The phrase "women as visible actors" highlights the critical and strategic role forced upon them within the structure of Transnational Organized Crime (TOC). They are the human interface between the hidden, powerful criminal syndicate and the legitimate world of airports, borders, and law enforcement.

1. The "Tip of the Spear" in the Supply Chain

In a transnational narcotics network, the supply chain is complex and segmented. It involves producers, financiers, logistics coordinators, corrupt officials, and finally, the couriers who physically move the product.

- a. The Invisible Core: The kingpins, financiers, and coordinators operate in the shadows, insulated by layers of hierarchy and distance. They are the "invisible" decision-makers.
- b. The Visible Tip: The female courier is the one who bears the risk of direct exposure. She is the person who checks in for a flight, walks through customs, and interacts with authorities. Her arrest is the point where the criminal operation becomes "visible" to the public and the legal system.

2. Deliberate Exploitation for "Low Visibility"

Paradoxically, women are made "visible actors" precisely because they are perceived by criminal syndicates as having "low visibility" to law enforcement. This is a strategic exploitation of gender stereotypes:

- a. Stereotype of Innocence/Helplessness: There is a widespread, though often incorrect, bias that women are less likely to be involved in serious crimes like international drug trafficking. They may be perceived as tourists, students, or mothers, making it easier for them to blend in.

- b. **Reduced Scrutiny:** This perceived helplessness can lead to profiling bias, where security and customs officials may subject female travelers to less frequent or less thorough searches than their male counterparts.
- c. **A Calculated Risk:** Syndicates use women as a calculated risk. They bet that their couriers will pass through security checks with looser scrutiny, making them a more reliable, though expendable, method of transport.

3. The "Expendable Shield" Strategy

By using women as visible actors on the front lines, TOC syndicates create a protective buffer for themselves.

- a. **Limited Knowledge:** A captured courier typically knows very little. She might know her handler's pseudonym and a drop-off location, but rarely the identities of the higher-ups in the network. She is a dead end for investigators.
- b. **Taking the Fall:** If the operation is intercepted, it is the "visible" woman who is arrested, prosecuted, and imprisoned. The media and legal system focus on her, while the true architects of the crime remain safe and free to recruit another "visible actor."

In conclusion, describing women as "visible actors" in this context means they are the deliberately exposed, high-risk, and ultimately expendable component of a sophisticated criminal enterprise. Their visibility is not a sign of their power within the network, but rather proof of their vulnerability and their role as strategic pawns used to protect the powerful, invisible core of the transnational crime syndicate.

The Exploitation of Female Vulnerabilities to Connect Them to Criminal Networks

1. The Deliberate Exploitation of Vulnerability: The Syndicate's Recruitment Strategy

The statement that "syndicates deliberately exploit the vulnerabilities of women (economic, gender stereotypes, deception) to recruit and run their operations" describes a calculated and predatory business model. This exploitation is the critical link that connects the desperate or deceived individual woman to the powerful, hidden criminal syndicate.

1) Economic Vulnerability: The Primary Leverage

Syndicates specifically target women in precarious financial situations.

- a. **Poverty and Debt:** They prey on women living in poverty, single mothers, or those burdened by overwhelming debt. The promise of a single payment that could solve their financial problems is an irresistible lure.
- b. **Lack of Opportunity:** In regions with high female unemployment or limited economic opportunities, drug courier work is presented as a rare and lucrative chance for income.
- c. **The "Easy Money" Trap:** Recruiters frame the job as a simple, one-time task with high rewards, deliberately downplaying the extreme risks and legal consequences.

2) Exploitation of Gender Stereotypes: A Strategic Weapon

This is perhaps the most cynical part of the recruitment and operational strategy. Syndicates don't just use women; they actively weaponize societal perceptions of women.

- a. **Perception of Innocence:** They exploit the deep-seated bias that women are inherently less criminal, less violent, and more trustworthy. A female traveler is often perceived as a tourist, a student, or a visitor, not a drug mule.
- b. **Reduced Law Enforcement Scrutiny:** Knowing that law enforcement and customs officials may operate on these same biases (leading to less frequent or less thorough searches of women), syndicates actively recruit them to lower the risk of interception. The woman's gender is used as an "invisibility cloak" for the contraband.
- c. **Using "Respectable" Cover:** Syndicates might provide them with props that reinforce a harmless image, such as traveling with a child, carrying religious items, or dressing conservatively to better blend in and avoid suspicion.

3) Deception and Coercion: The Invisible Chains

Many women are not fully aware of what they are getting into, or are trapped once they agree.

- a. The Bait-and-Switch: Some are recruited for what they believe are legitimate jobs abroad or as domestic workers, only to be forced into carrying drugs upon arrival.
- b. Debt Bondage: They may be tricked into accepting an "advance" payment for a fake job and then told they must work as couriers to pay off the unpayable debt.
- c. Threats and Intimidation: Once involved, coercion takes over. Syndicates threaten violence against the woman or her family if she backs out or fails to complete the mission.

2. The Connection: From Vulnerable Individual to Criminal Pawn

This exploitation is the essential link between the visible actor (the female courier) and the invisible syndicate:

- a) The syndicate identifies a vulnerability (e.g., a poor, unemployed single mother).
- b) They offer a "solution" tailored to that vulnerability (a large sum of money for a "simple" trip).
- c) They use her inherent characteristics (her gender) as a key operational tool to minimize risk.
- d) They create dependency and fear through deception and coercion, ensuring her compliance.

In this dynamic, the woman is not a willing partner in crime in the same way a syndicate kingpin is. She is a resource—a disposable asset that is strategically exploited. Her vulnerability is the input, and her role as a "successful" courier is the desired output for the criminal organization. This process ensures a steady supply of replaceable operatives who bear all the risk, while the syndicate itself remains protected, profitable, and in the shadows.

From a criminological perspective, other contributing factors include external influences, personal factors, peer pressure, education, and economic pressure. An urgent need to meet living expenses, coupled with the promise of lucrative financial rewards, strongly influences their decision. From an experiential standpoint, female drug couriers often face high risks, including arrest, social stigma, and vulnerability to exploitation by the drug networks.

CONCLUSION

This article concludes that the involvement of women as narcotics couriers is inextricably linked to structural, economic, and social factors. Furthermore, spousal dominance in domestic relationships also influences this decision, where women are often in a subordinate position that limits their access and choices. Therefore, addressing the issue of women as narcotics couriers must be done comprehensively, not only through law enforcement but also through empowerment, education, and sustainable social protection.

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