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Review Article

Causes Leading to Criminal Behavior among Women: An Overview

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Abstract

Criminal behaviour among women is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon influenced by psychological, sociological, and economic factors. Women's pathways to crime differ from those of male offenders as they are often a result of childhood trauma, mental health disorders, domestic violence, economic marginalization, and substance use/abuse. In this Research paper, these factors are examined by reviewing current criminological theories and a selection of empirical studies. The paper also emphasizes the transformative power of gender-responsive policies and gender responsive rehabilitation programs designed for women offenders. It synthesizes previous work across disciplines and makes the case for the need for trauma-informed programming and economic support systems to reduce female recidivism. It also offers suggestions for future research and policies that may more effectively address the different dynamics women face in the criminal justice system. These results highlight the need for a greater gender lens in the study and prevention of female offending, and suggest that early intervention, mental health services, and socio-economic empowerment strategies are integral to the needs of women who offend.

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INTRODUCTION

In the last several decades, as female criminality has increased, the role of gender in crime has moved closer to the forefront as an explanation for women involved in crime ^[1]. Over the years, criminology has been primarily male, with the theories and the law constructed on a male backdrop. Yet, recent research

indicates that women follow different crime pathways compared to men. Firstly, one of the motive differences held by male and female offenders is that males often commit crimes for social aggression, competition, and dominance whereas female offenders are more likely to be motivated by economic needs, victimization from an intimate partner, psychological

distress, and coerced by a male partner ^[2]. So this re-interpretation underlines the requirement of a gender-sensitive criminal justice system that recognizes the specific biological and social, psychological, and economic disadvantages putting women in similar threat. While many policies in the system have changed, the system itself is fundamentally still built around a punitive, old model that does not account for the role that the criminalization of women plays in broader public health issues. The reality is that many women who commit crimes may be victims themselves, where experienced with trauma, domestic violence, poverty or systemic discrimination have impacted their mental, emotional or economic situation. Female inmates are often convicted of non-violent crimes, including property crimes, drug crimes, and fraud due to financial circumstantial or due to an illness such as an addiction ^[3]. The reality is that relatively few women choose a life of crime, yet the justice system effectively ignores the underlying factors that contribute to female criminality, resulting in high rates of re-offending, and continual cycles of imprisonment. In light of these realities, there is a need to examine the factors that drive women into crime in order to create policies that support recovery, reintegration and social acceptance of women whose lives have crossed the tracks of the law.

OBJECTIVES

With this background, the purpose of this study is to examine criminological, psychological and socio-economic factors relevant to female criminal behavior. The study will focus on the impact of childhood trauma, substance abuse, domestic violence, and economic deprivation on how women criminals are created. It will also investigate theoretical explanations for women's involvement in crime and the relevance of those explanations today. It will also incorporate empirical research that has examined women's trajectories to offending and the success of gender-responsive treatment. The present work aims to synthesize these insights to add to the continuing discussion about gender and crime and offer direction for more effective, evidence-based practice. This makes the case for gender responsive policies for female offenders as the most needed to ensure non-reoffending and successful reintegration into society by offering rehabilitation rather than punishment. Utilizing a systematic study of existing literature from peer-Researched journals as well as forensic psychology and criminology, this analyses the existing literature. This identifiable methodology draws on previous empirical research regarding female offenders, gender-responsive policies, and modern criminological theory to develop a cohesive explanation for why women engage in criminal behavior. A comparative study between male and female criminality is also undertaken to address the impact of sex on criminality. The literature of present work is organized according to major themes: psychological indicators such as childhood trauma and mental illness; socio-economic factors like poverty and unemployment; and systemic aspects of the criminal justice system. Using empirical data on trends in female incarceration, this research seeks to provide a reframing of the legal challenges facing

women in the system ^[4]. The findings from this study will provide policymakers, researchers, and practitioners with the necessary information to develop interventions that are sustainable, target the root causes of female offending, and promote rehabilitation.

Key Factors of Female Criminality

1. Psychological and Developmental Factors

In addition to other causes, psychological and developmental factors contribute to the female criminal. Exposing the common threads of abuse and neglect: research findings have long shown that children exposed to trauma, abuse, and neglect are more likely to enter a life of crime ^[5]. Delinquent girls, and women more generally, whose have experienced violence physically, emotionally and sexually, have invariably been shown to be at people risk of indulging in pandemic delinquent behavior. High numbers of female offenders have experienced significant trauma in childhood and present with dissociation, self-harm and emotion regulation difficulties explained as avoidant coping behavior leading to criminogenic behavior ^[6]. Mental health disorders are another factor that is tied to female criminality. Research suggests that female inmates experience much higher rates of depression, anxiety, PTSD, and schizophrenia than males in the criminal justice system ^[7]. These women are often suffering from untreated or improperly managed psychiatric illnesses that lead into high-risk activities, including substance abuse and violent behavior. These disorders and the absence of adequate mental health care often led women to reoffend and repeat cycles between the community and incarceration.

2. Socio-economic and Structural Influences

Some of the primary factors driving in to crime include extreme economic instability and lack of access to educational and employment opportunities. Working-class women are often driven to engage in unlawful activities such as robbery, deception or prostitution to subsidize their costs of living ^[8]. Studies shows that less educated, less skilled women will turn to crime at a significantly higher rate because there are few legal ways to make a living. Such socio-economic disadvantage is self-reinforcing – increasing the chances they will be imprisoned in the first place, thus continuing the cycle of poverty. Another factor driving female criminality is employment hurdles. The issue is especially dire for those from marginalized communities, or those nearing completion of a criminal sentence, with systemic employment discrimination, disqualifying criminal histories and reduced wages and opportunities across sectors ^[9]. When this happens, many women become more dependent on criminal networks, abusive partners, or illegal trades to meet their financial needs due to economic marginalization. Their precariousness regarding to crime and re-offending are further magnified by inaccessibility to stable housing, childcare, and legal financial assistance.

3. Gender Based Violence and Victimization

In contrast, The Guardian's commentary specifically mentions gender-based violence, which is still arguably the most significant contributor to female crime. Many women facing domestic violence, coercion, and intimate partner violence are driven to crime either as victim-survivors forced into survival crimes or by abusive partners. A large number of female criminal offenders who had the experience of being a victim of crime at their childhood had a process of carrying out illegal acts based on the conduct of men who included their partners as well, making them victims of either drug trafficking, robbery or prostitution. Studies show many women in prison at some points were victims of domestic violence, and some even retaliated against their abuser, so they ended up in prison.

Female paths to crime also include sexual exploitation and human trafficking. A multitude of women, especially from the lower socioeconomic classes, fall into human trafficking and are either compelled into sex work or pressured into drug offenses ^[10]. As the reason behind women becoming victims of trafficking often is low income and poor social circumstances, traffickers use these aspects to earn women's trust by providing them with better job opportunities and a more prosperous life leaving faith but in reality, they tether them into the vicious circles of exploitation and crime. For a lot of these women, once they're caught up in these networks, it's incredibly hard to get away from them because of threats, lack of legal protection or they might think if they go to the police, then the police will be open to arresting them.

4. Criminal Networks and Substance Abuse.

Another major reason for the criminal behavior of female sex is substance abuse. Just like women who commit crime, most women are drug and alcohol dependent, often to deaden the pain of trauma and/or mental illness. For instance, female substance-dependent individuals often get involved in crime or antisocial behavior (when compared to men), about drug trafficking, theft or prostitution. Non-violent drug arrests and drug possession crimes have contributed to female incarceration as documented in research literature. Furthermore, female offenders sometimes get involved with criminal organizations, gangs, drug cartels and human traffickers. Women can participate in subordinate positions in criminal organizations; they are often used to carry out important functions, e.g., transporting drugs, money laundering, as well as through deceptive fraud schemes, agent ^[11]. Often, they are used or forced into criminal organizations by powerful men in these organizations. Because organized crime has a specific hierarchical structure, women in organized crime are essentially low-hanging fruit for law enforcement, as they are more easily prosecuted, and law enforcement has better chances at securing a conviction against a woman in organized crime than a male counterpart simply because of the nature of organized crime. Broadly, the reasons for challenging female criminality are intertwined, such that trauma leads to vulnerability to economic hardship, which leads to increased risk of male violence and exposure to crime. Redressing these issues should involve

gender-sensitive criminal justice, including trauma-informed responses, economic empowerment initiatives, and safeguards for women at risk of criminalization.

Gender-Responsive Criminological Perspectives and Interventions

Gender-Responsive Criminology and Justice:

1) Theoretical Perspectives of Women and Crime

This is particularly evident in traditional criminological theories that have typically fared poorly in explaining female crimes; many stem from research by and large, focused predominantly on male offending. Gender-specific approaches have emerged in recent years, providing greater insight into the specific factors relating to the role of women within crime. Pathways theory, which outlines how women's trauma and abuse history, economic marginalization, and substance dependence intersect to drive their criminal behavior, represents one of the most widely influential conceptual frameworks. The argument here is that the majority of women engaging in crime is not criminals by nature, but are attempting to escape an abusive or damaging situation, or to treat some order of psychological pain through crime. The nature of well-documented trauma informs the ways in which women enter the criminal justice system, which often does not understand and/or take account of their distinct experiences and pathways into the justice system, considering personal background as well as structural inequalities and socio-economic disadvantage. Feminist criminology is also significant as it emphasizes the importance of gendered systems of female criminality. According to this perspective, patriarchal structures and gender disparities frequently drive females into crime, especially via socio-economic disempowerment, victimization, and constrained societal mobility ^[11]. This argument is furthered by intersectionality's which acknowledges that race, class, and gender converge to create special oppressions, specifically for women of lower-income and minority groups. Feminist criminology advocates for the reform of the justice system to be more rehabilitative rather than punitive for women, and by understanding that many female offenders are victims before they become offenders. Feminist criminologists believe policies should focus on addressing the causes of female criminality rather than punishing women.

2) Rehabilitation and Policy Interventions

There has been increasing awareness that, due to the distinct risk factors involved in female offending, effective rehabilitation programs need to be both gender-specific and gender-responsive. Gender-specific risk assessments that consider women's trauma histories, mental health issues, and socio-economic challenges are thus a focal point for reform. Traditional assessment tools had been created with male offenders as subjects and would then have gendered a second time, assessing female offenders using faulty measures and often resulting in inadequate intervention based on inaccurate risk assessments; in contrast, gender-responsive assessments focus on factors such as victimization history, parenting responsibilities, and relational pathways to criminal behavior to provide more accurate risk assessments and ability to intervene.

Trauma-informed rehabilitation programs are another essential intervention, considering that many women offenders have experienced severe abuse and trauma. These programs combine mental health treatment and substance use, and cognitive behavioral therapies specifically based on women ^[12]. What happens here is that for those women with trauma history who receive trauma-informed care in correctional settings, they seem to recidivate less as this approach helps them solve the underlying emotional and psychological needs that lead to criminal behavior in the first place. Breaking cycles of reoffending requires rehabilitation, not retribution. These are some of the policy reforms that must change if we are to get away from the reliance on incarcerating non-violent female offenders. Alternatively, diversion programs, community supervision, or rehabilitative sentencing could have been used, which are shown to be effective at the safe reintegration of women without the adverse long-term consequences of incarceration ^[13]. These policies know that incarceration is not something that benefits society, as people leave prisons and cannot find jobs because of a record and so often return to the life of poverty from whence they came, especially if they have children, and are therefore putting them into an even worse socio-economic situation. Providing greater access to mental health services, housing support, and education experiences in the justice system would go a long way in helping rehabilitate female offenders.

3) Effective Programs for Recidivism Reduction

A well-planned system of reintegration is essential to successfully tackling recidivism in female offenders. Education and job training are among the most effective interventions, as they provide women with the skills they need to find decent jobs after their release. The challenge of finding affordable housing also looms large among female offenders, as many have few marketable skills or education, previous criminal records, and a still-male-dominated labor market that discriminates against women. By giving women access to job training programs, financial literacy courses, and entrepreneurship opportunities, we can empower them to seek out legitimate means of income instead of falling back into crime. Community-based reentry programs ensuring housing support, mental health counseling, and social services are also important for successful reintegration ^[14]. By assisting women to rebuild their lives in a safe, semi-structured environment with access to healthcare and opportunities to explore hobbies and gain skills under the guidance of volunteers, these programs have a positive impact on millions of women globally.

Finally, the presence of social support systems also helps allay recidivism. The majority of female offenders would have an arguably dysfunctional family life or no family at all, as well as not having a very strong support system, which may lead them to an increased sense of isolation and use the criminal world as a support system instead. Peer support groups, mentorship programs, and family reintegration programs are important elements of building a sense of belonging and positive community involvement. Research finds that involvement in social support and emotional support after release reduces rates of criminal behavior among women criminals by as much as 71% ^[15]. The solution should be a comprehensive gender

responsive approach that not only seeks to rehabilitate but also to empower, and provide long-term solutions to female criminality. With trauma-informed care, educational opportunities, and community-based interventions, policymakers and practitioners can make safe reentry pathways for recidivism-ending, successful reintegration into society possible. By adopting rehabilitative solutions instead of punitive responses, we sever the cyclical nature of female criminality and we pave the way towards sustainable reintegration.

CONCLUSION

Key Findings

Psychopathological, social, and economic factors underlie female criminality. Among the driving factors are childhood trauma, mental health disorders, poverty, domestic violence, and substance abuse. While men may engage in criminal activity under their own volition, for many women, their entry into the criminal justice system is by way of being coerced, are financially destitute, or with survival being a priority. Justice systems that have been primarily developed with the predominant conception of a male offender in mind overlook these specific pathways, reinforcing why gender-responsive approaches are warranted. Such a trauma-informed and rehabilitative approach is invaluable in breaking cycles of female criminality and preventing recidivism.

Policy Recommendations

Mental health support and trauma recovery services need to be expanded in both correctional and community settings, locally and nationally, to achieve better outcomes for the female offender population. To avoid recidivism, economic opportunities like vocational training and employment assistance should be made a priority. Moreover, legal frameworks need to integrate gender-sensitive risk analysis and alternatives to imprisonment for non-violent female offenders. Both to ensure long-term success and to avoid the need for incarceration, rehabilitative sentencing and community-based reintegration programs should be implemented. Further, more investigations are required to ask how life experience contributes to the impact on women's criminality through time. They can also shed light on systems of social control and their relation to gender-based violence against women across criminal justice systems around the world. This also aids in creating female-specific recidivism prediction models, which can be used to align the best practice intervention program to be implemented, confirming that evidence-based practices and policies are used to implement these programs to women in the criminal justice system.

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