

Sociological Determinants of Female Criminality: A Critical Analytical Review of the Literature

المحددات السوسيولوجية لإجرام المرأة: مراجعة تحليلية للدراسات السابقة

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Abstract:

الملخص:

This study offers a sociological analysis of female criminality through a systematic review of Arab, international, and local research published between 2003 and 2025.

Findings suggest that female criminality results from structural interactions among poverty, family disintegration, gender-based violence, and changing gender roles. Cross-contextual comparisons highlight variations in explanatory factors, underscoring the need for multidimensional, gender-sensitive preventive policies.

تهدف الدراسة إلى تقديم تحليل سوسيولوجي لعوامل إجرام المرأة عبر مراجعة منهجية لدراسات عربية وأجنبية ومحلية خلال الفترة 2003–2025.

يبين النتائج أن إجرام المرأة نتاج تفاعل بنيوي بين الفقر، والتفكك الأسري، والعنف القائم على النوع الاجتماعي، وتغير الأدوار الاجتماعية. كما أظهرت اختلاف تموضع العوامل تبعاً للسياقات الثقافية، وأوصت بمقاربة وقائية متعددة الأبعاد تراعي الخصوصية الجندرية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الجريمة النسوية، الضغط الاجتماعي، التفكك الأسري، العنف الجندري، التحليل السوسيولوجي.

Keywords: Female Criminality, Social Strain, Family Disintegration, Gender-Based Violence, Sociological Analysis.

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, crime has undergone substantial qualitative transformations extending beyond fluctuations in rates to shifts in structural patterns, forms of offending, and the social groups involved. Criminal activity is no longer viewed as an exclusively male domain; women increasingly participate not only in property and drug offenses but also, in some contexts, in violent crime.

These developments call for a sociological reassessment of female criminality that transcends reductionist biological or psychological explanations. Women's involvement in crime must be situated within broader social structures, economic change, and gendered power relations. Accordingly, this study critically reviews existing scholarship to identify the structural and cultural determinants of female criminality and to advance an integrated analytical framework for understanding women's pathways into crime.

2 - Research Problem

In recent decades, female criminality has undergone significant transformations that challenge classical criminological assumptions which traditionally confined crime to the male sphere. Empirical studies conducted across different social contexts indicate that women are no longer marginal actors within the criminal domain. Instead, they are increasingly involved in diverse forms of offending, particularly property-related crimes, drug offenses, and certain types of domestic violence (Naima Saeed, 2018) . However, a critical review of the literature reveals substantial variation in the explanatory frameworks adopted to interpret female criminal behavior. Some studies emphasize structural economic pressures—such as poverty, unemployment, and low educational attainment—as primary drivers of women's involvement in crime(Naima Saeed, 2018) .Other research highlights the role of family disintegration, domestic violence, and gender-based inequality as criminogenic environments that shape women's pathways into offending (Mohamed, 2022, p. 487)

Moreover, local Algerian studies point to a qualitative shift in the patterns of female criminality, particularly within urban settings, where women have begun to engage in offenses previously considered predominantly male, including organized theft(Djamai, 2018, p.45). Parallel

findings associate property crimes with weakened family control mechanisms and deteriorating socio-economic conditions .

Despite the richness of these contributions, much of the existing literature addresses economic, familial, and gender-related variables in isolation, with limited attention to how these factors interact within a unified social structure. Poverty, for instance, does not operate independently of family dynamics or gendered power relations; rather, it intersects with them in producing complex and context-dependent criminal trajectories. Accordingly, the central research question guiding this study is: What are the sociological determinants of female criminality as reflected in previous studies, and how do economic, familial, and gender-related factors interact in shaping women's involvement in crime across different social contexts?

2-1 - Study Objectives:

The present study aims to develop an integrative sociological analysis of female criminality through a critical review of previous empirical and theoretical research conducted across different socio-cultural contexts. More specifically, the study seeks to achieve the following objectives:

To systematically analyze the socio-economic determinants associated with female criminality, with particular attention to poverty, unemployment, and educational marginalization as structural sources of strain.

To examine the role of family dynamics and social control mechanisms—including family disintegration, domestic violence, and weakened informal regulation—in shaping women's involvement in crime.

To explore the impact of gendered power relations and shifting gender roles on the transformation of female criminal patterns, especially in rapidly changing urban environments.

To identify patterns of convergence and divergence across foreign, Arab, and local (Algerian) studies in explaining female criminal behavior.

To construct an integrative sociological framework that moves beyond reductionist explanations and accounts for the interaction between economic, familial, and gender-related factors in producing female criminal trajectories.

2-2 - Contribution of the Study:

This study advances an integrative sociological framework for understanding female criminality by bridging strain theory and feminist criminology. While strain theory (Merton, 1938) conceptualizes crime as a response to structurally blocked opportunities, the present analysis emphasizes that such strain is gendered in both its distribution and consequences. Women's exposure to economic marginalization, caregiving burdens, and restricted access to legitimate resources intersects with gendered power asymmetries, domestic violence, and patriarchal social control (Chesney-Lind, 1997). By synthesizing these perspectives, the study moves beyond reductionist accounts and proposes a structurally grounded, gender-sensitive interpretation capable of explaining the complexity and contextual variability of female criminal behavior.

2.3. Conceptual Clarifications

Female offender: A woman who has intentionally committed a criminal act and has been convicted and sentenced to a custodial penalty in accordance with the offense she committed. (Mazouz & Mezwahr, 2018, p. 159)

Crime: From a sociological perspective, crime is defined as a form of conduct that contradicts the collective conscience of a given society. It encompasses any individual or collective act that constitutes a violation of the norms of social control endorsed by the community, as expressed through its prevailing values, traditions, and customary rules (Matuq, 2014, p.27).

Factors: These refer to external stimuli and precipitating influences that activate internal motives within the individual, leading to intentional behavior. They constitute external triggers that both arouse and, in certain contexts, satisfy the underlying motive driving the action (Chauhan, 2024, p. 19).

3. Theoretical Foundations:

In order to construct a coherent sociological interpretation of female criminality, this study draws upon three major theoretical traditions: strain theory, feminist criminology, and social control perspectives. These theoretical foundations provide the conceptual lens through which the empirical findings of the reviewed studies are interpreted.

3.1. Strain Theory and Structural Pressure

Strain theory constitutes one of the foundational structural explanations of crime. Merton (1938) conceptualized crime as an adaptive response to the disjunction between culturally prescribed goals and institutionally available means. When access to legitimate opportunities is structurally constrained, individuals may resort to alternative modes of adaptation, including innovation through illegitimate means (Merton, 1938).

However, classical strain theory did not explicitly account for the gendered distribution of structural strain. Women's access to education, employment, property, and institutional power is often mediated by patriarchal norms and caregiving expectations. Consequently, structural strain must be understood as gendered in both its production and its lived experience.

3.2. Feminist Criminology and Gendered Pathways

Feminist criminology emerged as a corrective to androcentric criminological theory. Chesney-Lind (1997) argues that female criminality cannot be interpreted outside the context of gender-based violence, economic marginalization, and relational subordination. Women's pathways into crime are frequently shaped by cumulative experiences of abuse, trauma, dependency, and structural exclusion (Chesney-Lind, 1997).

This perspective reframes female offending not as deviance from normative femininity, but as a socially situated response to intersecting vulnerabilities embedded within gender hierarchies.

3.3. Social Control and Disorganization

Social control perspectives emphasize the importance of relational bonds and informal regulation. Weak attachment to family institutions, exposure to domestic instability, and residence in socially disorganized communities increase the likelihood of deviant adaptation. When family systems lose their regulatory and protective capacity, structural pressures are more likely to translate into criminal behavior.

Taken together, these theoretical traditions provide an integrative framework in which economic marginalization, family disorganization, and gendered inequality interact structurally rather than operate independently.

4. Study Procedures:

4.1. Research Design

This study adopts a systematic literature review (SLR) design to examine the sociological determinants of female criminality across diverse socio-cultural contexts. The SLR approach was selected to ensure methodological transparency, analytical rigor, and replicability in the identification, selection, appraisal, and synthesis of existing empirical and theoretical research. The review covers studies published between 2003 and 2025, a period characterized by significant transformations in gender roles, socio-economic structures, and crime patterns.

4.2. Search Strategy

The literature search was conducted between January and May 2025 using major academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and ERIC, in addition to selected Arab university repositories to ensure regional representation.

Search strings were constructed using combinations of key terms in English and Arabic, including: “Female Criminality,” “Women Offenders,” “Sociological Determinants,” “Gender-Based Violence and Crime,” “Family Disintegration and Crime,” “Economic Strain Theory,” as well as their Arabic equivalents. Boolean operators (AND, OR) were applied to refine and structure the search process. The initial search yielded 94 records.

4.3. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To ensure analytical coherence and methodological quality, the following inclusion criteria were applied:

- Publication date between 2003 and 2025.
- Explicit focus on female criminality from a sociological, structural, or feminist criminological perspective.
- Clear methodological design (qualitative, quantitative, mixed methods, or systematic review).
- Examination of at least one of the three core dimensions: economic determinants, family/social dynamics, or gender-related factors.
- Publication in peer-reviewed journals or recognized academic theses.

Exclusion criteria included:

- Studies addressing legal or psychological aspects without sociological analysis.
- Non-peer-reviewed reports or opinion-based articles.
- Studies lacking methodological clarity.
- Duplicate records.

4.4. Screening and Selection Process

The screening process followed PRISMA-guided stages. After removing duplicates ($n = 19$), 75 records remained. Title and abstract screening led to the exclusion of 38 studies due to insufficient relevance to the sociological framework of the review. The remaining 37 full-text articles were assessed for eligibility. Following detailed evaluation against the inclusion criteria, 22 studies were excluded for limited theoretical relevance or methodological weakness.

The final empirical corpus consisted of 15 studies published between 2003 and 2025. These studies were selected based on methodological rigor, theoretical relevance, and contextual diversity.

In addition to the empirical corpus, foundational theoretical works (Merton, 1938; Chesney-Lind, 1997) were incorporated to construct the analytical framework of the study. These theoretical sources were not included in the PRISMA quantitative screening process, as they serve conceptual grounding rather than empirical evidence. This distinction ensures methodological transparency while maintaining theoretical depth.

4.5. Quality Appraisal and Data Extraction

Each study was assessed using qualitative appraisal indicators, including clarity of theoretical framework, methodological rigor, data adequacy, analytical coherence, and relevance to the core dimensions of the review.

A structured coding matrix was developed to extract and organize data across the following categories: geographical context, research design, type of crime examined, economic determinants, family/social factors, gender-related dimensions, theoretical framework, and principal findings.

4.6. Data Synthesis

The analysis employed thematic synthesis to identify recurring patterns and conceptual convergences across studies. Findings were organized into three major analytical domains—economic marginalization,

family disorganization, and gendered structural inequality—followed by an integrative interpretation emphasizing structural interaction among these determinants.

5. Sociological Determinants of Female Criminality: An Expanded Analytical Discussion:

A comparative reading of the empirical studies included in this review reveals that female criminality does not emerge as an isolated behavioral phenomenon but as a structurally mediated outcome shaped by economic marginalization, family disorganization, and gendered power hierarchies. Although the socio-cultural contexts vary across Pakistan, Nigeria, Sudan, Libya, Jordan, Egypt, and Algeria, the underlying structural architecture demonstrates notable convergence.

5.1. Economic Marginalization and the Production of Survival Economies

Across the reviewed contexts, poverty functions not merely as a background condition but as a structurally embedded constraint limiting women's access to legitimate resources. In Pakistan, Saeed (2018) and Warraich and Farooq (2015) demonstrate that illiteracy, spousal unemployment, and financial dependency create gendered strain that pushes women toward property crimes and survival-oriented offenses. Similarly, Mehdi et al. (2025) confirm a statistically significant correlation between economic instability and recidivism among female inmates in Karachi.

In Jordan, Abu Salb and Mahadin (2020) show that low income levels and marital financial obligations disproportionately burden women, particularly those responsible for children. In Sudan, Mohamed (2017) reports that 82% of female offenders in the sample were living under severe economic deprivation, while youth and illiteracy further amplified vulnerability.

In Nigeria, Balogun et al. (2024) identify poverty and unemployment as primary determinants, yet emphasize that economic hardship interacts with psychological trauma and family instability. Likewise, Chabert (2003) conceptualizes the poverty–crime relationship as reciprocal, suggesting a feedback loop in which criminal involvement deepens economic exclusion.

In the Algerian context, Qazmir (2016) and Djamaï (2018) confirm that deteriorating economic conditions, particularly in urban environments,

contribute to women's engagement in theft, fraud, and organized property crimes. Notably, urbanization intensifies exposure to consumerist aspirations while simultaneously constraining legitimate opportunities, thereby reinforcing strain.

Collectively, these findings suggest that economic marginalization operates as a gendered structural strain. Women's caregiving responsibilities and limited labor market integration intensify the pressure to secure resources through alternative means, particularly when institutional support is weak.

5.2. Family Structure, Social Control, and the Reproduction of Vulnerability

The family emerges across contexts as both a regulatory institution and a potential site of vulnerability. In Pakistan (Warraich & Farooq, 2015) and Nigeria (Balogun et al., 2024), family culture and peer associations significantly predict criminal involvement and recidivism. In Sudan (Mohamed, 2017), weak parental supervision and residence in peripheral urban areas are linked to higher crime rates.

Arab case studies further underscore the centrality of family breakdown. In Libya, Al-Tuwaib (2022) identifies domestic violence and emotional deprivation as direct pathways to violent and economically motivated offenses. In Egypt, Mohamed (2022) demonstrates that divorce, chronic illness, and parental absence correlate with female offending patterns.

Algerian studies deepen this analysis. Djamaï (2018) and Qazmir (2016) report that family disintegration, absence of parental authority, and exposure to deviant role models are consistently present among female offenders. Zerarka (2016) finds that 62% of respondents experienced weak familial supervision, while Saadi (2016) highlights marital betrayal and spousal violence as triggers of retaliatory crimes against husbands.

Across these contexts, family disorganization functions as a mediating structure. It weakens informal social control and converts economic and gendered strain into deviant adaptation. Where family bonds deteriorate, the protective buffer against structural vulnerability collapses.

5.3. Gendered Pathways and Structural Inequality

Beyond economic and familial variables, gender operates as a structural organizing principle. Okoh (2024), drawing on feminist criminology, argues that women's criminal trajectories are cumulative and shaped by abuse, dependency, and institutional marginalization. Ang and Mat Saat (2024), through systematic review, confirm that childhood abuse and gender-based violence are cross-contextual predictors of female offending.

In Arab contexts, patriarchal authority structures amplify vulnerability. Abu Salb and Mahadin (2020) demonstrate that married women shoulder financial burdens within male-dominated households, while Saadi (2016) illustrates how violent crimes against husbands frequently represent reactive responses to sustained domestic oppression.

In Algeria, Djamaï (2018) notes a qualitative transformation in female offending patterns during periods of socio-political instability, suggesting that shifts in women's socio-economic roles alter exposure to criminogenic networks. Zerarka (2016) further identifies emotional deprivation and deviant peer influence as gendered risk factors.

Thus, female criminality cannot be reduced to economic necessity alone. It reflects layered structural inequality in which gender hierarchies shape access to resources, exposure to violence, and societal reactions to deviance.

5.4. Structural Interaction: An Integrated Interpretation

Despite contextual diversity, the studies reveal structural convergence:

- Economic deprivation intensifies strain.
- Family disorganization weakens informal control.
- Gender inequality amplifies vulnerability.
- Urbanization increases exposure to deviant networks and consumerist aspirations.

However, variation appears in crime typologies. Algerian and Nigerian studies report increasing female involvement in violent crimes, whereas Pakistani and Jordanian contexts emphasize property and economically motivated offenses. These variations reflect differences in

urbanization levels, cultural norms, and institutional enforcement regimes rather than fundamentally distinct causal mechanisms.

Overall, the comparative evidence supports an integrated structural model in which economic strain, family instability, and gendered power relations interact cumulatively. Female criminality emerges not as an anomaly but as a socially mediated adaptation to structurally constrained opportunity structures embedded within patriarchal social systems.

5.5. Intersectional Structural Vulnerability: Class, Age, and Urban Context:

While the preceding analysis identified economic marginalization, family disorganization, and gender inequality as core structural determinants, a deeper sociological interpretation requires an intersectional lens. Female criminality does not arise from gender alone; rather, it is produced at the intersection of class position, age, and spatial location within specific socio-economic formations.

First, class operates as a foundational axis of vulnerability. Across the reviewed studies, the majority of female offenders belong to lower socio-economic strata characterized by limited education, unstable employment, and informal labor participation (Saeed, 2018; Mohamed, 2017). Economic deprivation in these contexts is not merely income-based but structurally embedded in unequal access to institutional capital. Women situated at the intersection of gender subordination and class marginality experience intensified strain due to restricted mobility, dependency on male earners, and limited social protection mechanisms.

Second, age functions as a mediating factor shaping exposure to criminogenic environments. Algerian and Sudanese studies indicate that female offending is concentrated among younger age groups, particularly between 18 and 30 years (Djamaï, 2018; Zerarqa, 2016). Youth intersects with economic precarity and fragile family structures, amplifying susceptibility to peer influence and informal survival economies. Younger women navigating urban transition zones are especially vulnerable to recruitment into criminal networks.

Third, urbanization emerges as a spatial dimension of structural interaction. Rapid urban expansion, particularly in peripheral neighborhoods, produces environments marked by weak informal control, consumerist aspiration, and social anonymity. In Algeria and Nigeria, urban

restructuring correlates with shifts in female offending patterns, including increased involvement in organized property crimes and, in some contexts, violent offenses (Djamaï, 2018; Balogun et al., 2024). Urban settings simultaneously expand opportunity structures and intensify inequality, thereby heightening strain.

The intersection of class, age, and urban marginality generates what may be conceptualized as cumulative structural vulnerability. Women positioned at the nexus of economic deprivation, youth-related instability, and weakened community regulation encounter layered forms of constraint that transform structural strain into criminal adaptation. This intersectional configuration explains why similar levels of poverty do not uniformly produce criminal outcomes; rather, it is the convergence of multiple vulnerabilities that increases criminogenic risk.

Accordingly, female criminality should be understood not as a linear outcome of isolated determinants but as the product of intersecting structural positions. Gender, class, age, and spatial marginality operate simultaneously, producing differentiated pathways into crime across contexts.

- Conclusion

This study set out to provide a comprehensive sociological analysis of female criminality through a comparative review of foreign, Arab, and local research. By integrating structural, institutional, and gender-based perspectives, the findings demonstrate that female criminality cannot be adequately understood through mono-causal or individualistic explanations. Rather, it emerges from the intersection of economic marginalization, weakened social bonds, and gendered power asymmetries embedded within specific socio-cultural contexts.

The analysis confirms that economic strain constitutes a foundational structural pressure shaping women's involvement in crime. However, strain alone does not determine criminal behavior. Its impact is mediated by the strength of family structures, the stability of informal social control mechanisms, and the distribution of gendered authority and resources. In contexts where family systems remain central to social regulation, their disintegration carries heightened criminogenic consequences. Similarly, in environments marked by patriarchal hierarchies and economic dependency, women's exposure to structural vulnerability becomes intensified.

Importantly, the study reveals that recent transformations in female offending patterns do not necessarily reflect a simple convergence with male criminality. Rather, they signal broader socio-economic restructuring and shifting gender roles, which expand women's exposure to both opportunity and constraint. Thus, female criminality should be interpreted not as an anomaly or deviation from gender norms, but as a socially mediated phenomenon situated within evolving structures of inequality.

Theoretically, the study advances an integrative framework that bridges strain theory, social disorganization and control perspectives, and feminist criminology. This synthesis underscores the need to reconceptualize structural pressure as gendered, and to view social disorganization as operating simultaneously at the community and family levels. By positioning gender not as a peripheral variable but as a central analytical category, the study contributes to ongoing debates in contemporary criminological theory.

From a policy standpoint, the findings suggest that interventions aimed at addressing female criminality must move beyond punitive approaches and instead target structural inequalities, economic exclusion, domestic violence, and weakened social support systems. Preventive strategies should therefore incorporate gender-sensitive social policies, economic empowerment programs, and institutional mechanisms that strengthen family and community resilience.

In conclusion, female criminality reflects the broader dynamics of social transformation, structural inequality, and gendered power relations. Understanding it requires a multidimensional sociological lens capable of capturing the complexity of women's lived realities across diverse contexts. Future research should further explore intersectional dimensions—such as class, age, and rural–urban divides—to deepen theoretical refinement and inform context-responsive policy development.

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