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Female Offending in Contemporary Sociological Discourse: A Critical Analytical Study of a Sample of Arab and International Research

الجريمة النسوية في الخطاب السوسيولوجي المعاصر: دراسة تحليلية نقدية لعينة من البحوث العربية والدولية

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- **Abstract:**

This study examines how female offending is constructed in contemporary sociological discourse through a purposive, maximum-variation critical review of 23 contemporary studies—four Arab and nineteen international—published between 2015 and June 2026, together with five foundational works used to trace the field's theoretical development. A critical thematic content analysis was conducted using a deductive–inductive coding framework covering conceptual definitions, social representations, explanatory approaches, causal levels, methodological designs, and institutional responses. The findings demonstrate a gradual shift from biological, psychological, and moral explanations that portrayed the female offender as anomalous toward social, feminist, and life-course perspectives emphasizing violence, trauma, poverty, family relationships, mental health, gender inequality, and institutional processing. Women's offending emerged as a heterogeneous phenomenon shaped by multiple pathways and by the interaction of individual agency with social, relational, and gendered constraints. Arab studies tended to emphasize family and general social factors, whereas international research more frequently examined offending trajectories, desistance, mental health, and gender-responsive interventions

.**Keywords:**

Female offending; women and crime; sociological discourse; gendered pathways; feminist criminology.

الملخص:

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تحليل كيفية بناء إجرام النساء داخل الخطاب السوسيولوجي المعاصر، من خلال مراجعة نقدية قصدية لعينة ذات تنوع أقصى قوامها 23 دراسة معاصرة، منها أربع دراسات عربية و19 دراسة دولية، منشورة بين عام 2015 ويونيو 2026، إلى جانب خمسة أعمال تأسيسية استُخدمت لتتبع التطور النظري للمجال. اعتمدت الدراسة التحليل الموضوعاتي النقدي للمضمون، وفق إطار ترميز استنباطي–استقرائي قارن بين تعريف المفهوم، والتمثلات الاجتماعية، والمداخل التفسيرية، والمستويات السببية، والتصميمات المنهجية، والاستجابات المؤسسية. وأظهرت النتائج انتقالًا تدريجيًا من التفسيرات البيولوجية والنفسية والأخلاقية التي صوّرت المرأة الجانحة بوصفها حالة شاذة، إلى مقاربات اجتماعية ونسوية ومسارية تركز على العنف والصدمة والفقر والعلاقات الأسرية والصحة النفسية وعدم المساواة. كما تبيّن أن إجرام النساء ظاهرة غير متجانسة تتشكل عبر مسارات حياتية متعددة، وأن الدراسات العربية تميل إلى التركيز على الأسرة والعوامل الاجتماعية العامة، في حين توسعت الدراسات الدولية في تحليل المسارات الإجرامية، والانقطاع عن الجريمة، والتدخلات المستجيبة للنوع الاجتماعي.

الكلمات المفتاحية:

الجريمة النسوية؛ جرائم النساء؛ الخطاب السوسيولوجي؛ المسارات الجندرية؛ علم الإجرام النسوي.

- **Introduction :**

Criminological knowledge has historically been shaped by studies of male offending. Many canonical theories were developed from male samples and subsequently generalized to women without sufficient attention to gendered socialization, unequal access to resources, victimization, family relationships, or institutional responses. This androcentric orientation established the male offender as the implicit norm and often represented women who violated the law as deficient versions of men or as deviations from idealized feminine roles.

Early explanations of women's criminal behavior were largely biological, psychological, and moral. Female offenders were commonly portrayed as biologically abnormal, psychologically maladjusted, sexually deviant, or morally deficient, thereby individualizing their behavior and obscuring its social context. Feminist criminology challenged this reductionism by demonstrating that women's involvement in crime must be examined in relation to gendered opportunities, economic dependency, patriarchal control, interpersonal violence, and the unequal regulation of femininity[1]. In this study, *female offending* is used

[1] Freda Adler, *Sisters in Crime: The Rise of the New Female Criminal* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975); Rita James Simon, *Women and Crime* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1975); Carol Smart, *Women, Crime and Criminology: A Feminist*

as the English equivalent of **Female Offending**, referring to criminalized behavior committed by women and to the sociological processes through which it is interpreted and institutionally processed, without implying any connection to feminist ideology.

Contemporary scholarship has consequently shifted from the image of the biologically or morally defective "criminal woman" toward social, feminist, and life-course explanations. These approaches emphasize poverty, family disruption, childhood abuse, intimate-partner violence, trauma, substance use, mental-health difficulties, caregiving responsibilities, restricted opportunities, and institutional discrimination. Gendered-pathways research further demonstrates that women enter crime through multiple and intersecting experiences rather than through a single causal mechanism. Similar offences may emerge from different biographies, while comparable adversities may produce different outcomes depending on social support, economic resources, individual agency, and institutional response.[2]

Developmental and desistance research has extended this perspective by replacing static offender categories with differentiated patterns of onset, persistence, relapse, and withdrawal from crime. Recent evidence indicates that most women display episodic, low-frequency, or declining patterns of offending, whereas a smaller group follows persistent trajectories associated with complex histories of trauma, mental-health problems, unstable relationships, and economic marginalization. Desistance is likewise understood as a socially conditioned process rather than a purely individual decision, because sustained change depends on access to housing, employment, family support, social recognition, and institutional resources[3].

Relationships constitute a central mechanism in both offending and desistance. Intimate partners and family members may facilitate criminal involvement through coercion, emotional dependency, recruitment, economic pressure, or access to criminal networks. The same relationships may later support withdrawal from crime by providing housing, childcare, emotional assistance, and opportunities for reintegration. Their effects therefore vary across the life course and cannot be classified as uniformly criminogenic or protective [4].

Critique (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977); Eileen B. Leonard, *Women, Crime, and Society: A Critique of Theoretical Criminology* (New York: Longman, 1982).

2 Kathleen Daly, "Women's Pathways to Felony Court: Feminist Theories of Lawbreaking and Problems of Representation," *Southern California Review of Law and Women's Studies* 2, no. 1 (1992): 11–52.

3 G. Low, "'I Feel Like I've Come So Far with My Family': Families of Origin in Women's Desistance in Aotearoa New Zealand," *Women & Criminal Justice* 35, no. 6 (2025): 444–462, https://doi.org/10.1080/08974454.2023.2298224

4 Susan McNeeley, *Gendered Pathways into Co-Offending among a Sample of Adult Burglary and Robbery Offenders* (Minnesota: Minnesota Department of Corrections, 2019); Low, "'I Feel Like I've Come So Far with My Family.'

Institutional responses are equally important, since police, courts, prisons, mental-health services, and welfare institutions influence which behaviors are reported, criminalized, and punished, as well as whether victimization is recognized and desistance becomes materially possible.

Research on women who killed abusive partners illustrates how prolonged violence, failed help-seeking, economic dependency, and inadequate legal protection may precede the criminalized act.[5] Accordingly, gender-responsive interventions must address trauma, mental health, relationships, family contact, housing, and economic reintegration rather than reproduce models designed primarily for men.[6]

Despite these theoretical and methodological developments, the literature remains uneven. International research increasingly employs longitudinal data, trajectory modelling, narrative interviews, systematic reviews, and evaluations of gender-responsive interventions, yet it remains concentrated in high-income Western and Anglophone contexts. Arab research offers culturally relevant analyses of family relations, social change, economic hardship, moral norms, and recorded patterns of women's crime, but frequently relies on descriptive designs, official statistics, theoretical reviews, or small institutional samples. Consequently, women's life-course trajectories, desistance processes, institutional criminalization, intersectionality, and post-release experiences remain insufficiently examined in Arab and North African settings.

This gap is both empirical and epistemological. It reflects not only the limited volume of Arab research but also the absence of culturally situated models linking lived experience, structural inequality, relational dynamics, developmental timing, and institutional processing. At the same time, theories developed in Western contexts cannot be transferred uncritically to Arab societies, where family structures, labor markets, legal systems, gender expectations, informal social control, and reporting practices may operate differently. Comparative critical analysis is therefore necessary to identify areas of theoretical convergence while preserving cultural and methodological specificity.

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[5] D. Peel, "'We Just Die Quietly': Women's Pathways from Domestic Violence to Death Row in Uganda," *Women & Criminal Justice* (2026), advance online publication, https://doi.org/10.1080/08974454.2026.2647328.

[6] Emily J. Salisbury and A. Crawford, "Gender-Responsive Treatment to Improve Outcomes for Women and Girls in Correctional Settings: Foundations, Limitations and Innovations," *Health & Justice* 13 (2025), Article 11, https://doi.org/10.1186/s40352-025-00316-w.

Accordingly, the present study treats the literature not as a neutral accumulation of findings but as a sociological discourse that constructs the category of the female offender. Drawing on a purposive sample of Arab and international research, it examines the concepts used to define female offending, the explanations privileged by different studies, the experiences rendered visible or marginalized, and the influence of methodological choices on scientific interpretation. The study therefore aims to critically analyze how female offending is constructed and explained within contemporary Arab and international sociological discourse while identifying major areas of convergence, contradiction, and omission.

1. research question:

How is female offending constructed and explained within contemporary Arab and international sociological discourse?

This central question is addressed through the following subsidiary questions:

What theoretical perspectives and explanatory mechanisms are used to interpret female offending?

How have representations of the female offender changed from biological and moral explanations to social, feminist, and life-course approaches?

How do trauma, family relationships, economic marginalization, mental health, and gender inequality shape women's pathways into and out of crime?

What methodological differences characterize Arab and international research on female offending?

How do institutional and cultural contexts influence the interpretation, criminalization, and treatment of women's offending?

1.1 Study Objectives

The present study aims to critically analyze the construction of female offending within contemporary sociological discourse by examining a purposive sample of Arab and international research. More specifically, it seeks to:

Identify the principal theoretical perspectives used to explain female offending in contemporary sociological and criminological literature.

Trace the transformation of scientific representations of female offenders from biological, psychological, and moral interpretations toward social, feminist, intersectional, and life-course approaches.

Analyze the role of trauma, victimization, family relationships, economic marginalization, mental health, and gender inequality in shaping women's pathways into crime.

Examine how relational dynamics, including intimate partnerships, family networks, coercion, and co-offending, influence women's criminal involvement and opportunities for desistance.

Investigate the role of criminal justice, welfare, and mental-health institutions in defining, processing, and responding to female offending.

Compare the conceptual, theoretical, and methodological orientations of Arab and international studies addressing female offending.

1.2 Study Concepts and Operational Definitions:

Female Offending*:*

Female offending refers to criminalized behavior committed by women and to the social and institutional processes through which this behavior is defined, interpreted, and sanctioned. In this study, the Arabic expression **Female Offending** is used to denote women's criminal behavior without implying that such behavior is connected to feminist ideology. Operationally, the concept includes the different forms of women's offending examined in the selected studies, such as violent, property, drug-related, relational, and survival-oriented offences[7].

Sociological Discourse*:*

Sociological discourse refers to the concepts, classifications, explanatory frameworks, and methodological practices through which knowledge about a social phenomenon is produced. Discourse does not merely describe reality; it also contributes to constructing the categories through which that reality is understood Operationally, the concept is examined through [8]. the terminology, theoretical explanations, representations of female offenders, research methods, and institutional recommendations found in the reviewed studies.

Feminist Criminology and Gendered Pathways*:*

[7] Carol Smart, *Women, Crime and Criminology: A Feminist Critique* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977); Kathleen Daly, "Women's Pathways to Felony Court: Feminist Theories of Lawbreaking and Problems of Representation," *Southern California Review of Law and Women's Studies* 2, no. 1 (1992): 11–52.
[8] Kathleen Daly and Meda Chesney-Lind, "Feminism and Criminology," *Justice Quarterly* 5, no. 4 (1988): 497–538, https://doi.org/10.1080/07418828800089871.

Feminist criminology examines the influence of gendered power relations, inequality, victimization, and institutional control on crime and criminal justice. The gendered-pathways perspective extends this analysis by examining how trauma, intimate-partner violence, poverty, substance use, family relationships, and mental-health difficulties may interact across women's life courses.[9] Operationally, this concept is used to identify studies that connect women's offending to accumulated social, relational, and gendered experiences rather than to a single individual cause.

2. Methodology:

2.1 Review Design

This study employed a purposive critical review supported by critical thematic content analysis. It was not designed as a systematic review or meta-analysis because its purpose was to compare and critically interpret the concepts, theoretical explanations, methodological approaches, and institutional representations used in research on female offending, rather than to achieve exhaustive retrieval or estimate pooled effects.[10] The analysis focused on three questions: how female offending is defined and represented; which individual, relational, structural, developmental, and institutional mechanisms are used to explain it; and how geographical context, theoretical orientation, and research design shape the conclusions of the reviewed studies.

2.2 Search Strategy and Study Selection:

Sources were identified through Arabic bibliographic databases and journal platforms, including ASJP, E-Marefa, and the Egyptian Knowledge Bank, as well as publisher websites, DOI records, and backward reference searching. English search terms included *female offending*, *women and crime*, *gendered pathways*, *women's desistance*, *female offending trajectories*, *co-offending*, and *gender-responsive corrections*. The corresponding Arabic terms included Searches and bibliographic verification were completed in July 2026.

Maximum-variation purposive sampling was used to capture differences in geographical context, research design, offence type, and theoretical orientation. The coded corpus comprised 23 contemporary studies published between 2015 and June 2026: four Arab studies and nineteen international studies. Five earlier foundational works were retained to

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[9] Emily J. Salisbury and Patricia Van Voorhis, "Gendered Pathways: A Quantitative Investigation of Women Probationers' Paths to Incarceration," *Criminal Justice and Behavior* 36, no. 6 (2009): 541–566, https://doi.org/10.1177/0093854809334076

[10] Maria J. Grant and Andrew Booth, "A Typology of Reviews: An Analysis of 14 Review Types and Associated Methodologies," *Health Information & Libraries Journal* 26, no. 2 (2009): 91–108, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-1842.2009.00848.x.

trace the theoretical development of feminist criminology but were not counted within the contemporary corpus.

Studies were included when they addressed women's offending, criminalization, incarceration, co-offending, offending trajectories, desistance, or gender-responsive interventions; adopted a sociological, criminological, developmental, or institutional perspective; were available in Arabic or English; and provided sufficient bibliographic and methodological information for verification. Duplicate records, purely doctrinal legal analyses, studies limited to victimization without an explicit connection to offending or criminalization, short commentaries, and unverifiable publications were excluded.

2.3 Data Extraction and Thematic Coding

A structured matrix was used to extract the author, year, geographical setting, research design, sample or data source, offence or justice context, theoretical orientation, principal findings, and methodological limitations of each study. The unit of analysis was the argument, interpretive passage, or reported finding rather than the women represented in the studies.

Coding followed a combined deductive–inductive procedure. Initial categories were derived from the research questions and refined through repeated comparison across the corpus [11].

The coding framework covered conceptual definitions, representations of female offenders, biological and psychological explanations, family and relational processes, trauma and victimization, poverty and economic marginalization, opportunity and co-offending, developmental trajectories, desistance, mental health, intersectionality, institutional processing, gender-responsive interventions, and methodological limitations. Related codes were subsequently consolidated into the principal analytical themes. Themes were retained when they recurred across multiple sources or represented a distinctive case that materially extended the comparative analysis.

2.4 Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations :

The corpus was coded by one researcher; therefore, no intercoder reliability coefficient was calculated. Analytical dependability was strengthened through a predefined coding framework, a source-by-theme audit matrix, repeated review of theme boundaries, and the

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[11] [2] Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77–101, https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa; Margrit Schreier, *Qualitative Content Analysis in Practice* (London: SAGE Publications, 2012).

examination of contradictory or non-convergent findings. These procedures improve transparency but do not fully eliminate interpretive subjectivity.

Bibliographic verification was conducted as a separate quality-control stage. Each reference was checked against a publisher record, journal database, DOI registry, or recognized Arabic bibliographic platform, and sources whose existence or publication details could not be verified were excluded. As the study analyzed published documents and involved no direct participation by human subjects, formal ethical approval was not required.

3. Theoretical Foundations: The Emergence and Development of Feminist Criminology

Before the emergence of feminist criminology, explanations of women's offending were largely shaped by biological, psychological, and moral interpretations. Female offenders were often portrayed as abnormal women whose criminal behavior reflected biological deficiency, psychological maladjustment, or failure to conform to socially prescribed feminine roles. Such approaches individualized women's offending and gave limited attention to the social inequalities, relationships, and institutional conditions shaping their lives.

A major theoretical shift occurred during the 1970s with the emergence of feminist criminology. Adler and Simon linked changes in women's offending to transformations in their social and occupational roles, although their interpretations differed. Adler associated women's expanding opportunities with increased participation in crime, whereas Simon argued that employment might reduce some forms of violence related to dependency while increasing access to property and occupational offences.[1] [12]Smart and Leonard subsequently criticized the extension of theories derived from male experience to women without examining gendered power relations. They argued that criminology needed to account for patriarchy, class inequality, and the social regulation of femininity.[2][13]

These developments shifted the analytical focus from presumed deficiencies in the female offender to the social processes shaping women's criminal involvement. Contemporary feminist criminology emphasizes the influence of childhood abuse, intimate-partartner violence, economic dependency, poverty, caregiving responsibilities, substance use, and mental-health difficulties. The gendered-pathways perspective further demonstrates that

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12 Freda Adler, Sisters in Crime: The Rise of the New Female Criminal (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975); Rita James Simon, Women and Crime (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1975).

13 [2] Carol Smart, Women, Crime and Criminology: A Feminist Critique (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977); Eileen B. Leonard, Women, Crime, and Society: A Critique of Theoretical Criminology (New York: Longman, 1982).

women's offending emerges through heterogeneous and cumulative life experiences rather than through a single universal cause.[3][14]

This perspective also challenges a rigid distinction between victimhood and offending. Women may exercise agency and retain legal responsibility while acting within circumstances marked by violence, coercion, economic dependence, and restricted alternatives. Peel's study of women imprisoned for killing abusive partners in Uganda illustrates this interaction between individual action and structural constraint. Participants' offences were situated within histories of child marriage, repeated violence, economic subordination, community pressure to remain in abusive relationships, and inadequate institutional protection[15].

Relationality constitutes another central dimension of feminist criminology. Intimate and family relationships may function as sources of violence, coercion, criminal opportunity, support, or resilience, and their effects may change over the life course. Low's study of women's desistance in Aotearoa New Zealand shows that families may contribute to trauma and criminal involvement at one stage, while later providing housing, childcare, emotional support, or opportunities for reconciliation. Gender-responsive scholarship similarly argues that correctional interventions should address trauma, relationship quality, family responsibilities, health needs, and material conditions rather than reproduce programs originally designed for male offenders.[16]

Feminist criminology has therefore developed through three interconnected transitions: from biological and individual explanations to social and structural analysis; from static offender categories to gendered pathways and life-course processes; and from a universalized image of the female offender to culturally and intersectionally situated experiences. Nevertheless, the integration of individual, relational, structural, and

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14Kathleen Daly, "Women's Pathways to Felony Court: Feminist Theories of Lawbreaking and Problems of Representation," *Southern California Review of Law and Women's Studies* 2, no. 1 (1992): 11–52.

15 D. Peel, 'We Just Die Quietly': Women's Pathways from Domestic Violence to Death Row in Uganda," *Women & Criminal Justice* (2026), advance online publication, https://doi.org/10.1080/08974454.2026.2647328.

[16] Emily J. Salisbury and A. Crawford, "Gender-Responsive Treatment to Improve Outcomes for Women and Girls in Correctional Settings: Foundations, Limitations and Innovations," *Health & Justice* 13 (2025), Article 11, https://doi.org/10.1186/s40352-025-00316-w.

institutional explanations remains incomplete. Contemporary sociological analysis must therefore connect these levels while recognizing differences among women, offence types, and cultural contexts.

4. Results

The critical thematic analysis identified seven interrelated patterns in the reviewed literature: a transformation in the explanatory frameworks of female offending; the prominence of trauma and victimization; the heterogeneity of developmental trajectories; the association between mental health and persistent offending; the influence of structural and economic marginalization; the dual role of relationships in offending and desistance; and marked differences between Arab and international research traditions.

4.1 Characteristics of the Reviewed Literature

The reviewed corpus included Arab and international studies representing theoretical reviews, official-statistics analyses, qualitative interviews, prison-based studies, longitudinal administrative research, developmental trajectory studies, and reviews of gender-responsive interventions. The studies addressed varied forms of female offending, including violent, property-related, drug-related, financial, prostitution-related, relational, and survival-oriented offences.

The Arab literature focused mainly on Algeria and Egypt and relied predominantly on theoretical discussion, official criminal statistics, descriptive analysis, and small institutional samples. International research covered a wider range of geographical settings and employed more diverse methods, including longitudinal data linkage, narrative interviews, systematic review, and correctional-program analysis.

4.2 Transformation of Explanatory Frameworks

The analysis revealed a clear shift in the scientific representation of female offending. Earlier explanations primarily attributed women's criminal behavior to biological abnormality, psychological deficiency, moral deviation, or failure to conform to conventional femininity. Later sociological approaches redirected attention toward family disruption, poverty, changing social roles, and unequal criminal opportunities.

Contemporary feminist and life-course research further reframed female offending as a socially and temporally situated process. These studies emphasized the interaction of gender inequality, interpersonal violence, trauma, economic dependency, relational pressures, mental-health difficulties, and institutional responses. The female offender was therefore increasingly represented not as a homogeneous or inherently deviant category, but as an individual whose criminal involvement develops through differentiated social and biographical pathways.[1]

4.3 Trauma, Victimization, and Gendered Pathways

Trauma and victimization emerged as the most recurrent themes in the international literature. The reviewed studies associated women's criminal involvement with childhood abuse, neglect, sexual victimization, intimate-partner violence, substance use, homelessness, and psychological distress. These experiences were rarely presented as isolated events; rather, they formed cumulative sequences that influenced women's pathways into crime.

Research on women imprisoned for killing abusive partners demonstrated that the criminalized act was often preceded by prolonged violence, economic dependence, restricted opportunities, social pressure to remain in abusive relationships, and unsuccessful attempts to obtain institutional protection. [17]Prison-based and correctional studies similarly identified trauma, relational harm, and mental-health needs as central features of women's justice involvement.

Arab studies also documented family violence, parental cruelty, marital conflict, and family disintegration. However, these factors were more frequently presented as general causes of women's crime than as temporally ordered mechanisms connecting victimization, coping strategies, economic vulnerability, and criminalization. Across the corpus, trauma was a prominent but non-deterministic factor: the reviewed evidence did not support the assumption that victimization necessarily leads to offending.

4.4 Developmental Trajectories, Mental Health, and Desistance

Developmental studies identified substantial heterogeneity in women's offending patterns. The reported trajectories included life-course-persistent, adolescence-limited, early-desisting, late-onset, chronic low- and medium-rate, and sporadic offending. Sporadic or very low-frequency offending represented the largest category in most samples, whereas persistent offending characterized a smaller but significant group.[18]

The analysis also showed that persistent and serious trajectories were associated with earlier and more frequent contact with mental-health services, higher rates of diagnosis, and greater

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[17] D. Peel, "'We Just Die Quietly': Women's Pathways from Domestic Violence to Death Row in Uganda," *Women & Criminal Justice* (2026), advance online publication, https://doi.org/10.1080/08974454.2026.2647328.

[18] C. Coles, A. Wickersham, M. Lankester, D. Jolliffe, N. Blackwood, and H. Dickson, "Female Offending Trajectories: A Systematic Review," *Journal of Developmental and Life-Course Criminology* 12 (2026), Article 8, https://doi.org/10.1007/s40865-026-00295-y.

use of psychiatric care. Women whose recorded offending began in adulthood frequently had mental-health service contact before their first recorded offence.[19] Nevertheless, the reviewed studies treated these findings as temporal associations rather than evidence that mental illness directly causes offending.

Desistance research showed that withdrawal from crime was shaped by both personal change and social conditions. Housing, employment, family support, childcare, social recognition, and access to institutional resources influenced the sustainability of desistance. Narrative studies demonstrated that family relationships could not be classified as uniformly protective or criminogenic. The same family networks could contribute to trauma or criminal involvement at one stage and later provide accommodation, financial assistance, childcare, reconciliation, or emotional support.[20]

4.5 Structural and Economic Marginalization

Economic and structural disadvantage appeared consistently across the reviewed studies. Women involved in crime frequently experienced poverty, limited education, insecure employment, unstable housing, caregiving burdens, and restricted access to lawful economic opportunities. These conditions were particularly evident in studies of survival-oriented crime, drug markets, trafficking, illegal financial activity, and post-release recidivism.

The findings indicated that financial need rarely operated independently. Economic marginalization interacted with previous victimization, intimate relationships, migration, informal labour, limited social support, and unequal access to institutional protection. Women's inability to leave violent relationships was also associated with lack of independent income, childcare responsibilities, restricted education, and inadequate housing alternatives.

Structural disadvantage continued after criminal justice involvement. Women's ability to sustain desistance was weakened when they returned to unsafe housing, unemployment, violent relationships, stigmatizing environments, or limited access to welfare and treatment services.

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[19] A. Kuluk, T. Allard, C. Thompson, J. Ogilvie, and L. Broidy, "Examining the Timing of Mental Health Contacts across Female Offending Trajectories," *Health & Justice* 13 (2025), Article 34, https://doi.org/10.1186/s40352-025-00338-4.

[20] G. Low, "'I Feel Like I've Come So Far with My Family': Families of Origin in Women's Desistance in Aotearoa New Zealand," *Women & Criminal Justice* 35, no. 6 (2025): 444–462, https://doi.org/10.1080/08974454.2023.2298224;

4.6 Relationships, Opportunity, and Co-Offending

Relationships constituted a recurrent mechanism in women's entry into, participation in, and withdrawal from crime. Women were frequently introduced to criminal activity through intimate partners, relatives, or close social networks. These relationships could provide criminal opportunities, knowledge, economic resources, protection, emotional obligation, or coercive pressure.

Co-offending research showed that women involved in burglary and robbery were more likely than men to offend with romantic partners or family members and were less likely to occupy equal or leading positions in the criminal event.[21] Women's participation in the same offence categories as men did not therefore necessarily indicate equivalent authority, autonomy, or access to criminal networks.

The relational effects varied across time and context. Some women occupied subordinate or coerced roles, whereas others acted independently or assumed organizational responsibilities. Relationships that facilitated offending could later become resources for desistance, while renewed family contact could also reactivate trauma, shame, dependency, or criminogenic ties.

4.7 Intersectional and Cultural Differences

The reviewed literature demonstrated that gender did not operate independently of class, ethnicity, age, geographical location, colonial history, marital status, or access to social resources. Studies of Māori women in Aotearoa New Zealand linked offending and imprisonment to socioeconomic deprivation, family disruption, community trauma, and the continuing effects of colonization. Research conducted in Uganda connected gender inequality with rural poverty, child marriage, restricted education, economic dependency, and weak legal protection.

Arab studies established the relevance of family norms, economic hardship, cultural expectations, and social stigma. However, they rarely examined systematically how gender intersects with class, region, education, disability, marital status, or rural–urban inequality. The available studies also gave limited attention to the double stigma experienced by women who violate both criminal law and dominant expectations of femininity.

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21 Susan McNeeley, Gendered Pathways into Co-Offending among a Sample of Adult Burglary and Robbery Offenders (Minnesota: Minnesota Department of Corrections, 2019).

4.8 Differences between Arab and International Research

The comparative analysis identified clear differences between the two research traditions. Arab studies gave greater attention to family disorganization, marital conflict, cultural norms, moral regulation, social change, unemployment, and general economic factors. Their methodological approaches were primarily descriptive and often relied on official statistics, theoretical reviews, or small prison samples.

International studies devoted greater attention to gendered pathways, developmental trajectories, mental-health service contact, co-offending, desistance, intersectionality, and gender-responsive correctional interventions. They also employed more varied longitudinal, qualitative, narrative, and review methods. However, the international evidence was concentrated mainly in high-income and Anglophone contexts.

Despite these differences, both bodies of literature converged on the importance of family relationships, economic disadvantage, and social context. The principal distinction concerned the level of analytical specification: international research more frequently examined the temporal, relational, and institutional mechanisms through which these conditions shaped women's criminal involvement, whereas Arab studies more often presented them as broad categories of explanation.

5. Discussion

The findings indicate that contemporary sociological discourse has substantially reframed female offending. Earlier approaches represented women's criminal behavior as an expression of biological abnormality, psychological deficiency, or moral transgression. By contrast, the reviewed contemporary literature increasingly conceptualizes female offending as a heterogeneous social process shaped by the interaction of gender, biography, relationships, structural inequality, and institutional response. This transition does not render general criminological theories irrelevant; rather, it demonstrates that such theories become analytically insufficient when they treat male experience as universal and fail to explain how gender structures exposure to risk, access to opportunity, criminalization, and desistance.[22]

5.1. From the "Criminal Woman" to Gendered Pathways

The principal theoretical implication of the findings is the movement from a fixed category of the "criminal woman" toward differentiated gendered pathways. Women involved in crime cannot be treated as a homogeneous population governed by a single set of causes.

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22 Kathleen Daly, "Women's Pathways to Felony Court: Feminist Theories of Lawbreaking and Problems of Representation," Southern California Review of Law and Women's Studies 2, no. 1 (1992): 11–52.

The reviewed studies distinguish between episodic, late-onset, persistent, relationally mediated, survival-oriented, and violence-related pathways. This heterogeneity supports the integration of feminist criminology with developmental and life-course perspectives.

The convergence between qualitative pathways research and quantitative trajectory studies is particularly significant. Qualitative studies explain how violence, poverty, substance use, mental-health difficulties, and family relationships are experienced and interpreted, whereas trajectory research identifies recurring patterns of onset, persistence, and decline. Neither perspective is sufficient in isolation. Statistical classifications cannot explain the lived mechanisms that position women within particular trajectories, while qualitative accounts cannot establish the prevalence or distribution of those pathways. The findings therefore support an integrated approach that connects biographical processes with longitudinal patterns.

5.2. Reassessing the Convergence Hypothesis

The results provide only partial support for the convergence hypothesis. Women's increased visibility in property, drug-related, and low-level financial offences may indicate some convergence in recorded rates and offence categories. However, it does not demonstrate equivalent access to criminal authority, organizational power, or economic resources. The persistence of gendered role allocation in co-offending suggests that women may participate in the same offence types as men while occupying more dependent, relationally mediated, or less authoritative positions.[23]

5.3. Trauma, Structural Constraint, and Individual Agency

Trauma and victimization emerged as central dimensions of women's pathways into crime, particularly in studies of partner homicide, substance-related offending, street survival, and persistent justice involvement. Nevertheless, the results do not support a deterministic relationship between victimization and offending. Many women who experience violence do not become involved in crime, while women convicted of similar offences may have substantially different life histories.

Trauma is therefore best understood as a risk-laden context whose effects depend on mediating conditions. These include mental health, coping strategies, substance use, social support, economic resources, relationship dynamics, and the availability of institutional protection. The evidence concerning women imprisoned for killing abusive partners

23 Freda Adler, Sisters in Crime: The Rise of the New Female Criminal (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975).

illustrates how individual action may occur within a progressively restricted field of alternatives created by repeated violence, economic dependency, social pressure, and failed help-seeking. [24] Recognizing these constraints does not eliminate agency or legal responsibility; rather, it provides a more adequate explanation of the circumstances within which agency is exercised.

The findings also caution against treating mental-health diagnoses as isolated causes of offending. Earlier and more frequent contact with mental-health services among women in serious offending trajectories indicates an important association, but it does not establish direct causation. Service contact may reflect psychological distress, differences in access to care, institutional surveillance, or referral practices. Mental health must consequently be interpreted in relation to childhood adversity, intimate violence, unemployment, caregiving burdens, stigma, and social isolation.

5.4. Relationships as Dynamic Mechanisms

The analysis demonstrates that relationships operate as dynamic rather than uniformly protective or criminogenic mechanisms. Intimate partners and family members may introduce women to criminal activity, provide access to illegal markets, impose coercion, create emotional obligations, or reinforce economic dependency. At other stages, the same relational networks may provide housing, childcare, emotional support, reconciliation, and motivation for desistance.[25]

This finding challenges research designs that classify marriage, family contact, or social bonds as stable variables. The effects of relationships depend on their quality, distribution of power, material resources, and position within the life course. A partner relationship cannot be assumed to be protective merely because it exists, nor can family contact be treated as inherently beneficial. The analytical focus should instead be placed on coercive control, violence, dependency, reciprocity, available resources, and changes in relational meaning over time.

The dual role of relationships also clarifies the interaction between agency and constraint. Women's relational involvement in crime should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of passivity or coercion. Some women occupy subordinate positions, while others organize, recruit, negotiate, or act independently. A relational explanation must therefore

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24 D. Peel, "We Just Die Quietly': Women's Pathways from Domestic Violence to Death Row in Uganda," *Women & Criminal Justice* (2026), advance online publication, https://doi.org/10.1080/08974454.2026.2647328;
25 G. Low, "'I Feel Like I've Come So Far with My Family': Families of Origin in Women's Desistance in Aotearoa New Zealand," *Women & Criminal Justice* 35, no. 6 (2025): 444–462, https://doi.org/10.1080/08974454.2023.2298224;

identify the distribution of power and benefit without presuming either complete autonomy or complete victimhood.

5.5. Structural and Institutional Dimensions

The results show that structural disadvantage affects both entry into crime and the possibility of sustained desistance. Poverty, insecure employment, unstable housing, educational disadvantage, caregiving responsibilities, racial inequality, colonial marginalization, and social stigma restrict the alternatives available to women before and after criminal justice involvement. These conditions do not operate as direct or uniform causes; they interact with victimization, relationships, health, migration, and access to social protection.

This interpretation has important implications for correctional and social policy. Programs directed exclusively toward individual attitudes or behavior are unlikely to produce sustainable outcomes if women return to unsafe housing, violent relationships, unemployment, or inadequate childcare. Gender-responsive practice must therefore extend beyond specialized prison programs to include trauma-informed care, mental-health and reproductive-health services, family support, legal assistance, housing, education, employment, and continuity of care after release.[26]

The findings further indicate that institutions are not neutral settings that merely respond to pre-existing crime. Police, courts, prisons, mental-health services, and welfare agencies influence which behavior becomes visible, which women receive protection, how victimization is interpreted, and whether desistance is materially achievable. Official statistics should consequently be read as records of both behavior and institutional selection. This distinction is particularly important when comparing contexts in which reporting practices, informal family control, access to justice, and institutional trust differ substantially.

5.6. Arab and International Research Traditions

The comparison between Arab and international scholarship reveals differences in conceptual focus and methodological development, but these differences should not be treated as evidence of a simple hierarchy. Arab studies provide culturally relevant accounts of family relations, marital conflict, economic hardship, moral regulation, social change, and local patterns of recorded crime. Their principal limitation is that these factors are often

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26 Emily J. Salisbury and A. Crawford, "Gender-Responsive Treatment to Improve Outcomes for Women and Girls in Correctional Settings: Foundations, Limitations and Innovations," *Health & Justice* 13 (2025), Article 11, https://doi.org/10.1186/s40352-025-00316-w.

presented as broad categories rather than as temporally ordered and empirically specified mechanisms.

International research more frequently employs longitudinal data, narrative methods, trajectory modelling, linked administrative records, systematic reviews, and evaluations of gender-responsive interventions. This methodological diversity allows more detailed analysis of pathways, desistance, mental health, and institutional processing. However, much of this literature remains concentrated in high-income Western and Anglophone settings. Its concepts cannot therefore be transferred uncritically to Arab societies, where family authority, informal labour, legal institutions, social stigma, and reporting practices may operate differently.[27]

The appropriate response is neither the uncritical importation nor the rejection of international theories. Arab research should test, revise, and extend concepts such as gendered pathways, relational desistance, and intersectionality through locally grounded evidence. Culture should not be treated as a fixed explanation for women's offending, but as a set of contested meanings and institutional practices interacting with class, region, education, marital status, age, and economic position.

The limited attention to intersectionality in the Arab literature is particularly important. Treating "Arab women" as a uniform category risks obscuring differences between rural and urban settings, social classes, age groups, marital positions, educational levels, and access to legal or economic resources. Future studies should also examine the double stigma experienced by women who violate both criminal law and dominant expectations of feminine respectability.

5.7. Theoretical and Methodological Implications

The findings support a multilevel model of female offending that connects individual, relational, structural, developmental, and institutional dimensions. No single perspective adequately explains the diversity of women's pathways. Trauma-focused approaches may understate class and institutional power; structural explanations may overlook biography and agency; developmental models may identify trajectories without explaining their social production; and relational accounts may become reductive when they assume dependency rather than examining power.

Methodologically, the strongest future designs would combine longitudinal administrative records, confidential self-report data, and repeated qualitative interviews. Such integration would connect the distribution of offending trajectories with the lived processes that produce

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27 C. Coles et al., "Female Offending Trajectories"; G. Low, "Expanding the Lens: Developments and Theoretical Limits in Desistance Research," *Deviant Behavior* (2025), advance online publication, https://doi.org/10.1080/01639625.2025.2541285;

persistence or change. Research should also include women outside prison, including those under community supervision, diverted from prosecution, involved in undetected offending, or desisting without formal intervention. Institutional samples capture the most visible women and may overrepresent severe cases, poverty, and limited access to legal resources.

5.8. Study Limitations and Future Directions

The findings should be interpreted in light of several limitations. First, the study employed a purposive rather than exhaustive sample and therefore does not represent the entire body of Arab and international literature. Second, the included studies differed in geographical context, population, offence type, data source, and methodological design, limiting direct comparison. Third, official records, prison samples, interviews, and literature reviews capture different dimensions of female offending and are subject to distinct selection and measurement biases.

The analysis was conducted by one coder, and no intercoder reliability coefficient was calculated. Although the predefined coding framework, source-by-theme matrix, repeated review, and examination of contradictory findings strengthened analytical transparency, interpretive subjectivity cannot be eliminated. The limited availability and methodological detail of Arab studies also restricted the depth of regional comparison.

Future research should combine gendered-pathways analysis with developmental trajectory models, expand evidence from Arab and North African societies, and examine women both within and outside custodial institutions. Greater attention should be given to disaggregated administrative data, longitudinal life histories, post-release environments, and the evaluation of culturally adapted gender-responsive interventions. Arab scholarship would particularly benefit from transparent sampling procedures, explicit coding frameworks, multiple coders where feasible, and clearer separation between empirical findings and moral judgments.

Overall, the discussion demonstrates that female offending is best understood as a heterogeneous and socially embedded process. Its explanation requires attention to the interaction between biography and structure, agency and constraint, relationships and material resources, as well as behavior and institutional selection. This integrated perspective provides a stronger basis for comparative sociological analysis and for interventions responsive to the diversity of women’s pathways into and out of crime.

- **Conclusion**

This study examined how female offending is constructed and explained within contemporary Arab and international sociological discourse. The analysis demonstrates a substantial shift from biological, psychological, and moral interpretations of the "criminal woman" toward social, feminist, developmental, and life-course perspectives. Female offending is increasingly understood as a heterogeneous process shaped by the interaction of individual agency, gendered relationships, structural inequality, life-course experiences, and institutional responses.

The findings show that trauma, victimization, economic marginalization, mental-health difficulties, and family relationships are recurrent dimensions of women's pathways into crime. However, none of these factors provides a sufficient or deterministic explanation in isolation. Their effects depend on the social and institutional contexts in which they occur, including access to economic resources, social support, protection from violence, housing, employment, treatment, and opportunities for reintegration. Relationships are similarly dynamic: intimate partners and family networks may facilitate offending, reinforce dependency, or expose women to violence, while later providing resources for desistance and social reintegration.

The comparison between Arab and international scholarship revealed both convergence and divergence. Both traditions recognize the importance of family, economic disadvantage, and social context. Nevertheless, Arab studies tend to rely on descriptive approaches, official statistics, and small institutional samples, whereas international research more frequently examines developmental trajectories, desistance, mental health, co-offending, intersectionality, and gender-responsive interventions. International evidence, however, remains concentrated in Western and Anglophone contexts, limiting its direct transferability to Arab societies.

The study's principal contribution lies in integrating individual, relational, structural, developmental, and institutional levels of explanation within a comparative sociological framework. Female offending should neither be treated as a derivative form of male criminality nor reduced to a violation of conventional femininity. It is more adequately understood as a differentiated social process embedded in biographies, relationships, inequalities, cultural contexts, and systems of social control.

Future Arab and North African research should therefore develop culturally grounded models based on transparent sampling, longitudinal and mixed-method designs, disaggregated administrative data, and life-history evidence. Such research should extend beyond prison populations to include women under community supervision, women diverted from prosecution, and women who desist without formal intervention. These developments are necessary for producing more rigorous explanations and designing

gender-responsive policies that address both women's individual needs and the structural conditions shaping their pathways into and out of crime.

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