

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.121126372

Tracing Women's Pathways to Crime: A Sociocultural Exploration of Female Convicts

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Received: 11/03/2026

Accepted: 08/04/2026

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ABSTRACT

Understanding women's involvement in crime requires a nuanced analysis of sociocultural, economic, and relational factors. While criminology has traditionally focused on male offenders, feminist scholars argue that female criminality must be studied in its own context, considering gendered experiences and structural inequalities. Focusing on sociocultural influences, family dynamics, and broader societal norms that shape women's criminal behaviour, this study explores the evolving nature of women's participation in crime in India, drawing on qualitative interviews and case studies of convicted women. Anchored in both secondary data from the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) and field-based qualitative evidence, the paper examines how modernization, emancipation, socio-economic pressures, and familial disruptions contribute to female criminality. Data from 2012–2023 suggest a steady rise in the number of female convicts, from approximately 16,951 in 2012 to 23,772 in 2022, yet women continue to constitute only about 4.1% of India's total prison population. The analysis underscores that although female involvement in crime is limited compared to men, its increasing diversity ranging from property offenses to violent crimes reflects deeper structural shifts in gender, economy, and power.

KEYWORDS: *Female criminality in India, Gender and crime, Sociocultural determinants of crime, National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), Qualitative criminological analysis.*

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of women's criminality has received growing attention in recent years, reflecting shifts in social structures, gender relations, and the visibility of women within the criminal justice system. Traditionally, criminology has viewed crime through a male-centric lens, with female offenders often portrayed as anomalies or moral deviants rather than as individuals shaped by social, psychological, and structural constraints. In the Indian context, this invisibility is further compounded by deep-rooted patriarchy, limited access to education, and systemic inequities that restrict women's agency. Feminist criminology emphasizes that women's experiences in crime and the criminal justice system are shaped by gendered power relations. Scholars argue that women often commit crimes as a

response to victimization, marginalization, or economic necessity rather than purely individual choice. This perspective highlights the importance of understanding women's social contexts, including domestic violence, poverty, and societal expectations, in analysing their criminal behaviour. Female criminality in India therefore demands a gender-sensitive and contextually grounded exploration that goes beyond statistical representation to understand the lived realities of women who come into conflict with the law

In the 21st century, the visibility of women in domains traditionally dominated by men has extended even into criminal behavior. Bajpai and Bajpai (2000) noted that as women increasingly integrate into modern socio-economic frameworks, their exposure to and

engagement in criminal activities have become more varied and visible. According to the NCRB (2022–2023), the number of female convicts has shown a consistent upward trend. The total population of incarcerated women in India rose from 20,000 in 2020 to over 23,772 in 2022, with women constituting around 4.1% of India's total prisoners.

Historically, female offenders have been involved in petty and domestic crimes; however, recent statistics indicate involvement in a wider array of criminal activities including theft, kidnapping, drug trafficking, and even murder. The rise of female criminality does not necessarily signal moral deterioration but rather reflects evolving gender roles, social isolation, and systemic inequities. While crimes against women remain alarmingly high increasing from 3,71,503 cases in 2020 to 4,48,211 in 2023 the gradual rise in crimes committed by women reveals an underexplored dimension of India's socio-legal fabric. (Bajpai-and-Bajpai.docx)

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The life-course approach examines how individual trajectories are influenced by social, economic, and relational factors across time. For women offenders, critical life events such as childhood abuse, early pregnancy, or unstable family environments can serve as turning points that increase vulnerability to criminal activity. This framework emphasizes that pathways to crime are cumulative and context-specific.

Strain theory suggests that women may resort to criminal activity when legitimate means to achieve socially valued goals are blocked, often due to poverty or social inequality. Social learning theory adds that criminal behaviour can be learned through associations with peers or family members engaged in crime. Together, these theories provide insight into the structural and interpersonal mechanisms influencing women's pathways to crime. Research consistently highlights the role of family dynamics in shaping women's criminal behaviour.

Studies show that experiences of domestic violence, neglect, or parental criminality can predispose women to offend. For instance, women may engage in property crimes or drug-related offenses to cope with abusive relationships or economic dependence.

Socioeconomic and structural factors like Poverty, lack of education, and limited employment opportunities are significant predictors of female criminality. Many women enter the criminal justice system due to survival-driven crimes such as theft, fraud, or involvement in the drug trade. These structural inequalities underscore the intersection of gender and socioeconomic status in shaping criminal pathways.

Societal expectations regarding women's roles such as caregiving responsibilities and moral conduct can

increase pressure and marginalization when unmet, sometimes leading to criminal coping strategies. Women offenders often report experiencing stigma and social exclusion, which further limits legitimate avenues for social and economic mobility.

Research shows that modernization and women's emancipation have opened avenues both for empowerment and exposure to deviance.

Bajpai and Bajpai's foundational research highlighted that modernization and emancipation have broadened the scope of women's involvement in criminal activities. Once limited to petty thefts or domestic violence incidents, female criminality in India now includes a range of serious offenses such as homicide, kidnapping, and economic crimes. The authors argue that this diversification parallels women's expanding social roles and point out the interplay between socioeconomic hardships, gender inequality, and psychological vulnerability as recurring causal factors in female deviance (Bajpai & Bajpai, 2000).

Reddy and Sandeep (2023) examined women's positions within Indian criminal law through the lens of feminist legal theory. Their study found that patriarchal interpretations of law continue to frame women offenders as morally deviant rather than socially conditioned. Using NCRB data, they observed that although female arrests rose by over 10 percent between 2015 and 2020, women still constituted less than 6.3 percent of convicted IPC offenders. The paper emphasizes that structural discrimination and socio-economic dependency perpetuate cycles of female criminality and hinder reintegration into mainstream society.

In their theoretical analysis published in the CMR University Journal for Contemporary Legal Affairs, Rajkhowa and Deka (2023) explored female criminality through the framework of strain theory. Their study argued that increasing exposure to financial independence, occupational change, and social mobility has altered the patterns of women's crimes in India. Female offenders are no longer confined to "petty" acts but increasingly participate in economic and violent crimes, challenging traditional narratives that associate criminality with masculinity. The authors advocate for reforms toward gender-neutral criminological laws to account for this evolving dynamic.

Yadav's theoretical review in The Indian Sociological Society Journal emphasized that socio-economic vulnerabilities, unequal education, and patriarchal structural barriers fundamentally underpin both female criminality and crimes against women. By tracing the rise in women offenders alongside the increase in violence against women, Yadav (2023) illuminated the interconnected character of these phenomena. The study concluded that addressing female criminality requires

synchronized reforms across the justice, welfare, and educational systems rather than isolated punitive measures

METHODOLOGY

Objectives

1. To analyze the socio-economic and psychological backgrounds of female convicts.
2. To examine the trends and patterns in women's participation in crime based on NCRB data
3. To interpret qualitative insights from selected case studies to highlight recurring themes and gendered motivations.

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in feminist criminological theory to explore the complex social realities underlying female criminality in India. A qualitative case study approach was selected to gain an in-depth understanding of individual women's experiences within their socio-cultural contexts, while thematic analysis was employed to identify overarching patterns across cases.

Case Selection and Sampling

Four incarcerated female convicts from Special Prisons for Women in Andhra Pradesh were purposively selected to represent diverse socio-economic backgrounds and offense contexts, including domestic violence-related homicide, mental health crisis, accidental death, and wrongful implication. Purposive sampling is justified within qualitative research to provide rich information yielding insight into the phenomenon rather than statistical generalizability.

Data Collection

Primary data comprised semi-structured, life-history interviews with each participant, supplemented by examination of legal documents, prison records, and observational field notes. Ethical protocols were rigorously followed, including informed consent, confidentiality, use of pseudonyms, and participant rights awareness. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

Data analysis proceeded in two complementary stages. First, detailed case analyses were conducted, creating comprehensive narratives that contextualized each woman's lived experiences, offense circumstances, and interactions with the criminal justice system. This illuminated the nuanced, individual trajectories of female criminality shaped by intersecting socio-economic, psychological, and structural factors.

Second, a systematic thematic analysis was implemented following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework: familiarization with data, initial coding, theme development, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and synthesis. This process

identified common themes across cases, including victimization–agency continuum, patriarchal entrapment, mental health neglect, legal vulnerability, resilience, and social stigma. Themes were iteratively refined to balance rich description with interpretive insight, linking empirical findings to feminist criminology literature. The analysis drew upon the frameworks of feminist criminology and gendered pathways theory, as proposed by scholars such as Chesney-Lind (1997) and Daly (1992), which emphasise the structural and emotional antecedents of women's offending.

Trustworthiness and Reflexivity

Trustworthiness was ensured by methodological triangulation (data triangulation across interviews and documents), member checking when feasible, and maintaining a reflexive journal to identify potential biases of the researcher. The researcher's positionality as an academic engaged with sensitive women's narratives was acknowledged and managed to enhance ethical integrity.

Limitations

The purposive small sample limits statistical generalizability; however, analytic generalizability to similar socio-cultural environments is supported through thick description and thematic abstraction. The study aims to provide depth of understanding and inform conceptual models rather than population-level inference.

3. Case Analyses and Qualitative Interpretation

Case 1: Domestic Violence and Psychological Trauma
This case involves a 40-year-old Muslim woman from a rural agricultural setting who faced chronic domestic violence and economic neglect from her alcoholic husband. Illiterate and socially marginalized, she struggled within a patriarchal family system that limited her autonomy. In 2016, overwhelmed by years of abuse, she killed her husband by hanging. Her legal process was prolonged and complicated by her inability to navigate the justice system effectively, including coercion during the investigation. Despite incarceration, she exhibits resilience but continues to experience psychological trauma and social stigma. This case exemplifies how prolonged victimization under patriarchy can lead to reactive violence as a desperate form of agency.

Case 2: Untreated Postpartum Depression and Familicide

A 35-year-old woman from Guntur, Andhra Pradesh, belonging to a Scheduled Caste background, suffered severe postpartum depression after giving birth. Isolated by poverty and societal stigma, her illness went untreated, culminating in a tragic incident where she set fire to her home, killing her husband and infant son. Convicted under Section 302 IPC, her case highlights the critical role of mental health neglect in female

criminality. Her prison life includes participation in vocational programs, with sustained family contact, indicating potential for rehabilitation. This case illustrates the intersection of psychological distress and social disadvantage contributing to women's criminal acts.

Case 3: Marital Conflict, Emotional Abuse, and Reactive Violence

This case focuses on a 37-year-old woman from Anantapur district, enduring years of emotional abuse, marital infidelity, and caretaker stress. During a violent quarrel in 2021, she fatally injured her husband with a household object. The act was impulsive, arising from accumulated trauma and provocation. Despite her defense citing self-defense, she was convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment. Her prison experience involved emotional challenges and efforts at adaptation through counselling and vocational activities. This case underscores the gendered dynamics of domestic violence and its escalation into female-perpetrated homicide.

Case 4: Alcoholism, Domestic Accident, and Legal Challenges

A 36-year-old woman from Vizianagaram district accidentally inflicted fatal injuries on her intoxicated husband during a heated domestic dispute. The injury, though unintended, resulted in legal charges and an extended trial. She faced social ostracism and estrangement from her children, compounding her psychological distress. This case exemplifies how volatile domestic environments exacerbated by alcoholism lead to tragic outcomes. It also highlights the challenges in proving intent and navigating complex legal interpretations of domestic homicides involving women.

4. Thematic Analysis

The case analyses reveal complex, intersecting themes that illustrate the multifaceted nature of female criminality in the Indian socio-cultural context. These themes move beyond simplistic notions of deviance, highlighting structural, psychological, and relational dimensions underpinning women's offending pathways.

1. Continuum of Victimization and Agency

Each woman's narrative illustrates a continuum rather than a binary of victim versus offender. Years of sustained domestic violence, emotional neglect, economic hardship, and social marginalization position these women initially as victims trapped within patriarchal constraints. Their eventual engagement in violent acts is better understood as reactive agency, where crime emerges not from inherent criminality but as a survival or resistance strategy. For instance, the first case underscores how chronic spousal abuse and

coercion erode a woman's autonomy until retaliatory violence becomes an act of desperate self-preservation. This shift from passive victimhood to active, but constrained, agency aligns with feminist pathways theory, which frames female offending as an adaptive response to intersectional oppressions. The cases collectively challenge traditional criminology's gender-neutral assumptions and highlight the necessity of viewing female offenders within the social contexts of abuse and deprivation.

2. Patriarchal Entrapment and Gendered Dependency

The deeply patriarchal environments pervading these women's lives emerge as significant structural catalysts of their offending. In rural and semi-urban Indian settings, rigid gender roles dictate women's economic dependence, limited mobility, and subservience within their households. This entrapment fosters vulnerabilities to abuse, exploitation, and psychological subjugation.

For example, the narratives detail how husbands' alcoholism, cruelty, and infidelity intersect with societal expectations of female obedience, amplifying women's isolation and powerlessness. Such environments create a context where women's voices and grievances are systematically silenced, channeling suppressed frustrations and trauma into legally defined criminal acts. This theme echoes longstanding feminist critiques regarding the role of patriarchy in shaping women's pathways to the criminal justice system.

3. Mental Health Neglect and Psychological Trauma

A recurring and deeply concerning theme is the neglect of mental health needs. Postpartum depression, psychosis, emotional breakdowns, and trauma-induced stress are documented yet remain largely unaddressed by healthcare and social support systems. Women manifest psychological suffering in violent or self-destructive manners, often at the cost of familial loss and legal punishment.

Case two's familicide linked to untreated postpartum depression exemplifies this gap starkly. The absence of accessible mental health interventions exacerbated by poverty and stigma contributes to women's criminal actions being pathologized without therapeutic context. This highlights a humanitarian crisis wherein the criminal justice system inadequately differentiates between criminal culpability and psychological illness among female offenders.

4. Legal Vulnerability and Procedural Disadvantage

The women's low literacy, unfamiliarity with legal procedures, and societal prejudices amplify their vulnerability within the formal justice system. Case one's coerced signing of blank papers and lengthy trial reflects systemic inequities in access to justice for marginalized women. The narratives reveal that women often face legal representation challenges, evidentiary

biases, and moralistic stigmatization, which further hinder fair trials.

This theme advocates for enhanced gender-sensitive legal literacy programs, protective procedural safeguards, and judicial awareness of socio-economic backgrounds to ensure equitable treatment. It also underscores the intersection of caste, class, and gender in shaping legal outcomes.

5. Resilience through Rehabilitation Gaps

Despite adversities, the women's adaptation within incarceration reveals glimpses of resilience. Engagement in vocational training, forging social connections within prison, and maintaining family ties serve as coping mechanisms. However, the absence of comprehensive trauma-informed psychological support limits their potential for emotional recovery and holistic rehabilitation.

The current punitive framework inadequately addresses the psychosocial dimensions of female offending, often repeating cycles of trauma and exclusion. This calls for integrative models combining vocational skill-building with mental health counseling, trauma recovery programs, and gender-specific reintegration strategies.

6. Social Stigma and Challenges in Reintegration

Lastly, pervasive social stigma following conviction isolates women from families, communities, and economic opportunities. Ostracization and moral censure extend beyond the sentence, hindering post-release social acceptance and employment prospects. Several narratives illustrate how women remain branded as deviant or dishonorable, perpetuating marginalization and psychological distress.

Breaking this stigma requires public awareness, community support initiatives, and policy frameworks promoting restorative justice models. It also demands challenging entrenched patriarchal norms that disproportionately punish women for breaches of social morality compared to men.

5. Summary and Conclusion

This qualitative study has examined female criminality in India through in-depth case analyses of four women convicts from Andhra Pradesh, integrated with secondary NCRB data. The findings reveal that women's involvement in serious offenses is deeply rooted in chronic domestic violence, socio-economic deprivation, untreated mental health conditions, and systemic patriarchal oppression. These factors coalesce into a complex continuum where victimization transitions into reactive agency manifested as criminal acts.

The detailed case narratives illustrate the varied manifestations of this trajectory—from retaliatory homicide and familicide linked to mental health crises

to accidental domestic fatalities and wrongful accusation shaped by gendered prejudices. The thematic synthesis highlights pervasive issues including legal marginalization, gaps in rehabilitative care, and enduring post-conviction stigma.

Crucially, this study challenges simplistic criminological views that portray women offenders as morally deviant, presenting instead a nuanced understanding of female criminality as symptomatic of structural injustices and intersectional vulnerabilities. While the cases provide deep contextual insights, their small number limits broad generalizability; however, they offer critical theoretical and policy implications for addressing gendered pathways to crime in India.

In conclusion, effective responses require a paradigm shift from purely punitive frameworks toward trauma-informed, gender-sensitive justice and social support systems. Early interventions for domestic violence, expanded mental health services, accessible legal aid, and comprehensive rehabilitation programs are essential. Furthermore, combating social stigma and fostering community reintegration must be prioritized to break cycles of marginalization. This study calls for continued interdisciplinary research and informed policy reforms to holistically address the realities faced by women in contact with the justice system.

Acknowledgements: The authors acknowledge with gratitude the financial support received from Sri Padmavati Mahila Visvavidyalayam under the **PM-USHA (MERU)** Grant for carrying out the present research work

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