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Navigating Inequity: Understanding the pathways to criminalization for women in a disparate society

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ABSTRACT

Female criminality is highly influenced by the structural inequalities that have become the socio-economic realities of females in South Africa. This article explores the pathways to female criminality by emphasizing how gender expectations, economic disenfranchisement, and societal narratives converge to create barriers that disproportionately funnel women toward criminal behaviour. Implementing a qualitative design, data was obtained from 10 ex-female offenders, who shared their narratives of criminalisation, compiling a thick description of their lived experiences. Thematic analysis, shaped by feminist criminology, the concept of the 'gender deal', and Agnew's general strain theory, was used to highlight patterns across their stories. The analysis highlighted two central themes. Firstly, the impact of victimisation emphasized that experiences such as childhood abuse, domestic violence, and economic strain resulted in women committing crimes as a strategy of survival or a coping mechanism. The second relates to the consequence of the gender deal, revealing that restrictive gender norms and continuous economic exclusion developed cycles of desperation, which left women in situations vulnerable to criminality. The findings demonstrate that female crime isn't about deviance but rather about surviving systemic inequality and victimisation. The study concludes that gender-responsive, trauma-informed interventions are required, with policies that address strains such as poverty, unemployment, and violence to prevent incarceration and promote interventions that empower females.

KEY TERMS: female criminality, gendered expectations, gender-sensitive intervention, pathways to crime, South Africa, structural inequalities.

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HOW TO REFERENCE USING ASWDNET STYLE

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INTRODUCTION

The rapid growth of female criminality in South Africa has cast light on the considerable structural inequalities that exist in the lives of women. Historically, women's roles in society have been shaped by gender norms, economic marginalisation, and inherited vulnerabilities, which often position criminality as a means of survival. The intersection of poverty, unemployment, and socio-economic strain, compounded by experiences of domestic violence, further aggravates these realities and drives females to unlawful acts as a response to their challenges. Increasing female interaction with the criminal justice system cannot be understood without recognising the persistent inequalities that frame their lived experiences. Beyond economic exclusion, the harsh reality of gender-based violence and femicide has normalised victimisation, shaping women's pathways into offending. While women represent a small portion of the prison population, their criminal behaviour is deeply linked to poverty, caregiving burdens, histories of trauma, and gendered expectations. These dynamics underscore how societal norms, economic exclusion, and victimisation converge to produce cycles of vulnerability and desperation. This article highlights how structural realities, gender expectations, and socio-economic disenfranchisement shape female offending in South Africa, and it draws on the lived experiences of ex-female offenders to argue for more gender-responsive interventions that both prevent criminality and promote empowerment among vulnerable populations.

BACKGROUND

Female criminality in South Africa is intrinsically linked to the structural socio-economic disadvantages that women face. The traditional societal expectations and 'gender deal' demonstrate that whilst women are praised for domestic subordination, they are constrained regarding opportunities in public life (Parry, 2020b). These traditional notions conflate unemployment, poverty, and gender-based violence, placing women in a vicious cycle of vulnerability that increases their risk of criminality (Oliveira, 2024). For many women, crime becomes a response to these realities, highlighting the intricacy of female offending and demonstrating how both structural inequalities and individual experiences play a role (Parry, 2020b). Female offenders often carry histories of victimization, reinforcing the need to understand their pathways to criminality through the lens of broader socio-economic and personal contexts rather than a blanket approach based on judgmental societal narratives (George, Sibanyoni & Mofokeng, 2022). However, there remains a lack of research that uncovers these structural inequalities and vulnerabilities, creating a clear gap that this study seeks to address.

The voice of the female offender is often minimized in academia and the media, where the underlying factors behind her actions are underreported. A more gender-sensitive approach is therefore required to reveal these in-depth experiences (Thornton, 2023a). Preventing female criminality must emphasize empowering women by addressing systemic disparities and strengthening resilience. Tailor-made interventions have the potential to improve women's quality of life, prevent offending, and reduce recidivism (Johnson et al., 2012). Current approaches fail to address the interplay between systemic inequality and victimization, thereby illuminating the importance of qualitative research that embodies these lived experiences.

The causes of female criminality in South Africa thus consist of both structural challenges and personal vulnerabilities. These issues spark more than academic interest, demanding meaningful policy and practice changes informed by the voices of incarcerated women. Confronting systemic challenges can improve the justice system by prioritizing the needs of all women (Thornton, 2023a). Accordingly, this background highlights the importance of understanding female pathways to criminality by examining both structural and personal dimensions, in line with the study's objective of bridging this identified research gap.

The problem of female criminality in South Africa

Regardless of the growth in academic literature focusing on female offenders in South Africa, the reality of an unequal system pushes women into desperation, vulnerability, cycles of victimization, and crime. Female offenders face a multifaceted dilemma that includes poverty, unemployment, domestic violence, and caregiving responsibilities (Nagdee, Artz, Corral-Bulnes, Heath, Subramaney, Clercq, Erlacher, Kotzé, Lippi, Naidoo, & Sokudela, 2019). These realities not only intensify their weaknesses but also create a narrative where criminality becomes a last resort, defence, and, in some cases, survival. Whilst society often labels these women as deviant, the system has failed to recognise the trauma linked to their criminality (Sivertsson, 2016).

Research demonstrates that many female offenders come from backgrounds of abuse and socio-economic hardship, yet policy remains disconnected from the root causes of crime (Nagdee et al., 2019). The criminal justice system relies on a blanket approach that neglects systemic challenges such as poverty, lack of education, and unstable housing, while overlooking the vulnerabilities that heighten women's risk of offending (Thornton, 2023). Failure to implement a gender-responsive and contextually grounded approach will lead the system to remain

ineffective, as it continues to ignore the circumstances that shape female criminality (Nunes & Baltieri, 2013).

This research highlights the need to examine the intersections of gender, structural inequality, societal expectations, and criminal behaviour to better understand female offending. The outcome of such strategies should promote social change and reduce offending through systemic transformation that focuses not only on the individual but also on the broader disparities that contribute to crime (Nagdee et al., 2019). To prevent victimisation and criminality, it is crucial to understand the pathways that catalyse women's involvement in crime. Building an equitable justice system requires acknowledging and addressing these systemic challenges, thereby extending support and empowerment to women (Agboola, 2016).

LITERATURE

Female criminality stems from structural inequalities and socio-economic realities that females face in South Africa (Agboola, 2016). Numerous research findings emphasise that female offenders are often affected by issues of trauma as a result of childhood victimisation or socio-economic challenges (Okoh, 2024). Such conditions affect females, in addition to systematic oppression, which often leads to criminality as a defense mechanism or way of surviving in their conditions (Mandatori & Fitch, 2021). Agboola uncovers how victimisation leads women to crime, which often acts as a defense in situations of distress (2016). The work of Elklit, Karstoft, Armour, Feddern, and Christoffersen (2013) emphasise the notion of interlinking childhood trauma or victimisation to higher risks of criminology among women. The notion of the 'gender deal' provides further understanding by demonstrating how expectations of society confine the roles of a woman, limiting economic opportunities (Elklit et al., 2013). These limitations are crucial, as they propel women towards criminality when they are unable to attain the desired material success set by the standards of society, thereby increasing their risk of criminal activity (Mandatori & Fitch, 2021). The intersecting gender roles and economic challenges subject women to experience strains, which result in their pathway to criminality (Mandatori & Fitch, 2021).

The General Strain Theory (GST) is imperative, as it provides the lens through which one can examine female criminality within a socio-economic context. The GST advocates that criminality stems from experiences of strain, such as poverty, unemployment, and family dysfunction (Fagbadebo et al., 2024). Females resort to crime as a coping mechanism to address these strains (Higgins, Piquero & Piquero, 2010). In South Africa, female offenders are often victims of poverty, childhood victimisation, or domestic violence, which can lead them to indulge in illegal substances or prostitution as a means of survival (Higgins et al., 2010). Through the application of the GST, Johnson (2018) and Fagbadebo (2024) uncovered the importance of using a multidimensional approach to understand female criminality, thereby emphasising the frameworks that can merge the experiences of female offenders with their unique backgrounds (Higgins et al., 2010).

The Good Lives Model (GLM) focuses on holistic interventions personalised to the needs of females. These models advocate the importance of emotional and social well-being. Most importantly, the aim is to create self-employment opportunities and promote skills development for offenders; women experience opportunities and gain confidence, which prevents criminality (Thornton, 2023).

The implementation of the GST and GLM is intentional, as these are complementary theories that play a pivotal role in addressing the causes and solutions of female criminality. The GST provides a framework that focuses on structural inequalities and experiences of strain that motivate criminality amongst women, whilst the GLM provides a rehabilitative, strength-based perspective that highlights the need for empowerment and desistance. The combination of these theories is imperative, as they provide a gender-sensitive, holistic stance to uncover the pathways of female criminality and further assist in designing interventions tailored to the needs of women.

Social and policy interventions fail to empower women in a manner to prevent female criminality, as they neglect to address systemic conditions in the lives of females, such as poverty, unemployment, and gender-based violence (Graaff & Heineken, 2017). Addressing female criminality requires stakeholders such as the social government and private sectors to stand together and provide opportunities to increase financial stability, education, and safe housing for women who are in vulnerable conditions or at risk of committing crimes. Fragmented systems will continue to result in females being left in situations that lead to criminality. To prevent this, there needs to be a stronger connection and coordinated links between social support systems, communities, and policy frameworks (Villardón-Gallego et al., 2023).

Literature included in the literature review

Table 1: Articles included in the review

Article number	Title	Authors	Year published	Summary
1	Memories of the “inside”: Conditions in South African women’s prisons	Agboola, C.	2016	This study analysed women’s prison conditions in South Africa, reviewing psychological, social, and economic impacts of incarceration, including overcrowding, lack of rehabilitation, and stigma. It concluded with the need for female-tailored approaches.
2	Female Criminality in Nigeria: A Feminist Conceptual and Theoretical Perspective	Okoh, A.	2024	This study focused on female offenders in Nigeria. Okoh’s feminist perspective addressed domestic abuse, socioeconomic pressures, and victimisation, showing female criminality as a response to systemic oppression and marginalisation.
3	An Examination of Adult Female and Male Offending Within the Context of Strain	Mandatori, F., & Fitch, C. H.	2021	This article examined strain among males and females, highlighting gender differences, where women’s discrimination increases their likelihood of criminal activity as a survival or self-improvement.
4	General Strain Theory, Peer Rejection, and Delinquency/Crime	Higgins, G. E., Piquero, N. L., & Piquero, A. R.	2010	Using GST, this study explored peer rejection and delinquency, finding that negative adolescent experiences lead to higher crime, stressing the role of social environment.
5	An Exploration of Reported Food Intake Among Inmates Who Gained Body Weight During Incarceration in Canadian Federal Penitentiaries	Johnson, C., et al.	2018	This research investigated prison dietary habits, showing junk food as inmate currency, linking nutrition to health, social dynamics, and power structures.
6	Predicting Criminality from Child Maltreatment Typologies and Posttraumatic Stress Symptoms	Elklit, A., et al.	2013	This article studied childhood maltreatment and adult criminality, showing that different abuse types of links to PTSD, predisposing crime, and advocating trauma-focused prevention.
7	Dysfunctional Social Systems, Experiential Traits and Sheer Wickedness: Interrogating the Vicissitudes of Criminal Violence in South Africa	Fagbadebo, O., et al.	2024	This paper addressed socio-economic and behavioural causes of violence in South Africa, explaining how a dysfunctional system fosters a culture of aggression.

8	A Link to Recidivism: Excluding Female Offenders Serving Short Sentences from Rehabilitation Programmes	Thornton, J. L.	2023	This article examined the exclusion of short-term sentenced female offenders from rehabilitation, arguing it fuels recidivism and highlighting the need for reform.
9	Going Home to the Gangsters: A Preliminary Study on the Potential Link Between Reintegration Support and Recidivism Amongst Female Offenders	Thornton, J. L.	2023	This article investigated reintegration support and recidivism, showing that inconsistent support worsens re-offending, and called for systematic post-release changes.
10	Masculinities and gender-based violence in South Africa: A study of a masculinities-focused intervention programme	Graaff K. Heinecken L.	2017	This paper studied male participation in GBV interventions in South Africa, finding that GBV is normalised but can be reduced by early intervention.
11	Early Educational Interventions to Prevent Gender-based Violence: A Systematic Review	Villardón-Gallego LGarcía-Cid AEstévez AGarcía-Carrión R	2023	This research presented GBV interventions, showing positive impacts in awareness, relationships, reduced violence, and empowering vulnerable people.

The nominated studies reflect the understanding of structural, social, and personal factors that contribute to female offending in vulnerable communities. The collective data uncovers themes of socio-economic marginalisation, gendered expectations, victimisation, strain, and barriers that specifically affect the female population. Whilst some studies highlight the experiences of females in prison (Agboola, 2016; Johnson, 2018), others uncover theories of strain and criminality (Higgins et al., 2010; Mandatori & Fitch, 2021; Fagbadebo et al., 2024; Elklit et al., 2013). The importance of the literature sources is that they are imperative tools to address the role of policy, social support, and rehabilitative interventions, which aim to reduce offending amongst females and provide a platform for empowerment for women (Thornton, 2023; Graaff & Heinecken, 2017; Villardón-Gallego et al., 2023). The studies further illuminate the interconnected nature of vulnerabilities that catalyse female offending, in response to the research focus.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The nominated study applies three main theoretical lenses. Firstly, feminist criminology is instrumental when examining the manner in which gender inequality and patriarchy shape women's pathways to crime. Carlen's gender deal, which the researcher nominates to explore how women are socialised into traditional roles and how failure to adhere to this deal results in criminality, and thirdly, Agnew's gender strain theory, which demonstrates how experiences of trauma, victimisation, and poverty result in strain that leads to criminality. These theories are imperative to the study, as they directly link to the victimisation, structural inequalities, and gender expectations, which are dominating themes that emerge in the narratives of the participants.

In order to address the pathways of female criminality, the theoretical framework integrates aspects of feminist criminology, the 'gender deal', and the harsh realities of females in South Africa. Feminist criminology uncovers how societal expectations, norms, and inequalities have shaped female interactions within the criminal justice system (Heidensohn, 2012). One of the key components to understand is the analysis of the 'gender deal', which projects that women are nurtured into domestic roles in exchange for their safety and security; however, this trade is often disrupted by issues of abuse or poverty, which results in criminality as a method of survival or means of resistance (Cook, 2016).

Female criminality is the consequence of a record of trauma experiences, childhood victimisation, and socio-economic hardships, thereby increasing the vulnerability of female offenders in such circumstances (Aday et al., 2014). The harsh reality of these conditions of these women is a catalyst, which turns them to crimes, in most

cases, not out of deviance, but out of strategies and means of survival in oppressive situations. Research conducted by Foy, Richie, and Conway highlights this phenomenon, as it demonstrates that females with records of interpersonal violence are more likely to escape these conditions through criminality (2012).

This study aims to highlight and emphasise the ineffective methods of dealing with the social and financial imbalance and further advocates for preventative models for females that are gender sensitive, acknowledge situational experiences, and are more trauma informed. These models must recognise the interconnectedness between societal structures and the personal experiences of females that contribute to female offending (George et al., 2022). This framework dictates the need for comprehensive, context-driven reforms to address and reduce female criminality, which prioritise the understanding that social factors contribute to the vulnerability of females (Jeenah, 2017).

METHODOLOGY

The core of this study was grounded in a qualitative research methodology, chosen to explore the pathways of female criminality in South Africa, with a particular focus on how structural inequalities shaped their lived experiences. This method was selected for its ability to provide a rich, nuanced understanding of the social contexts influencing female offending, allowing participants to share personal narratives from their interactions with the criminal justice system (Parry, 2021). Such an approach was essential for investigating diverse issues, including culture, systemic challenges, and socio-economic factors affecting women (Hout & Wessels, 2021).

An interpretivist framework guided the study, acknowledging the varied socio-cultural backgrounds of participants. This framework enabled a detailed understanding of how factors such as poverty, gendered discrimination, and limited resources shaped female offenders' experiences (Mofokeng & Tlou, 2022). Scholars emphasise that understanding the gendered dimensions of crime requires an interpretivist stance to capture the complexities of women's interactions with the justice system (Adam & Grobbelaar, 2022).

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with female offenders who had experienced incarceration and reintegration into society. This method allowed participants to narrate their experiences without being constrained by a rigid interview structure, while structured protocols ensured that key areas such as personal backgrounds, trauma, socio-economic conditions, and perspectives on the justice system were thoroughly explored. Given the sensitive nature of the study, ethical considerations were prioritised, and strict confidentiality was maintained to empower participants to share openly without fear of stigma (Hout & Wessels, 2021).

Purposive sampling was employed to select participants, enabling the study to focus on female offenders from diverse backgrounds (Hesselink & Prinsloo, 2022). Ten participants were recruited, providing comprehensive insight into varied experiences and ensuring representation of different pathways to criminality. The thematic analysis implemented Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework. This was used to identify patterns in participants' narratives. This involved verbatim transcription, systematic coding, and categorisation into themes relevant to the research questions, aligning with South African criminological research practices (Hesselink & Prinsloo, 2022).

This method facilitated the identification of both commonalities and differences in participants' experiences, revealing the challenges women face due to socio-economic and structural inequalities (Adam & Grobbelaar, 2022). Member checking was employed to ensure the accuracy of interpretations, and data triangulation was achieved through consultation with social workers and community members, strengthening the study's credibility (Martin-Howard, 2022).

Ethical compliance was strictly maintained. All participants provided informed consent, were fully briefed on the study's purpose, and were aware of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Confidentiality and anonymity were preserved, and the study received approval from relevant institutional review boards, demonstrating a commitment to ethical research practice (Radford et al., 2017).

The methodology was designed to uncover the voices of female offenders and provide a detailed exploration of how structural inequalities influence pathways to criminality. The insights gathered have implications for policy, practice, and further research in criminology, social work, and social justice (Adam & Grobbelaar, 2022).

RESULTS

The analysis uncovered two dominant themes, offering insights that further explain the pathways that women in South Africa face, which ultimately lead to criminality. The first noted theme of victimisation highlighted the impact of domestic violence, abuse, and poverty on the lives of women. These harsh realities often leave women vulnerable, pushing many to crime as a method of survival. The second theme, consequences of the gender deal, illuminates the manner in which societal expectations and the shifting of gender roles limit opportunities for women. The impact of these structural inequalities, intertwined with the reality of economic instability, reveals conditions in which women are pressured to commit economic crimes such as theft and drug-related offences. Collectively, these themes illuminate the interplay between individual victimisation and systemic inequalities that shape women's pathways to criminality. The nominated findings reveal that women's pathways to offenders are

not linear but rather a cumulative process, which includes multiple strains that build up over a period of time. Participants reported layered experiences of abuse, poverty, unemployment, and social marginalisation, which increased their vulnerability within their societies. The combination of experienced strain emphasises the need to adopt interventions that are gender responsive and an intersectional lens when examining female offending in South Africa. The narratives obtained from the 10 female ex-offenders highlighted the reality of victimisation in South Africa. Qualitative data was imperative in order to share the voices of females rather than statistical data. The majority of the participants shared narratives of poverty, and six shared the common reality of unemployment. Whilst seven expressed the experiences of domestic violence. Four out of the ten participants illuminated the coping mechanisms of social influence and their peers as a contributing factor to criminality. Nine females expressed that economic strain has paved the pathway to criminality. These personal experiences overlap in many cases. Participants experienced more than one factor or strain before their incarceration. The overlap of these factors demonstrates that victimisation and economic strain should be treated as interdependent conditions that reinforce one another. Domestic violence co-exists with strains such as financial dependence. Unemployment further increases the need for women to stay in abusive relationships or deviant environments. The co-occurrence of the various strains highlights that female offending is structurally embedded rather than an individually motivated offence.

Themes

The research explored how structural inequalities lead females to criminality, uncovering two dominant themes that emerged from the sample population: the impact of victimisation and the consequences of the gender deal.

The impact of victimisation

The participants of the study were asked the question, “What are the reasons that led you to criminality?” The sample of participants exposed a multi-factorial pathway. Domestic violence in South Africa is a norm; females find themselves in relationships where they are abused, and due to financial constraints and caretaking responsibilities, they remain in such relationships. Participant 3 explained that prolonged domestic violence preceded her offence, stating, “*My husband was abusive towards me, so I murdered him.*” This was further expressed by Participant 5, who emphasised that her actions were rooted in what she described as “*self-defence*”, suggesting that she felt in a risky, threatening environment. The shared accounts demonstrate a prolonged exposure to violence in survival-based offending. The narratives of the participants reflect that crimes such as homicide stem from abusive contexts, which are justified by participants as defensive responses of survival rather than criminal intent. The observed distinction is imperative, as it highlights that for many vulnerable women, the criminal justice system misinterprets their context and histories of victimisation. Many women come from disadvantaged backgrounds. Their peers commit crimes and offences as a means of survival. Participant 7 shared that her experience of crime was related to social influence, stating, “*Peer pressure, friends.*” This suggests that her immediate social environment shaped her involvement in crime. She was a victim of peer pressure, which is common, as many victims of peer pressure are compelled to partake in illegal activities to sustain their allegiance to their group in return for security and resources. Peer networks for females have dual roles, offering belonging and exposure to coping strategies which may extend to deviance. For many women, these networks are the only survival method that they are able to depend on as they exist in an environment of economic deprivation. Responses from participants indicate that the toxic cycle of victimisation leads many women to criminality as a method of coping with the harsh realities. Many women report engaging in criminality as a response to their trauma or survival strategy. The responses from participants align with the GST (Higgins et al., 2010), demonstrating that exposure to strain often results in negative emotions and criminal methods to cope with these emotions. It emphasises women experience factors such as abuse, poverty, and marginalisation as pathways to criminality, as highlighted in South African research (Agboola, 2016). The interconnected nature between trauma, inequality, and coping mechanisms is reflected in the core elements of feminist criminology, which maintains that the criminality of females cannot be independent from patriarchal systems, gender-based violence, and inequalities that exist within the lives of females. The findings demonstrate that women's emotional stability is often compromised and reinforces the link between victimisation and crime. Negative emotions described by participants, such as anger, fear, desperation, and hopelessness, acted as a mechanism to control strain and offending behaviour. These emotional responses were linked to the lived experiences of abuse and neglect. This depicts the value of the GST when viewed through a gendered lens, as it shows that experiences of strain by women are internalised differently than those of men. The findings are nuanced; victimisation is a central feature of the participants' life histories. The recorded prevalence of violence and abuse shared among 7 of the 10 participants suggests that victimisation is rife and embedded structurally within their environments, to the extent that it is normalised. This reinforces the feminist criminological stance that female offending needs to be understood with a broader patriarchal perspective of power relations.

Consequences of the gender deal

The researcher further probed participants by asking, “In your opinion, what factors contribute to female offending?” The researcher observed the consequences of the gender deal in the responses of the participants. The strains that exist within communities, particularly on women, are numerous. Participant 9 highlighted that financial strain preceded her offense. She stated, “*Financial crisis, unemployment. I had to get money to survive.*” The response of the participant shows that offending is rooted in necessity rather than opportunity. The participants' reflections of economic crimes were described as survival-driven, showing that criminality is simply an adaptive response to survival. This reflects the effects of economic hardships and how they have paved the pathway to criminality as a means of survival. Many vulnerable women in South Africa lack proper shelter and require assistance in obtaining a meal. Participant 1 shared her opinion on female criminality, stating that “*Other females were caught for drugs or shoplifting. They have no shelter, and some make mistakes.*” The reality in South Africa, with high unemployment rates and poverty, was emphasised by Participant 4, “*Offenders do crimes because of poverty, hunger, and unemployment,*” highlighting that the economic backgrounds contribute to criminal offences committed by female offenders. In many cases, South African women have an education; however, they lack work experience, as expressed by Participant 10, “*They steal clothes and food because they can't find work; they don't have experience,*” highlighting that the lack of employment opportunities is coupled with the lack of work experience. The reality of unemployment and a lack of work experience in South Africa demonstrates a structural exclusion from the labour market. Despite participants having an education, the absence of work experience limits their employment opportunities, which contributes to the systemic barriers that specifically affect women from disadvantaged communities. Female offenders are often stuck in the gender deal, which means that they are in relationships to maintain food and shelter. Due to this, many women are faced with domestic violence within these relationships, as expressed by Participant 6: “*The majority of women are in for murder; they kill their husbands or boyfriends because of abuse.*” In such instances, women remain in abusive relationships simply to be able to attain security; however, eventually, anger and frustration due to their abuse prevail, and they react to it. The concluding findings show that the instability of the “gender deal” is dependent on the context of poverty. When women are unable to secure a stable income, they become reliant on their relationships as a method of survival. However, when the relationship becomes abusive, the mechanism intended to provide safety and security becomes a strain, limiting the terms of the gender contract. The collective narratives of the participants demonstrate the concepts of the gender deal, which highlights the way in which women are confined to traditional roles and demonstrates what is required when they attain these (Carlen, 1983). The thick description of the data obtained from the sample extends Carlen's framework to the context of South African realities of women. Exposing the reality of how the gender deal works within a vulnerable context of unemployment, poverty, and an influx of domestic violence. The breakdown of the deal is not an individual failure to conform but rather a societal failure to provide resources for women to be able to uphold socially prescribed roles. In most cases, it means that women are required to endure abuse to attain security. It is important to note that when barriers such as unemployment, lack of stability, or abuse prevent one's ability to conform to the gendered expectations, this is experienced as a betrayal by society, which sets a path to criminality. This notion is intertwined in South African criminogenic studies, which reveal the relationship between marginalisation and gender inequality and pathways to criminal behaviour (Fagbadebo et al., 2024). The nature of the findings demonstrates the clear relationship between victimisation amongst females and the gender deal, illustrating that female criminality is a phenomenon that cannot exist solely but is accompanied by factors of abuse, socio-economic challenges, and gender inequalities. The collective findings imply the support of Carlen's gender deal framework, emphasising that a woman's inability to meet the traditional gendered expectations due to challenges such as poverty, instability, or abuse leads to the breakdown of the ‘deal’ and increases the possibility of criminality. The concluding findings reflect that female criminality amongst the sample cannot be explained by one factor, but the data revealed that a combination of factors, such as poverty, structural vulnerabilities, victimisation, economic strain, and limited gender roles, overlap. The consistent patterns illuminated across participants highlight that the pathway to offending behaviour is not incidental but rather a piece of a broader picture reflecting gendered inequalities that shape the lives of women across South Africa.

DISCUSSION

The exploration of the pathway to female criminality within a South African context uncovers various insights, such as the structural challenges that led females' pathway to offending as a means of survival. The nominated study acknowledges that these results are consistent with previous studies in South Africa, which illuminates the role of socio-economic and structural challenges that contribute to female offending (Agboola, 2016; Mandatori & Fitch, 2021). An extensive body of research demonstrates that the rise in female criminality correlates with societal changes, specifically in periods of economic instability. The shifts of the gender roles within society over

periods have underscored the relationship between societal expectations and female offending behaviour. The relevance of the General Strain Theory is highlighted as a tool to explain how the phenomenon of excessive strain can create emotional distress, which further motivates survival-based offending among females.

One of the recurring themes illustrated in literature is the impact of victimisation on criminality among female offenders. The low reports from victims of domestic violence and abuse limit our understanding and context for female criminality. Studies demonstrate that many females resort to criminality to escape cycles of poverty and abuse, emphasising how many women have been driven towards economic crimes such as theft and drug-related offences due to economic marginalisation. These findings are consistent with prior studies, which demonstrate that victimisation, trauma, and economic marginalisation are contributing factors to the pathway of female criminality (Higgins et al., 2010; Agboola, 2016). The consistent patterns observed align with the principles of the gender deal, which demonstrates that when women are unable to keep the promise of traditional gender roles, they are motivated towards alternative survival strategies, such as criminal behaviour.

The symbolic interaction significantly informs an understanding of female offending; female criminality is a response to social disorganisation and injustice. Hence, the identities of these women are heavily influenced by their social environment and their experiences of inequality. These responses and influences are reflected in feminist criminology's position that female criminality stems from imbalances in power, economic exclusion of females, and a trend of long-term victimisation. This notion aligns with the GST, which explains that the effect of strain and negative experiences can result in negative emotions and coping behaviours such as crime (Agnew, 1992). This notion emphasises addressing the basic needs of females as part of an intervention process that can enhance their lives and prevent offending. The effective nature of intervention programmes rests on completion rates, which raises concern for such interventions. The current limitations in the risk-need-responsivity models hinder opportunities for females to actively engage, as such frameworks fail to address aspects of their past victimisation, psychological impacts, or systematic barriers. Studies posit that failure to address these factors that affect females may result in offending.

Comprehensive research findings demonstrate that successful strategies to improve the lives of females require interventions to be flexible and responsive to address the social and emotional state of a woman. Programmes developed with the foundation of cognitive behavioural theories advocate for more focus on developing positive behaviours through observational learning and cognitive restructuring to promote social change. Hence, females must continue engagement with intervention frameworks to form emotional bonds and connections. Support is a key factor in addressing both the psychological and social needs of the females. The GLM substantiates these collective narratives (Thornton, 2023a), which demonstrate the imperative nature of holistic, strength-based interventions to effectively address the needs of women. The collective findings support the theory of the Good Lives Model, which illuminates the female's need for rehabilitation that focuses on emotional, relational, and socio-economic needs. The combined perspective of feminist criminology, the gender deal, and the general strain theory provides a framework that holistically demonstrates how structural inequality, trauma, and gendered expectations shape the pathway to criminality amongst females in South Africa.

The impact of victimisation

A substantial body of literature highlights victimisation as a central factor influencing female criminality. Research shows that women who come into conflict with the law often experience domestic violence, childhood abuse, trauma, and economic disadvantages. This study amplifies the personal experiences of women affected by systemic failures. The narratives collected align with previous findings, demonstrating that victimisation is a significant contributing factor to offending (Higgins et al., 2010; Johnson et al., 2018). Many women engaging in criminal behaviour report histories of trauma, abuse, or childhood victimisation, emphasising the need for a comprehensive understanding of how these experiences shape pathways to crime.

Although men commit higher rates of violent crimes, the complexities of female victimisation remain under-reported, limiting understanding of the factors that drive women to offend. Socio-economic adversity is a primary motivator, often pushing women toward survival through unlawful means. Economic hardships frequently result in non-violent, economically driven offences such as theft, scams, and fraud, due to the high rate of unemployment of females (35.9%) compared to men (31%) recorded by Statistics SA (2025). These realities reflect Agnew's (1992) General Strain Theory, which explains that females are more frequently exposed to strain compared to males, which generates negative emotions, sometimes manifesting in criminal acts as coping mechanisms. Addressing these forms of victimisation is crucial for developing interventions that support healing, protect women, and prevent future offending.

The experiences shared by participants in this study further highlight how trauma and systemic disadvantages compromise emotional stability, creating conditions that contribute to criminal behaviour. These findings reinforce earlier research demonstrating the interconnectedness of trauma, emotional instability, and offending as strategies of survival (Agboola, 2016).

The consequences of the gender deal

The phenomenon of the gender deal is pivotal in understanding social expectations of women and how these expectations influence their criminal behaviour. Research demonstrates that the gender deal illustrates traditional roles, rewarding women for conformity to societal norms while limiting opportunities when these roles are unattainable due to financial strain, hardships, or domestic violence (Carlen, 1983; Agboola, 2016b). The results of the study show that societal expectations cultivate criminal behaviour among the most vulnerable women, as structural limitations and systemic challenges shape their responses and may lead to offending (Mandatori & Fitch, 2021).

When women are unable to conform, they often feel betrayed by the social system, leading to desperation and crime. The gender deal highlights that these structural disadvantages are not the individual choice of the female but a pathway to criminal deviance. The analysis underscores the importance of addressing the convergence of victimisation, societal gender norms, and structural deficiencies in programmes that fail to consider the realities of female criminality in South Africa. Findings from this study, in line with existing literature, demonstrate that female pathways to crime are shaped by personal, societal, and structural factors, emphasising the need for policy reforms and targeted interventions to support women navigating these challenges.

IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

The study accentuates the need for a paradigm shift regarding the approach to understanding the plight of the female within an unjust society. The need for incorporating feminist criminology and trauma-informed care during incarceration, with implications for post-release reintegration in conjunction with rehabilitative models as preventative measures that focus on both emotional and psychological support when addressing policy reforms, is imperative. As observed from the findings of the study, female crime is not a choice but the last resort when challenges such as inequality, victimisation, and societal norms bombard the vulnerabilities of these females. Therefore, policies and interventions need to address the root causes of criminality. Social workers play an imperative role in the post-release process of reintegration, as they can assist females released by offering services such as counselling and trauma processing, as well as referring them to opportunities for housing, employment, and support services.

The study further demonstrates the importance of considering structural issues such as violence, poverty, limited access to education, and unemployment, and the necessity of promoting long-term reintegration when implementing gender-sensitive approaches and preventative policies. Interventions require a holistic stance to address social, economic, and psychological support to address the reality that shapes the pathway to female criminality and to remedy the research findings and criminological theories.

Effective intervention relies heavily on stakeholders and government support to ensure females are given access to programmes that address their vulnerabilities and prevent criminality. Hence, policy reforms should further focus on empowerment, social protection, and trauma-informed rehabilitation to aid females with the resources to break the cycles of victimisation. The study emphasises the importance of collaboration among justice departments, community initiatives, and social services to create an environment that harnesses gender-sensitive solutions that limit the pathway to criminality for females and prevent female offending.

The study aims to offer recommendations that are practical and achievable to address female criminality in South Africa by emphasising changes in individual rehabilitation programmes, intervention programmes that include emotional support, shelter, or employment opportunities, and systemic reform. To address issues of victimisation, it is important to develop trauma-focused counselling within the prison environment. To further tackle the challenges of the gender deal, there is a need for more job training and opportunities for socio-economically disadvantaged females. However, based on the narratives obtained and experiences shared by the participants, it is important to acknowledge that each pathway to crime is shaped differently and stems from a variety of factors with their own intensity, such as trauma, socio-economic strain, or victimisation. Therefore, individualised programmes are important to address the specific needs of the offender. The study further highlights the abundant need to address existing structural challenges of women through poverty reduction, mental health assistance, and community support. To reduce female criminality and promote the well-being of women in conflict with the law, it is vital to expand research on female offending and promote greater involvement of women in criminological inquiry. The future of our country rests with the essence of our female generation. Empowering women through education, vocational programmes, and educating them through public campaigns on domestic violence is planting seeds for our future generations to prosper.

CONCLUSION

The root of female criminality is in the hands of society. Females are faced with both economic and societal disadvantages, including gender-restricted roles. Females are driven to crime due to their desperation and

vulnerability as a form of survival. This article highlights the obvious need for interventions and policies to improve how they address the unique needs of females and to tackle systemic issues that often lead to criminality. The findings of this study highlighted that female criminality is deeply linked to societal factors such as widespread gender-based violence, economic inequality, and restrictive expectations placed on women. Female offenders often come from backgrounds marked by childhood trauma, including sexual and physical abuse, and face significant financial hardship that can lead to crime as a means of survival. These experiences, compounded by discriminatory gender norms and limited opportunities, create cycles of victimisation and vulnerability that shape women's pathways into crime. The study emphasised that female criminality in South Africa is constructed by societal inequalities, victimisation, and restrictive norms that dictate women's roles, showing that crime often becomes a strategy of survival rather than a matter of choice. By drawing on feminist criminology and social theory, the research demonstrates the need to move beyond punitive responses towards gender-sensitive, trauma-informed interventions that address the unique needs of women. To reduce female criminality, stakeholders must implement changes that strengthen education, empowerment, and systemic support, providing economic opportunities, social protection, and survivor support for victims of gender-based violence. The golden thread of this study underscores that responses to female criminality must confront the structural inequalities and victimisation that contribute to offending, making gender-sensitive strategies essential.

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